

Policy Solutions for Supporting Kinship Adoption and Guardianship

INTRODUCTION

More than 2.4 million children across the United States are being raised in grandfamilies (also known as kinship families). These families are formed when grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends step in temporarily or long-term to raise children when their parents are unable to do so. Grandparents and other kin play a key role in achieving permanency for children who cannot return to their parents' care, including children in foster care. Of all children who exited foster care to adoption in 2022, 33% were adopted by a relative.¹ An additional 11% of children exiting foster care did so through guardianship.²

When children cannot safely remain with their parents, research shows they do best in the care of relatives or close family friends. Children in kinship foster care experience better outcomes than those placed with non-relative foster families, including greater stability, higher rates of permanency, improved mental and behavioral health, and stronger academic performance.³

Recognizing the value of these outcomes, child welfare systems are increasingly identifying relatives to care for children who enter the foster care system. Nationally, the percentage of children in foster care with relatives rose from 25% in 2007 to 39% in 2024.⁴ These figures underscore the crucial role kinship caregivers will continue to play in helping children secure stable, permanent homes.

The Administration for Children and Families' [A Home for Every Child](#) initiative continues the important trend of

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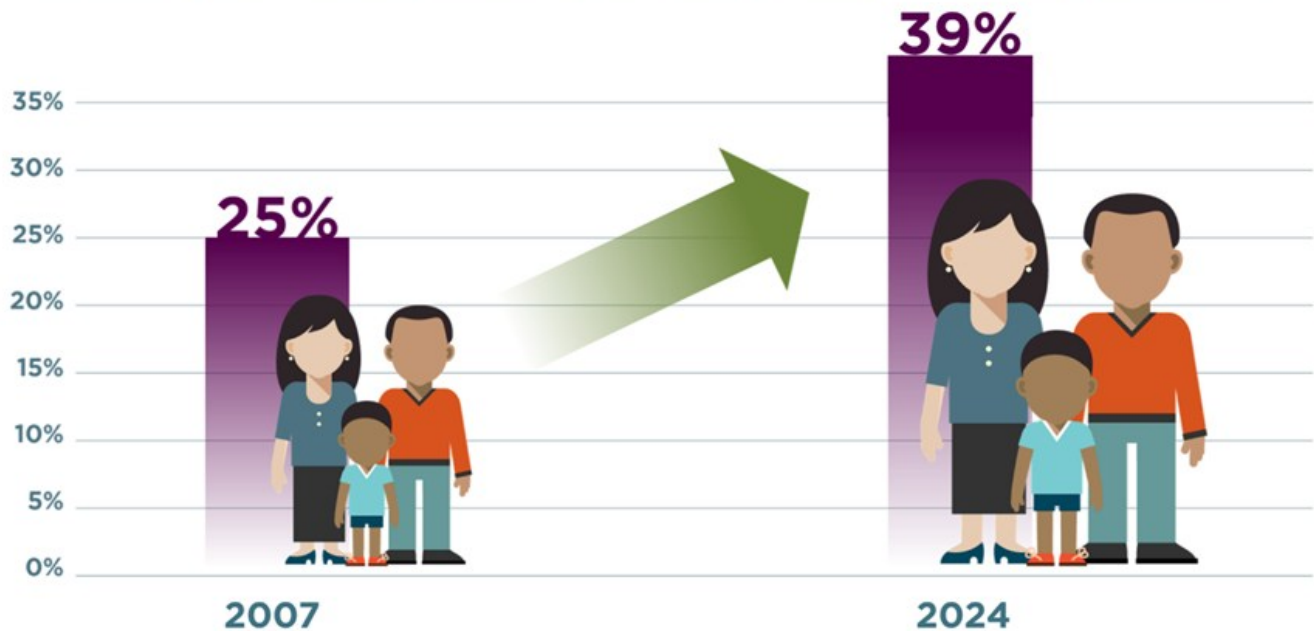
prioritizing kin placements for children in foster care. This context provides a key opportunity to offer post-permanency services and policy solutions that support permanent homes for children through kinship adoption and guardianship.

