



Kinship Caregivers in Minnesota

Summary of findings from a three-year Federal Demonstration Project

Every year, thousands of Minnesota children are removed from their homes because of parental abuse and neglect, inadequate housing, parental incarceration, and other reasons. In 2011, nearly 3,000 children were formally placed with relatives in Minnesota (15% of all placements). Thousands more live with relatives or family friends as a result of informal arrangements with the child's parents.

Living with a relative or family friend, known as kinship care, is the preferred placement choice for a child not able to live with a parent. It offers many benefits, including emotional ties and a familiar setting. However, research shows that kinship caregivers also face a number of unique challenges and stressors which can affect their ability to provide a safe and stable home environment for the children in their care. These include financial worries, health concerns, and emotional stress. About three-quarters of kinship caregivers are grandparents caring for their grandchildren. Census data indicates that these grandparents are younger (69% under age 60), more likely to live in poverty (14%), and are disproportionately people of color (32%).

According to the American Community Survey, the number of children in Minnesota living with relatives other than parents has risen more than 40 percent since 2000, and is now at nearly 68,000.

Supporting kinship caregivers

The Minnesota Kinship Navigator Project was created in 2009 to give families needed support to meet these challenges, to give children more stability, and to help children living with kin strengthen relationships with their biological parents, when possible. The project was unique, nationally, because it focused on informal kinship caregivers – those not involved with the formal child protection system.

“It was helpful to have someone who understood the legal process and jargon.” – Kinship caregiver

“The support [from my kinship worker] has helped create a calmer environment.” – Kinship caregiver

Identifying kinship caregiver needs

To better understand the unmet needs of caregivers, Wilder Research conducted four focus groups with kinship caregivers during project development. The majority of participants were female, grandparents, and white. One focus group was made up of American Indian caregivers. Overall, 26 caregivers participated. The following needs were commonly identified in the focus group discussions:

Increase awareness of and access to existing resources. In particular, caregivers requested information about concrete supports such as legal advice and options; financial, medical, and school related services; mental health services and respite care; and informal supports like peer support groups. They also requested overall guidance on how to best address family issues and their children’s mental and emotional needs. Caregivers felt, in particular, that there was a lack of information and support about the legal options available to them in order to care for their kinship children on a long-term basis.

Increase opportunities for peer support. Caregivers are looking for opportunities to connect with each other and expand their sources of peer support. They endorsed the idea of 1-to-1 mentorships, pairing less experienced caregivers with those who have more experience navigating the system.

Improve services and supports for caregivers not involved in the formal foster care system.

Caregivers felt they “fell through the cracks” of formal supports compared with non-relative foster and adoptive parents. A combination of further outreach efforts and continued relationship-building with social service agencies could increase the systematic inclusion of relative caregivers in getting the supports they need.

Provide more opportunities for case management services. Ongoing case management services were highly valued by the small number of caregivers receiving them. Establishing a continuum of easily accessible services, especially for children with special needs, can provide caregivers a sense of empowerment and security when it comes to long-term planning.

Offer culturally-specific services. American Indian caregivers expressed a strong preference for receiving support and services from American Indian providers. They noted a degree of distrust with formal, non-Native systems, and stated that if there were not culturally specific services available, they would likely seek help from informal supports (friends and family) rather than accessing other formal systems.

With funding from a three-year federal grant, the Kinship Navigator project was developed and led statewide by the Minnesota Kinship Caregivers Association, enlisting a network of regional centers across Minnesota to serve kinship families, especially low-income families, those living in rural areas, and communities of color. Additional outreach was made to African-American and Latino communities in the metro area, and to increase the number of partnerships with American Indian groups both in the metro and on American Indian reservations.

Throughout the three-year grant period, the Kinship Navigator Project and its partners provided a range of supportive services to kinship families throughout Minnesota. These services included information and referrals, support through a centrally operated phone number called the Warmline, local support groups, one-to-one services by trained caregiver mentors, family activities, children's group activities, general advocacy and public awareness, and training and education for caregivers and professionals. In addition, some partner organizations offered access to basic needs, medical information, transportation, child care, respite, and financial guidance.

