



# KINSHIP UNITY ACTION AGENDA

**generations  
united**

Because we're stronger together®





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**There is this notion that when we are in the child welfare system, we pathologize families and we say that apple doesn't fall too far away from the tree. The necessity to change the public narrative is that everyone needs support every now and then. We cannot pathologize families, we must be able to support them. If we change the narrative to say that all families need support and that we are here to support them in whatever way they need, I think that we'll have a better society because this is the next generation.**

**— DR. SHARON MCDANIEL, KINSHIP CAREGIVER, AND FOUNDER,  
PRESIDENT, & CEO, A SECOND CHANCE, INC.**

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# SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM KINSHIP UNITY CONVENING

On February 1-2, 2023, Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies convened a gathering of national advocates with professional and lived expertise in grandfamilies/kinship families to identify and prioritize key policy opportunities. This is the fifth in a series of convenings held since 1997, which have been critical to coordinating and prioritizing our collective work. With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, this convening was co-hosted by Generations United, the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, and Think of Us.

We convened 39 caregivers, youth raised by kin, parents, and kinship leaders from national organizations. Over one-third of participants indicated having lived experience within grandfamilies/kinship families. The purpose of this meeting was to bring together a group of policy advocates with lived and professional expertise in kinship care to identify and prioritize key policy opportunities and begin the process of building and engaging other critical stakeholders in a strong and actionable national policy agenda, which will guide our future collective work. Following the convening, we collected feedback from the broader field and facilitated focus groups of kinship caregivers from geographically and racially diverse backgrounds to gather their feedback on the action agenda and invite other stakeholders to join us in our collective advocacy for kinship families. This feedback is reflected in the action agenda.

The Kinship Unity Action Agenda is complementary to and builds on the recommendations of the [Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Federal Advisory Council's Report to Congress](#) and the [National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers](#).



## Who are grandfamilies and kinship families?

**Grandfamilies and kinship families are families in which children reside with and are being raised by grandparents, other extended family members, and adults with whom they have a close family-like relationship such as godparents and close family friends. Please note that we use the terms “grandfamilies” and “kinship families” interchangeably.**

## CONVENING AND ACTION AGENDA GOALS

- To uplift and celebrate kinship policy successes to date and explore new opportunities to build on them.
- To engage and reflect the voices and perspectives of individuals with lived expertise in kinship families in order to identify and prioritize strategies that advance equity and improve outcomes for families.
- To recognize and call out the key challenges and systemic flaws that prevent policy progress, including structural racism, sexism, economic disparities, coercion, and inadequate system accountability.
- To map out the different priorities of national kinship policy organizations to identify both areas of common ground and unaddressed gaps.
- To forge and strengthen relationships across national organizations and lived experts in order to improve kinship policy and thought leadership.
- To build momentum around policy priorities that can be shared with an even broader group of lived experts and shaped into a coordinated and actionable national policy plan.



## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Grandfamilies/kinship families and those who advocate with them have had many policy successes over the course of our five convenings. Key highlights include:

- Older Americans Act (OAA) reauthorization in 2000 included grandfamilies within the National Family Caregiver Support Program. The 10% cap on use of OAA funds for the National Family Support Program was removed during 2020 reauthorization.
- Passage and implementation of the LEGACY Intergenerational Housing Act of 2003, which authorized a study of grandfamilies' housing needs, training for HUD staff, and funding for dedicated housing for grandfamilies. Funding was appropriated for LEGACY Act programs in 2005 and 2021.
- Passage and implementation of the Lifespan Respite Care Act of 2006, which established the Lifespan Respite Technical Assistance and Resource Center (TARC) and authorizes competitive grants to eligible state agencies in collaboration with a public or private non-profit state respite coalition or organization to make quality respite available and accessible to family caregivers regardless of age or disability.
- Passage and implementation of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. This Act provided funding for family connections grants (including kinship navigator programs and family finding programs), required notice be given to adult relatives of children removed from their parents' care, authorized new federal funding for subsidized guardianship payments, and clarified that states can waive non-safety related licensing standards for kinship families to address barriers.
- Implementation of Title IV-E Guardianship Assistance Programs (GAPs) in 42 states, 2 territories, 11 tribes, and the District of Columbia. Tens of thousands of children have exited foster care to permanency with kin as a result.



