This study recruited program managers and evaluators from the U.S.D.H.H.S. Children's Bureau's 2012 Fostering Family Connections Kinship Navigator Grantee Cluster to identify essential and additional components of a kinship navigator model.

Building an Evidence Base: A Kinship Navigation Model

About 2.6 million children are being raised in kinship care without birth parents in the home. For every child in foster care raised by relatives (formal kinship care), there are 20 children being raised by grandparents or other relatives outside the foster care system (informal kinship care), who have additional difficulty connecting their kinship families to needed resources and support compared to those involved in the child welfare system. Hence, kinship family needs span both public and private systems of care and kinship navigation services are vital for linking kinship caregivers to needed service information and referrals.

- Kinship navigator programs are social service delivery programs intended to inform grandparents and other relatives raising kinship children about available resources and services, provide information specific to their needs, and help families navigate service systems.

- To date, there are no studies of a Kinship Navigator Model based on shared program intervention characteristics across multiple kinship navigator programs.

- Our Kinship Navigator Model reflects both essential organizational and direct-service components from four, 2012 Kinship Navigator Grantee demonstration programs across the U.S. (California, Oklahoma, New York, and Florida).

- This model is intended to offer guidance for further development, ongoing implementation, and evaluation of kinship navigator programs with suggested core activities that are necessary to include, as well as additional program activities that could be included for further customization.

Implications for Policy & Practice

Recent Families First legislation (2018) requires states to implement kinship navigator programs that are meeting U.S.D.H.H.S standards of promising practice, supported, or well supported interventions. At this time, the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare does not have any kinship navigator programs listed that meet the criteria. Thus, our purpose is to build the current evidence base with a criteria of essential kinship navigator model characteristics that consider both direct-service and organizational kinship navigator program components.

With an increase in policy and resource support for kinship navigator programs, more investment in evaluation of this model will need to be prioritized as it is important to understand the most effective way to design and implement this program in a variety of communities with diverse kinship families. Further information is needed to culturally tailor this approach to meet the variable needs of caregivers, including those providing care under formal and informal arrangements, those residing in rural vs. urban geographic service districts, those who are and are not eligible (based on age) for supports through the Older Americans Act, and programs being administered through tribes and state territories.

Future research could test and refine this model by examining whether existing kinship navigator programs have all of the essential direct-service and organizational components. Additional research is needed to test and validate assessment and outcome measures, so state kinship navigator programs can compare results and improve replication efforts. Further interviews with kinship caregivers and families is also suggested for testing applicability and cultural competence of these model components across diverse populations and communities.
KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAMS

The decision of non- parental relatives to care for their younger kin in an arrangement called Kinship Care is a solution born out of difficult circumstances. Child maltreatment, parental substance abuse, incarceration, mental illness, teenage pregnancies, and extreme poverty are major contributors to the need for kinship care. The impact of these social problems on the family system is disruptive and requires relative caregivers to make adaptive decisions in response, such as establishing multi-generational homes or taking on the responsibility of raising a relative’s child. Custody options exist for kinship families based on the family’s relationship with the child welfare system, including formal and informal kinship care.

Aside from support groups and educational programs, few studies have examined how other types of programs, such as kinship navigator programs could improve the lives of kinship caregivers, especially for older women. Kinship navigator programs are social service delivery programs intended to inform grandparents and other relatives raising children about available resources and services, provide information specific to their individual needs, and help families navigate service systems.

- About 2.6 million children are being raised in kinship care without birth parents in the home (3.5% of all children in the United States).
- For every child in foster care with relatives, there are 20 children being raised by grandparents or other relatives outside the foster care system, who have more difficulty connecting to resources and support compared to children involved in the child welfare system.
- Kinship care has been on the rise for the past decade, and this growth is most dramatic among families headed by women 55 and older who frequently have the least amount of financial resources to support their caretaking role.
- Custodial grand-parenting can be especially challenging for older grandmothers facing age-specific issues, such as 55-and-older living communities’ restrictions of including children on the property and chronic health conditions that impact their caregiving.

HISTORY

Kinship navigator programs were established in the late 1990s in two states, Ohio and New Jersey, prior to the passage of the 2008 Fostering Connections Act, to meet the informational needs of kinship caregivers and link them with available resources. In 2009, the U.S. Children’s Bureau funded six kinship navigator demonstration programs and seven in 2012. This current study uses data from one of the seven kinship navigator programs funded in 2012. Kinship navigator programs can be customized for diverse service settings and differ in program design, scope, and outcomes. States with state-administered child welfare systems often use a statewide kinship navigator approach that includes information and referral with a connection to local community partners to follow up with service recommendations (i.e., New York kinship navigator). States with county-administered child welfare systems often select a more direct service approach to kinship navigation that can include kinship support services such as home visits, case management, and wrap-around services (i.e., Children’s Home Network Kinship Navigator in Florida).
THE RESEARCH

Florida Children’s Home has conducted one of the only randomized control trials of a kinship navigator program, Full KIN Tech Care, a community-based program using peer navigators providing assistance with program eligibility and enrollment with a laptop in a grandmother’s home and access to an interdisciplinary team of service support. Compared with peer-to-peer support, formal care, and usual foster care supports, the KIN Tech Care program pilot showed significantly higher self-report scores in the following areas related to caring for their placed child:

- At the 12-month follow-up period, kinship caregivers enrolled in the KIN Tech program scored higher in Family Functioning, Social Supports, Concrete Supports, Child Development, and Nurturing & Attachment.
- In contrast, kinship caregivers enrolled in child welfare services as usual had lower scores in protective factors at the 12-month follow-up period.
- Peer-to-Peer-Only group were grandparents raising grandchildren who had varying levels of education and experience in helping others, which highlights the importance of using peers because they have close ties to the communities they serve.

Because child welfare services have historically served the needs of parents and foster parents, these results suggest that these traditional services may need to be culturally tailored to better meet the nuanced needs of relative caregivers, especially older caregivers. Future research could further identify the specific needs of older grandmothers (and other relative caregivers) providing care within the child welfare system. Child welfare service systems have difficulty engaging older relatives, who may experience unique parenting challenges, especially with younger children who require more up-to-date parenting practice recommendations and educational trainings such as trauma-informed caregiving.

Usual care or a traditional service approach may not meet the dynamic needs of these families that often require a more multi-system, coordination of care approach informed by knowledge about services and supports available to kinship families in the community. For example, a custodial grandmother who is struggling with enrolling a grandchild in school must navigate a multitude of barriers.

While the grandmother does not have custodial rights, she may also be unable to vaccinate the child as a requirement for school enrollment and unable to purchase school supplies. A multi-system approach would convene school administrators, legal aid, a local health department, a local area agency on aging, TANF or child welfare or financial assistance offices, and other community-based agencies to coordinate and meet these complex needs; while traditional child welfare services, may be unequipped or under-resourced to spend the time and resources to pursue these multisystem challenges.

IMPLICATIONS

This research highlights the importance of including peers in service delivery models tailored to meet the needs of multi-generational families. Grandparents raising grandchildren have the capacity to provide leadership and peer support to other kinship caregivers when needed.

Future policy work will need to use the results of kinship navigator demonstration projects to support design, implementation, and evaluation of these programs to provide community-based services and supports for both informal and formal families.

Furthermore, replication of kinship navigator programs could build capacity in data collection to build a more complete national picture of how systems of care impact the family and how families navigate such systems.

Reference:


partnersforourchildren.org

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