

KINSHIP CARE

In some child welfare cases, children must be removed at least temporarily from their birth parents' home. The aim is to place them with a safe adult while their parents make changes to ensure a safe and stable home for their child. However, the experience of separation, even in situations where it is necessary, can be destabilizing, stressful, and even traumatic for children.

Whenever possible, maintaining a child's existing supportive relationships is better than removing them entirely from their family and community. **When children and youth must live outside their birth parents' homes, research shows that they often fare better in kinship placements than when placed with strangers.**¹

WHAT IS KINSHIP CARE?

- *Kinship care* is the placement of youth in the care of non-parent relatives, such as grandparents, or like-kin adults who have existing relationships with youth and their families, such as family friends. Kinship care is often informal, but here we will focus on official placements in the child welfare system.
- *Like-kin caregivers* are often included in the definition of kinship care¹ and like-kin placements have shown similar positive impacts on stability and outcomes to placements with relatives. However, current policies in Wisconsin distinguish between them when it comes to benefits and legal requirements for long-term placement.

WHY IS KINSHIP CARE IMPORTANT?

Kinship care (including like-kin care) has beneficial impacts on children's relationships and on their emotional and behavioral health.

- Children in out-of-home child welfare placements who live in kinship homes are more likely to:
 - Remain with their siblings²
 - Report feeling loved and wanting to stay in the placement home²
 - Experience fewer changes in placements and schools²
 - Maintain and restore connections with their families and communities³
 - Experience fewer psychiatric disorders and behavioral problems³

- Kinship caregivers are less likely than unrelated foster parents to request a change of placement due to behavioral challenges.⁴
- Kinship care leads to lower system costs over the long term:
 - Mitigates the need for more intensive (and costly) intervention from the child welfare system.¹
 - Helps meet the need for foster homes.
 - Better mental health outcomes decrease the need for more intensive and costly long-term support.

Of course, not all children have access to safe kinship care. The more kinship caregivers that are able to take in children, the more unrelated licensed foster parents are available to take in children who cannot be placed with kin.

Current policies recognize the importance of kinship care. The federal Family First Prevention Services Act prioritizes kinship placements, and the Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services has established a contract performance measure that targets 40% of foster care placements in Milwaukee County to be kinship placements in FY 2021-22.

However, current conditions do not make it easy for families to partner with us to achieve this goal. Wisconsin currently trails other states in providing compensation that ensures kinship caregivers can afford to meet children's needs.

- Nationally, the average monthly foster care payment is \$511¹.
- In Wisconsin, licensed foster parents receive a basic rate of \$420-\$545, and benefits including childcare subsidies, mental health counseling, and supplemental payments as needed.
- Kinship caregivers who have not completed the licensing process receive only \$254 (starting in January 2022, this rate will be \$300). They also have access to benefits licensed foster parents receive, except supplemental rates. Some kin caregivers become licensed to receive higher payments and/or to be eligible to become permanent legal guardians.
- Like-kin caregivers are often preferred placements similar to relatives, but they do *not* qualify for kinship benefits. Like-kin caregivers must become licensed foster parents before they can receive any benefits or provide a long-term placement. If they are unable to obtain a license, children in their care must be relocated, causing unnecessary destabilization.
- There is a discrepancy in current background check requirements: relatives applying for kinship care benefits may be rejected for an offense that would not disqualify a licensed foster care applicant. For example, a relative can be rejected for a kinship placement due to a misdemeanor battery conviction, but a licensed foster parent applicant will not be barred for the same conviction.

As Wisconsin Department of Children and Families moves toward implementing the federal Families First Prevention Services Act reforms, where kinship care will be prioritized, we need to make it easier for caregivers with existing relationships to take in children.

SAINTA EXPERIENCE

- Relatives working with SaintA often request a change of placement because they cannot afford to pay for childcare or to meet sufficient housing requirements, not because they do not want to continue the foster relationship.
- Children with intensive behavioral care needs are often taken in by kinship caregivers when they are turned away from treatment foster care homes and group facilities.
- Like-kin placements typically fall through either because the licensing process is not complete before the court-appointed deadline, or because the caregivers can't afford to continue the placement without financial help. When this happens, children are relocated into the home of an unfamiliar foster caregiver.

CHALLENGES

Many people who want to take care of their family or like-kin children need additional assistance to ensure they can afford to meet basic and urgently arising needs of children in their care. However, they face barriers:

- Relative caregivers are more likely to live below the poverty line than a child's biological parents.³
- Like-kin caregivers must meet certain housing space requirements to become licensed. However, without benefits the cost of a larger space is often a barrier, creating a Catch-22. (See our housing brief for more information)
- If a kinship caregiver becomes the payee for a child who receives SSI benefits, they lose access to the childcare subsidy paid to foster caregivers. SSI benefits are rarely sufficient to cover the cost of childcare on top of other expenses, which is necessary for any caregivers to be able to work. (See our early childhood education brief for more)

SAINTA RECOMMENDS

- **Officially classify like-kin adults as kinship caregivers** in order to remove barriers to being priority caregivers.
- **Increase baseline monthly payments for kinship caregivers**, so they can afford to take in a child without having to complete the licensing process.
- **Establish consistency in barrable criminal offenses** between kinship caregivers and licensed foster parents.
- **Update regulations to ensure that kinship caregivers do not lose access to childcare subsidies** when they take in a child who receives SSI benefits.



Allowing like-kin adults to have kinship caregiver status, increasing kinship payment rates, and removing disparities in barrable offenses between kinship care and foster care will help placement stability for many children in care.

By better supporting kinship caregivers, including like-kin adults, we can provide every child the opportunity to live in a home that gives them the best chance to thrive.

REFERENCES:

¹Annie E. Casey Foundation, "[Keeping Kids in Families: Trends in U.S. Foster Care Placement](#)" 2017.

²Generations United, "[Children Thrive in Grandfamilies](#)" 2016.

³Annie E. Casey Foundation, "[Stepping Up for Kids: What Government and Communities Should Do to Support Kinship Families](#)" 2012.

⁴Center for the Study of Social Policy, "[A Critical Resource at Risk: Supporting Kinship Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond](#)" 2020.

⁵American Bar Association, "[Kinship Care is Better for Children and Families](#)" 2017.

CONTACT:

Ann Leinfelder Grove, President & CEO, SaintA: (414) 465-1323, aleinfeldergrove@sainta.org

Jason Childress, Director of Public Affairs, Foley & Lardner LLP: 608-217-6109, jchildress@foley.com

ABOUT SAINTA

SaintA is a human services organization that strives to address the impact of trauma, prevent adversity and promote resilience for the people in our care. Headquartered in Milwaukee, we empower people to overcome barriers to well-being – poverty, poor educational outcomes, unemployment and discrimination, to name a few – so they may thrive. SaintA serves 5,000 Wisconsin children, youth and adults each day, helping to build life skills, access needed resources and navigate systems of care. We use a framework that promotes the five pillars of stability and a trauma informed perspective.