- Passage and implementation of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014. This Act includes provisions to allow preservation of eligibility for kinship guardianship assistance payments with a successor guardian and clarifies that states must notify the parents of a child's siblings when a child is removed from their parents' care.
- Passage and implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018. This Act includes key provisions to support grandfamilies by addressing barriers to licensing relatives as foster parents, providing federal Title IV-E funding for evidence-based kinship navigator programs, and providing federal support for evidence-based mental health and substance abuse prevention and treatment services and in-home parent/caregiver skill-based programs.
- Passage and implementation of the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act of 2018. This established a Federal Advisory Council on Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, which has produced its initial report to Congress (2021) and the National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers (2022).
- Establishment of the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (2021).
- The Supreme Court of the United States upheld the constitutionality of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in the *Haaland v. Brackeen* case, representing a key victory for Native children and families and for the child welfare system as a whole. ICWA represents the gold standard for prioritizing and supporting family and cultural connections for children (2023).
- The Administration for Children and Families finalized a federal rule which explicitly allows states to use kin-specific commonsense foster care licensing standards that are different from those used for non-relative foster family homes (2023).

## CORE VALUES

- When children cannot live with their parents, they do best with kin.
- Kinship families deserve the same support as foster families.
- Supported kinship is the bridge to equity, particularly for African American, American Indian, Alaska Native, and other communities of color.
- Kinship families caring for children outside the child welfare system should have access to targeted supports.
- Children and youth must remain connected to their families and communities.
- Every child deserves to grow up with the people who know and love them and who are supported in doing so.
- Efforts to help children remain with parents should include giving them supports, services, and resources needed to provide for the child. Families need support and resources to stay together.
- No one should be discriminated against because of their identity.
- Lived experience should not just inform policy change but lead it.
- Government systems must be held accountable to prioritize and support kinship families.

## Government Systems Must be Held Accountable to Prioritize and Support Kinship Families

To radically transform government policies and systems that negatively impact families, systems must:

- Ensure that those most impacted by systems lead their redesign.
- End the coercion, control, unnecessary investigation, unnecessary separation, and oversurveillance of families.
- Explicitly acknowledge and apologize for racist history, and intentionally eradicate racist design, ideologies, and policy and practice impacting kinship families.
- Recognize that current systems are not “broken” but, rather, operating in the legacy of their intentional design.
- Recognize and embrace the diversity of kinship families, including LGBTQIA+ caregivers and youth, and ensure that all families are treated equitably and with respect regardless of their race, immigration status, gender identity, or sexual orientation.



## PRINCIPLES FOR SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

- We recognize that some of the suggested policy directions that are included in this action agenda are grounded in systems and policies that should be completely redesigned or abolished.
- We also recognize, however, that total systemic reform will take time, so we are open to pursuing shorter-term changes that will bring more immediate relief and better outcomes for grandfamilies/kinship families.
- In pursuing concurrent strategies, we must ensure that focus on short-term policy victories in current systems does not impede more radical long-term transformation.
- And, as with all policy implementation, we must look to data to evaluate and prioritize needs and fill existing gaps.



# COLLECTIVE ACTION PRIORITIES

## Ensure that kinship caregivers receive equitable financial and other supports

When children cannot remain with their parents, they do best with relatives.<sup>1</sup> Despite evidence of the strength of grandfamilies, grandfamily caregivers experience significant and unnecessary barriers to helping the children they raise thrive. The systems and services that help families in the U.S. were not designed to meet the unique needs of grandfamilies. For kinship caregivers, something as simple as enrolling children in school or taking them to the doctor can be difficult, if not impossible. This can be especially challenging for grandfamilies raising children outside of the foster care system. For every 1 child being raised by kin in foster care, there are 18 children being raised by kin outside foster care.<sup>2</sup> As with other key supports, a major determinant for financial benefits is whether the child is in the foster care system.

Many kinship caregivers miss out on financial assistance their grandfamilies may be eligible for because they are unaware of what benefits or support may be available to them, or they do not know who to ask for assistance. Some kinship families are reluctant to apply for government benefits or get involved with foster care because they are fearful of the system or don't feel valued by it. Other families are never given the option to become a formal foster parent to the child because they step in to care for the child before the child welfare system becomes involved or the child welfare system diverts the child to their care without providing information about the financial support and services available through foster care.

Inequities are particularly prominent for grandfamilies outside the foster care system. Grandfamilies outside of the foster care system generally have no targeted financial assistance and often do not have access to secure financial assistance, child care, respite, education and training, and other supports for the child. They may be eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only grant payments, but the amount is much smaller than foster care maintenance payments, and eligibility rules for TANF vary significantly by state and tribe. For example, families within the foster care system receive, on average, \$511 per month in financial assistance for one child, compared with an average of just \$249 for those outside the system. The disparities become substantially larger for kin who care for sibling groups as, unlike foster care maintenance payments, TANF child-only grant amounts only increase slightly with each additional child being cared for in the home. Furthermore, in most states, the TANF agency requires that the caregiver assign the right to pursue child support to the state. This often prevents caregivers from pursuing the TANF benefit because they fear a child support action will drive the parent to retrieve the child, possibly placing the child back in danger. Additionally, going after a parent for child support is often counterproductive for kin caregivers who want the child to reunify with their parents, as it makes it more difficult for parents to find stability.