Overall, **2,167** kinship caregivers and their children were served by the Kinship Navigator Project during the three-year grant period. Kinship caregivers who contacted the Minnesota Kinship Caregivers Association or other agencies involved in the Navigator Project tended to be older, white women. Caregivers served through the project were also low-income, with a quarter reporting that their income was below the federal poverty line. The children served were spread fairly evenly across all age groups. About a third of the children had special needs, and about a quarter had been involved with child protection over the past five years.

Evaluation findings

To assess the effectiveness of the Kinship Navigator Project over the three-year grant period, Wilder Research employed an experimental design to help understand whether Kinship Navigator services resulted in positive outcomes for families. Wilder Research compared two groups: 1) kinship families who received project services (intervention group) and 2) kinship families who did not (control group). Wilder Research conducted telephone interviews with intervention and control group families when they requested information or services (baseline), and 9 months later.

Overall, the Kinship Navigator Project demonstrating the following positive outcomes for caregivers and their families who received services:

- **Access to needed services:** Intervention families were more likely than control group families to receive a variety of social services, including MFIP, a program providing cash support for low income families (29% intervention, 10% control). This difference was statistically significant.
- **Improvements in mental health of children.** A slightly higher percentage of intervention caregivers versus control group caregivers reported that their children's mental health had improved in the last nine months (53% versus 45% control group). In addition, fewer intervention caregivers reported that their kinship children needed emotional or mental health services (40% intervention, 79% control), which is statistically significant.

"I am grateful to know that Minnesota Kinship is available for parents who are in need of help and... I was able to get my questions answered and [the] referrals [I] needed."

– Kinship caregiver

- **Progress towards legal custody.** A majority of intervention caregivers (55%) experienced changes in the legal status of at least one of their kinship children with a quarter saying they now have legal permanent custody (including adoption and guardianship). About half (49%) of control group caregivers experienced changes in legal status of at least one of their kinship children, including one in five who gained legal, permanent custody.
- **Positive relationships with birth parents.** A majority of caregivers in both groups (69% intervention, 79% control) reported positive relationships with the birth parents of their kinship children; while parental involvement remained low, it increased slightly over the 9-month period (and more so for intervention caregivers).
- **Caregivers felt supported.** Most intervention caregivers (87% at baseline, 92% at follow-up) agreed that they have someone they can talk to who understands what they are going through, and more intervention caregivers than control group caregivers agreed with that this was true.
- **The program itself was highly valued.** A large majority of the intervention caregivers said that their kinship worker was caring, warm, and helpful, gave useful suggestions, knew a lot about helpful services and programs in the community, and was easy to reach. All would recommend the Kinship Navigator Project to families similar to their own; and nearly all were

satisfied with the information and support they received, particularly the emotional support and help in understanding legal issues.

Unfortunately, due to financial issues, the Minnesota Kinship Caregivers Association was unable to sustain itself at the desired level of service for an extended period after the end of the grant and is no longer in operation. However, information, including a Legal Steps Manual revised and expanded as part of the project, and referral services through the Warmline will continue to be offered through partner organizations.

"[My kinship worker] saved me a lot of money by telling me where to go online to get the form and complete it and gave me the handbook...and gave clear direction on points in the book... [She] was always concerned with the well-being of the children".

– Kinship caregiver

Although the Kinship Navigator Project is no longer available to families in Minnesota, policy makers and administrators can use information from this evaluation to learn more about the demographic characteristics of kinship caregivers, as well as what services and supports they found most necessary and helpful. Instituting policies and programs that provide basic, front-end support for kinship caregivers could help get them the resources and support they need to care for their children, and keep caregivers and children out of crisis down the road.

"[My kinship worker helped me by] always being there and at the meetings... giving her time to me, and I always felt I could call her at any time. She was good with anything."

– Kinship caregiver

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Minnesota Kinship Navigator Project: Final Progress Report*, available at www.wilderresearch.org. For more information about this report, contact Michelle Decker Gerrard at Wilder Research, 651-280-2695

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