**Making sure that kinship families have equitable financial resources is what helps them thrive in their communities and within their families, avoid crises, and prevents system entry.**

— SONIA EMERSON, KINSHIP CAREGIVER, CONNECTICUT



Even those children who enter foster care with kin often receive inequitable supports. In order to receive foster care maintenance payments equal to those of non-kin foster parents, kinship caregivers must become licensed foster caregivers. While the recent rule from the Biden Administration allows for different licensing standards for kinship families, currently in many states those licensing requirements ignore the unique context and circumstances of kinship caregivers. Many grandfamilies face barriers to becoming licensed that have no impact on the child's safety, receiving a lesser amount of financial support or no monthly financial support at all, despite the child being in the custody of the child welfare system.

### Action Items/Recommendations:

- Require that children in kinship care receive the same financial assistance and other supports as children with non-related foster parents and states receive federal reimbursement for all such supports.
- Require that equitable funding be provided for the child as soon as the child moves into the home of their kinship caregiver.
- Ensure that all financial supports for children in kinship care be based on the reasonable calculation of the cost of raising a child, including kinship families who have been diverted from or who were never in contact with the child welfare system (regardless of the source of funding – e.g., TANF, foster care, tax credits, etc.). These reasonable calculations should also include enhanced rates for special needs, when appropriate.
- Promote best practice TANF policies to support kinship families in states and tribes, such as those highlighted in the [Improving Grandfamilies' Access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families policy brief](#).
- Reinstate the Social Security survivors benefit for children of deceased or disabled workers for students enrolled in college or an alternative vocational school through age 26 and expand access to the Social Security child's benefit for children in grandfamilies.
- Urge states to adopt approval/licensing standards for kin caregivers that are different from those for non-kin foster parents through the opportunity presented by [this final rule](#) to ensure kinship foster families receive adequate and equitable financial support for the children in their care. Eliminate burdensome and nonsensical licensing requirements and provide financial support to address safety and barriers to licensure if needed.
- Do not require citizenship for foster care licensure or other financial supports for kinship caregivers. Coordinate policy with local law enforcement that limits sharing of an immigrant kinship caregiver's personal information with federal law enforcement.
- Ensure the availability of statewide, effective kinship navigator programs and other outreach programs that provide information on and assist with applying for available benefits.

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## Ensure policies that meet kinship families' basic needs

Research indicates that children in grandfamilies who receive services and support, such as financial and legal assistance, housing, food and nutrition supports, and health services, experience better outcomes than those whose grandfamilies don't receive services.<sup>3</sup> But many grandfamilies lack access to services to help meet these basic needs.

All children deserve a safe, loving home, healthy food, a good education, and timely, quality health care. Yet in general, across the nation, there is a dearth of adequate services and supports available to grandfamilies. Those services that are available often are not tailored to the unique needs of grandfamilies and are inadequate to meet the basic needs of both the children and the caregivers. The list of recommendations below is not exhaustive; kinship families have diverse and varied needs depending on their circumstances.



## Action Items/Recommendations:

- **Physical, Mental, and Behavioral Health Care:** Increase access to affordable, quality, trauma-informed physical, mental, and behavioral health supports for children, parents, and caregivers, including for children in kinship families with disabilities or special needs. Increase access to substance use treatment and prevention services. Ensure access to specialized mental health supports for caregivers, parents, and children as the family navigates separation and reunification.
- **Housing:** Expand or provide a new funding stream to build and fund specialized housing for kinship care families. Specifically name kinship families as a population served by the Family Unification Program (FUP).
- **Education:** Clarify that the McKinney-Vento Act includes students living with kin outside of the foster care system. Provide kinship families with educational resources, including ensuring access to technology and technology support in the home for schoolwork.
- **Food and Nutrition:** Improve Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit adequacy and establish a SNAP child-only benefit. Provide free healthy school meals for all children and maintain adequate fruit and vegetable benefits in the Special Supplementary Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Invest in targeted outreach to connect kinship families to Federal Nutrition Programs.
- **Tax Credits:** Provide a refundable kinship caregiver tax credit at the federal and state levels. Expand the Child Tax Credit and make fully refundable for grandfamilies.
- **Child Care:** Provide child care benefits for kinship families inside and outside the system that mirror policy for non-kin foster families.
- **Child Support:** Explicitly include kinship care as a “good cause” exemption in child support collections.
- **Expand Other Financial Supports:** Including Social Security, SSI, SSDI, TANF, and other cash supports. Provide equitable financial assistance to support kinship families that prevent entry into foster care.
- **Caregiver Education:** Ensure kinship caregivers are educated on services and benefits available to them and understand what their options are.
- **Provider Education:** Provide caseworkers, health care and mental health providers, and educational providers training and resources on issues related to grandfamilies and the services and supports available to them.
- **Collaboration:** Promote collaboration across systems to increase kinship families’ access to existing services in other systems, including aging, disability, education, housing, Medicaid, Medicare, Nutrition, TANF, legal assistance, and other social services system agencies.

## Fully integrate lived expertise into policy review, design, and implementation

Increasingly, government and nonprofit leaders are recognizing the value of engaging individuals with lived experience when creating and enhancing public policies, programs and services. Policies, programs, and services are more effective, trusted, and used when they intentionally draw on the perspectives of those they seek to serve. Engaging individuals with lived expertise in an authentic way requires preparation, an understanding of power dynamics, and a commitment to providing support to enable their engagement.



**Those of us who have lived experience are the ones who must bear the burden of the shortcomings of policy. We must bear the weight of the intended or sometimes neglected actions that harm us. The incorporation of lived experience gives those of us who have experienced the system the way we have, the ability to ensure future generations don't have the same struggles that we do.**

— AUTUMN ADAMS, KINSHIP CAREGIVER AND CITIZEN OF YAKAMA NATION

### Action Items/Recommendations:

- Change federal and state hiring practices to properly weigh lived expertise.
- For every government and government-funded program, require that funds be made available to authentically engage lived expertise and pay lived experts for their time and expertise.
- Require that government-funded research and evaluation integrates lived expertise and guards against extractive practices.
- Develop and implement policy guidance on how to fully and authentically engage lived expertise to guide policy change.
- Provide training to federal, state, and local government and nonprofit staff serving grandfamilies on how to intentionally and authentically engage lived experts in a respectful, trauma-informed manner.
- Promote strategies to fully support lived experts as they are engaged in practice or policy work, including by providing peer-to-peer supports and investing in programs led by individuals with lived experience. Ensure lived experts have access to mental health supports in their roles.
- Educate the field about how to fully support and effectively engage lived experts in a respectful, trauma-informed manner, including by considering guidance included in this [Tip Sheet to Include Kinship/Grandfamilies in Programmatic Decision-Making](#).
- When engaging kinship families as lived experts, support families in communicating in their preferred language to fully engage them as experts.

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## Ensure racial/cultural equity, and respect and support tribal sovereignty

In the United States, the quality and level of support and services a family can receive depend on personal characteristics like sex, age, race, socioeconomic status, immigration status, or a caregiver's personal or legal relationship to a child. Compounding these challenges, grandfamilies must navigate complicated, fragmented systems of support, often aimed at "parents," that differ within and among communities, are underfunded nationwide, and do not consider diverse cultural norms.

African American, American Indian, and Alaska Native children are more likely to live in kinship families than the general population. This is partially based on cultural values and long and proud traditions that emphasize the importance of connections with extended family and community. While African American children comprise 14 percent of all children in the United States, they make up over 25 percent of all children in grandfamilies and 23 percent of all children in foster care. The long history in the United States of enslavement, segregation, economic injustice, and institutional racism contributes to this overrepresentation in the foster care system, and likely also contributes to the larger percentage of African American children in informal grandfamilies.

American Indian and Alaska Native children make up one percent of all children in the United States, yet they comprise over eight percent of all children in grandfamilies and two percent of all children in state foster care systems. While the overrepresentation of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children in grandfamilies is likely a product of the centuries-long shameful treatment of Native communities by



**Federally recognized tribes need to be able to keep their children to maintain their status as federally recognized tribes. We need to have a language, we need to show that we are different from others, that we have ceremonies, and that we have a unique set of beliefs that make us who we are. And we cannot do that if all our children have been adopted out of our tribes and they don't know our customs and traditions. We need them with us.**

— ROBYN WIND, KINSHIP CAREGIVER AND CITIZEN OF MUSCOGEE (CREEK) NATION



the United States and the many inequities these communities continue to face, it is also a reflection of their cultural strengths and resilience. There is a long and proud tradition of kinship care in Native cultures. In almost all Native cultures, extended family kinship structures prevail. Within this kinship structure, there are many potential caregivers and many natural supports. Recognizing the different ways in which tribes define relatives and kin in their communities is important to honoring tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

Tribal governments in the United States, under their retained powers of self-governance, provide child welfare services and decide custody matters regarding children. Those sovereign powers are recognized and enforced by the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Under ICWA, states must recognize the authority of tribes over their own child welfare and work with them on a government-to-government basis. Despite the protections ICWA provides, disproportionate placements for American Indian and Alaskan Native families continue to persist as these children are four times more likely to be removed from their homes compared to white children.

### **Action Items/Recommendations:**

- Support policy that recognizes and builds on strong cultural traditions of kin and extended family.
- Provide funding for community-based, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive services and supports.
- Require cultural awareness and race equity training for all child welfare and other grandfamilies stakeholders incorporating members of the various communities as trainers.
- Require states to redefine maltreatment to take into account the overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities among the impoverished.
- Require states to revise living standards when assessing a home to take into account income, cost of living, and families' real-life circumstances.
- Ensure services for kinship families are available in the language spoken by the caregivers and youth in their care.
- Provide federal funds directly to tribes to provide culturally sensitive supports to kin, without requiring that they meet strict evidence-based standards that do not account for cultural differences, and work with tribal leadership to ensure effective implementation of supportive programming.
- Reform the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse to address barriers that prevent programs and services developed by and for Native communities and communities of color that are overrepresented in child welfare from being approved for federal reimbursement.

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## Ensure that the child welfare system respects, values, and fully supports kinship families

Kinship caregivers step up to raise children because the children need them. Without them, many more children would wind up in non-relative foster care, separated from their parents, families, homes, communities, culture, and all that is familiar — creating even more trauma for them. While there is general agreement that children who are not raised by their parents deserve and need care and support, there is a pervasive and inaccurate perception that kinship caregivers should be able to meet all of the children’s needs, even though they didn’t expect or plan for this role financially, logistically, or mentally.

The research is clear. When children cannot remain with their parents, they do better with kin and even better in kinship families that receive needed services and supports.<sup>4</sup> But far too many grandfamilies are not connected with equitable supports. There are disparities among grandfamilies according to their community, state, tribe, racial/ethnic group, and other family and personal characteristics. As a nation, our policies, systems, and services are not all geared to help them thrive and succeed.

### Action Items/Recommendations:

- Enhance prevention resources to prevent crisis before they occur, including supporting kin in being part of prevention plans.
- Streamline and address barriers to interstate placements for kinship families.
- Invest in funding for jurisdictions to conduct family finding, engagement, and support when a child first comes to the attention of the child welfare system.
- Require caseworkers placing children with kin to educate caregivers about their care arrangement options and any supports or benefits that may be available through each arrangement option. Promote policies that prevent coercing kinship families into being diverted from the foster care system.
- Require policies that place all children removed from parents with safe and appropriate kin placements by default, with consideration of the youth’s preferences. Placement with non-kin must be reviewed and only allowed only in circumstances where it explicitly determined that placement with kin is not appropriate or possible even with appropriate support. Ensure caseworkers follow-up with kinship families following placement to confirm successful and appropriate placement and to determine further opportunities for support.
- Ensure specialized supports are available to kinship caregivers, children in kinship families, and parents to support them as they are navigating the reunification process.
- When children are removed from their parents’ care, allow, encourage, and support kin to maintain the family bond and connection to culture even if they are not able to care for the child full-time.

## Provide affordable, high-quality legal representation for kinship families

The legal relationship between a caregiver and the child they are raising can be pivotal in terms of the ability of the caregivers to provide for the child. But the legal system is complicated and confusing, and understanding the terminology and legal options are crucial. Unlike parents who have an automatic legal relationship with their children, grandparents and other relative caregivers do not have inherent legal rights and responsibilities for the children they are raising. To obtain such a relationship takes time and money — money that is likely already stretched thin because they are raising children they did not plan or expect to raise.

High quality legal representation for children leads to higher placement with kin and obtaining quality legal help is often critical to securing legal custody, guardianship, or adoption, and accessing services and supports.<sup>5</sup> Yet obtaining quality, affordable legal counsel and/or assistance can be difficult. Those who try to form a legal relationship and don't qualify for affordable legal services often spend down their retirement and lose their financial security due to the high costs and long-term nature of many cases. Giving kin caregivers equitable access to affordable legal fees and services in kinship matters can allow many to preserve their family's financial security while providing more permanency and stability for the children they are raising.



**It is extremely costly to get legal help and I know that because we hired an attorney and it was quite expensive. I ended up having to go into my 401k in order to pay for these services. If you have little income and you don't have the knowledge and information that you need in order to carry you forward, there's no way you can do it.**

— SARAH SMALLS, KINSHIP CAREGIVER, VIRGINIA

### Action Items/Recommendations:

- Expand federal, state, and local funding for free and low-cost legal representation for all families, including kinship caregivers outside of the child welfare system.
- Require that kinship caregivers receive free legal representation in the child welfare system as a condition of federal funding.
- Ensure caregivers are educated on when they or their family may need legal representation.
- Provide funding to develop and incentivize training for attorneys to better understand grandfamilies and ensure quality representation.
- Incorporate kinship families' lived experience into legal training to educate attorneys on the unique family dynamics and diverse circumstances of these families.





## Support effective strategies to change the public narrative on kinship care

Research shows when children cannot stay with their parents, they do best with relatives. Kinship families have increased stability, higher levels of permanency, and strong safety. Children in grandfamilies experience better behavioral and mental health outcomes. They maintain a greater preservation of cultural identity and more community connections.<sup>6</sup>

While grandfamilies and advocates have made significant strides raising awareness about these positive outcomes for children in grandfamilies, some stigmatizing stereotypes persist. A coordinated, steady campaign to educate policymakers and the public will be a critical component to successful policy change.

### Action Items/Recommendations:

- Use public opinion research & messaging to push against negative stereotypes.
- Highlight why kinship is the best option for children when they cannot remain with their parents, including research that demonstrates stronger outcomes for children in relative care.
- Acknowledge that no family is perfect, nor do they have to be.
- Normalize help-seeking and destigmatize the need for assistance.
- Ensure it is clear that government and public systems should consistently support, not undermine kinship networks and families.
- Recognize that caring for children in kinship care is complex as families navigate changing family dynamics, emotions, and circumstances.
- Promote community awareness about grandfamilies and work towards shifting public perceptions to normalize grandparents and other relatives raising children through kinship care.

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## Develop specialized programs to meet the unique needs of kinship families

More than 2.4 million children are raised in grandfamilies<sup>7</sup>, yet family systems and services in areas such as housing, education, and health care were not designed for grandfamilies. Services are often oriented toward parents, do not use inclusive language, and do not adapt to the unique challenges, strengths, circumstances and needs of the children and caregivers in kinship families. Furthermore, not all staff are well-trained and fully familiar with the unique needs of grandfamilies and supports available to them. Research indicates that children in grandfamilies receiving services and support, particularly tailored to meet their unique needs, achieve more positive outcomes compared to those in grandfamilies without such assistance.<sup>8</sup> Grandfamilies have diverse and varying needs, and they deserve a wide array of specialized programs and services to meet these unique needs.



**I want the people who make decisions about these specialized programs to understand how valuable it will be to the families that are in these situations, how important it is. If you can make this happen, please do. For the families that can't advocate or speak for themselves, for the families that are struggling, for the families that have the heart to be able to love and nurture the kids and provide everything they need. Understand that when making these decisions, if material things are the only things preventing children from being in homes with their family members, with the culture and familiarity that they grew up with, please make your decisions wisely.**

— SANTANA LEE, KINSHIP CAREGIVER, WISCONSIN



## Action Items/Recommendations:

- Expand funding for kinship navigator programs and encourage them to equally support kin caregivers both inside and outside the child welfare system. Encourage kinship navigator programs to be operated by community-based organizations that are known and trusted by kinship families and located in areas easily accessible to the families. Ensure that kinship navigators coordinate services and supports with other local agencies and organizations serving kinship families.
- Develop specialized programs and training for younger caregivers and for older caregivers parenting for the first time in years. This training should include education about trauma and how to meet the special needs of the children they are taking in.
- Ensure that kinship caregivers have full access to become therapeutic foster parents and therefore receive necessary supports, training, and services to care for children who need a higher level of care, when appropriate.
- Invest in programs that meet kinship families' mental health, social, and emotional needs (e.g., peer-to-peer, peer-led, and peer-founded support groups, trauma-informed mental health supports, specialized training on family dynamics and resource development).
- Ensure that kinship families have full access to programs and services that provide them the support and skills to provide an affirming home for LGBTQIA+ children and youth and invest in these programs where they do not currently exist.
- Establish robust federal, state, and local respite networks and programs for kinship families inside and outside of the child welfare system.
- Develop flexible funds to meet urgent family needs (e.g., cribs, car seats, diapers, formula, etc.) and fund innovative programs to meet grandfamilies' unique needs.
- Leverage existing resources for kinship families and coordinate services with existing programs, including family resource centers.
- Ensure the inclusion of kinship families in permissible uses of federal and state opioid settlements.



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## Enhance social science research on all kinship families to better address inequities across systems

Research indicates that children do better with kinship families than in families with non-kin. When the grandfamily receives services and supports, the children do even better.<sup>9</sup> Yet, inequities still abound, and all grandfamilies certainly do not have access to the same services and supports. Currently, only limited data exists, particularly for kinship families who are not involved with the child welfare system. The U.S. Census Bureau collects data on grandparents who self-identify as responsible for grandchildren. Similar data is available for the grandchildren of grandparents who are responsible for them. Both data sets include broad racial and ethnic breakdowns but cannot be disaggregated based on racial and ethnic background within categories such as poverty and disability. This information is critical to informing services and supports and identifying racial disparities. No national racial or demographic data are publicly available for other relatives, such as aunts or uncles, or the children they raise.

Additional research and data on kinship families who are involved with the child welfare system is also needed. This includes data on children who are diverted from the child welfare system, children who are in the legal custody of the child welfare system with unlicensed kin and receive no foster care maintenance payments, those who exit foster care to guardianship or adoption, and children who are reunified with parents. Many state child welfare agencies are removing children from homes, finding relatives or kin, and then diverting those children with little or no supports. No federal data are collected from states on these children. Agencies “divert” children despite the fact that they have placement and care responsibility. We need to capture data on these large numbers of diverted children to better understand this population, and whether they eventually enter foster care. Although some Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data are reported for children who are reunified with their parents and who exit foster care to guardianship or adoption, additional data collected on race will inform policy and program responses to possible disparities.

### Action Items/Recommendations:

- Provide funding to support research on the stability, permanency, health, and well-being outcomes for caregivers and children in kinship families inside and outside of the child welfare system. This should include research on physical and mental health diagnoses and outcomes for children in grandfamilies.
- Collect more demographic data about all kinship families inside and outside of the child welfare system, including race/ethnicity, location, tribal affiliation, LGBTQIA+ identities, and other pertinent characteristics, to inform services and supports.
- Analyze and disaggregate the racial data of grandfamilies both inside and outside the foster care system.
- Track children who have come to the attention of the child welfare system but are diverted from that system.
- Collect longitudinal data tracking the well-being of children being raised by their relatives after they turn 18 and into adulthood.
- Prioritize researchers with lived experience in grandfamilies and the child welfare system. Involve and fund minority-serving institutions and scholars of color in the collection of data in our communities.
- Develop evidence-based tools to help evaluate inequities of grandfamilies.
- Leverage alternative data sources to compile and analyze data on grandfamilies whenever feasible.
- Promote research that is strengths-based and highlights family resilience.
- This research and data collection may encounter resistance from kinship families and we emphasize the importance of ensuring the process is not overly intrusive and facilitated in a dignified and respectful manner, including informing the kinship families on how the data and information will be used when possible.

## CONCLUSION

Every day across the nation, grandparents and other kin take on the responsibility of providing a stable home for children, keeping them with family and preventing them from entering foster care. These dedicated grandfamilies deserve not only recognition but also comprehensive services and support to address their diverse needs. Ensuring that these families receive adequate assistance is crucial for creating an environment where both the children and caregivers can not only survive but truly thrive. The Kinship Unity Action Agenda outlines priorities that, when implemented, will play a crucial role in ensuring that the diverse and unique needs of these families are acknowledged and met.



# NATIONAL KINSHIP UNITY CONVENING ATTENDEES

Name	Organization
Autumn Adams	Arizona State University Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law
Alexandra Ashbrook	Food Research & Action Center
Ana Beltran	Generations United
Mary Bissell	ChildFocus
Sixto Cancel	Think of Us
Jamarl Clark	Generations United
Alexis Contreras	National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA)
Currey Cook	Lambda Legal
Angelique Day	University of Washington
Meg Dygert	American Public Human Services Association (APHSA)
Sonia Emerson	ChildFocus
Raul Enriquez	Idaho Area 3 Senior Services Agency
Rob Geen	CWPolicy LLC
Karen Gillespie	Generations United
Treva Johnson	The Family Focused Treatment Association
Leland Kiang	USAgging
Santana Lee	All 4 Kidz
Jaia Peterson Lent	Generations United
Todd Lloyd	Annie E. Casey Foundation
Ira Lustbader	Children's Rights
Kati Mapa	Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)
Sharon McDaniel	A Second Chance, Inc
Cherae McWilliams	Annie E. Casey Foundation
Marina Nitze	New America's New Practice Lab
Steven Olender	Think of Us
Emily Peeler	American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law
Jenny Pokempner	Youth Law Center
Heidi Redlich Epstein	American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law
Chelsi Rhoades	Generations United
Keri Richmond	American Academy of Pediatrics
Berenice Rushovich	Child Trends
Andrew Russo	National Family Support Network
Sarah Smalls	Formed Families Forward
Alisa Thornton	Birth Parent National Network
Kristen Weber	National Center for Youth Law
Ruth White	National Center for Housing and Child Welfare
Robyn Wind-Tiger	Generations United

# ABOUT

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## Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies

Founded in 1986, Generations United's mission is to improve the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit for all. Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies is a leading voice for families headed by grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends. The Center's work is guided by an advisory group of caregivers, known as GRAND Voices, and organizations that set the national agenda to advance public interest in support of these families. Center staff conduct federal advocacy and provide training to grandfamily practitioners, advocates and caregivers to elevate their voices to improve policies and practices. The Center raises awareness about the grandfamilies' strengths and needs through media outreach, weekly communications, and awareness-raising events. It offers an annual State of Grandfamilies report and a broad range of guides, fact sheets and tools for grandfamilies, which cover issues from educational and health care access to financial and legal supports ([gu.org](http://gu.org) and [grandfamilies.org](http://grandfamilies.org)). Generations United is also home to the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network, the first-ever national technical assistance center for those who serve grandfamilies and kinship families ([gksnetwork.org](http://gksnetwork.org)).



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## American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law

The ABA Center on Children and the Law works to increase access to justice for children and families encountering the child welfare system through improved legal and judicial practice. The ABA Center on Children and the Law is a grant-funded organization that manages a diverse portfolio of projects with two main goals: to improve legal representation and to improve the legal systems that impact the lives of children and families ([www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_interest/child\\_law](http://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law)).



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## Think of Us

Think of Us is a research and design lab dedicated to fundamentally rearchitecting the child welfare system, with the children, families, and communities that have been impacted by the system at the center of shaping what it should be. Founded and co-led by people with lived experience in foster care, Think of Us looks system-wide to identify opportunities for the greatest impact. Through participatory research, virtual support services, proximate policy, and innovative partnerships with state and local governments, Think of Us has worked with and learned from more than 40,000 people with lived experience since 2020 ([www.thinkofus.org](http://www.thinkofus.org)).



Driving Systems Change  
in Child Welfare



# ENDNOTES

- 1 Generations United. (2023). Fact Sheet: Children Thrive in Grandfamilies. [www.gu.org/resources/children-thrive-in-grandfamilies](http://www.gu.org/resources/children-thrive-in-grandfamilies).
- 2 Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network. (2023). Kinship/Grandfamilies Data. [www.gksnetwork.org/kinship-data](http://www.gksnetwork.org/kinship-data).
- 3 Generations United. (2023). Fact Sheet: Children Thrive in Grandfamilies. [www.gu.org/resources/children-thrive-in-grandfamilies](http://www.gu.org/resources/children-thrive-in-grandfamilies).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, & National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. Ensuring High-Quality Legal Representation for Parents and Children. [www.ncjfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ensuring-High-Quality-Legal-Representation\\_508-Final.pdf](http://www.ncjfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ensuring-High-Quality-Legal-Representation_508-Final.pdf).
- 6 Generations United. (2023). Fact Sheet: Children Thrive in Grandfamilies. [www.gu.org/resources/children-thrive-in-grandfamilies](http://www.gu.org/resources/children-thrive-in-grandfamilies).
- 7 Generations United. (2023). State of Grandfamilies Report 2023. Building Resilience: Supporting Grandfamilies' Mental Health and Wellness. [www.gu.org/resources/building-resilience-grandfamilies-mental-health-and-wellness](http://www.gu.org/resources/building-resilience-grandfamilies-mental-health-and-wellness).
- 8 Generations United. (2023). Fact Sheet: Children Thrive in Grandfamilies. [www.gu.org/resources/children-thrive-in-grandfamilies](http://www.gu.org/resources/children-thrive-in-grandfamilies).
- 9 Ibid.

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**We need to join this agenda because there are too many families and children who next year, or a decade from now, a generation from now, are going to be dealing with the same issues we are currently dealing with if we don't use our voice to fix this and make it better.**

**— NORMA HATFIELD, KINSHIP CAREGIVER, KENTUCKY**



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