PERMANENCY THROUGH ADOPTION AND GUARDIANSHIP

For kinship families, both adoption and guardianship offer meaningful pathways to permanency, each with distinct strengths. Adoption may appeal to caregivers seeking the most permanent legal relationship. It turns



Percentage of Children in Foster Care Being Raised by Relatives



grandparents or other extended family members into parents in the eyes of the law and terminates parental rights. Guardianship may appeal to families who do not want to change family dynamics, such as by legally turning grandma into mom. Guardianships provide an important option for older children in foster care who may want to maintain a relationship with their parents and not sever legal ties. Guardianships are also responsive to some tribal cultures that do not believe in terminating parental rights or legally adopting kin.

Importantly, neither adoption nor guardianship is inherently superior. What matters is ensuring caregivers and youth have the proper information to choose the option that best aligns with their family's needs. The types of benefits and supportive services that accompany each option vary by state. Policymakers should ensure that structural, financial, or procedural barriers do not inappropriately push families toward one option over the other. For example, it is important to maintain equity in access to adoption assistance and guardianship assistance payments.

SUPPORTS AND SERVICES HELP PROMOTE STRONG OUTCOMES AND PERMANENCY FOR CHILDREN

Studies show that children raised in grandfamilies have better social, behavioral, and mental health outcomes when their caregivers have access to supportive services and resources compared to those who do not receive similar support.⁵ Yet grandparents and other kinship caregivers often lack access to important resources and services available to children in foster care with non-relatives.

Kinship caregivers should have equitable access to clear information, legal assistance, financial supports, and post-permanency services so they can make informed decisions and sustain stable, permanent homes for the children in their care whether through adoption or guardianship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase investment in post-permanency supports for kinship families

Kinship families continue to need support after adoption or guardianship is finalized. Policymakers should invest in ongoing services

that help families navigate their long-term needs. These services include financial assistance, mental health supports, caregiver training, peer support groups, and legal guidance. Strengthening post-permanency services reduces the risk of disruption, supports children's healing, and ensures that kinship families remain stable and supported over time.

Support kinship navigators to include help with adoption and permanency

Kinship navigator programs play a central role in helping caregivers understand and pursue permanency options, as well as connecting kinship families to existing post-permanency supports.

a. Ensure statewide and tribal access to effective kinship navigator programs and related supports.

States should provide consistent, statewide coverage of navigator programs that offer hands-on assistance with government benefits applications, legal processes, permanency pathways, and post-permanency supports and services. These programs must be adequately funded, culturally competent, and accessible in multiple languages. Tribes should have access to federal funding streams and state partnerships that support broad availability of kinship navigators.

b. Partner with trusted community-based organizations.

Collaboration with local community organizations helps ensure that caregivers receive information from sources they trust. These partnerships strengthen outreach, reduce stigma, and ensure that supports reflect family and cultural contexts. Federal and state policies should specifically identify the importance of collaborating with trusted community organizations in the planning and provision of kinship navigation and permanency services.

“It’s frustrating that once the papers are signed, all support just disappears and we’re left to fend for ourselves.”

Grandmother who is raising her grandchildren

c. Make funding available to nonprofits as well as child welfare agencies.

Resources should not flow solely through child welfare agencies; nonprofits and community-based organizations must also have access to funding to provide navigation, legal support, and advocacy. Diversifying funding streams expands reach and ensures caregivers can choose services that best meet their needs.

Establish robust federal, state, and local respite networks and programs for kinship families

Kinship caregivers often take on caregiving responsibilities unexpectedly, without preparation or a built-in support system. To sustain permanency, federal, state, tribal and local partners should invest in accessible, high-quality respite services for kinship families both within and outside the formal foster care system. Federal funds through the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) and Lifespan Respite program can be used to support respite for some kinship caregivers, but funds are not sufficient to meet needs of all family caregivers. Reliable respite options reduce caregiver stress, promote family stability, and allow caregivers to maintain employment, manage health needs, and prevent placement disruptions.

Encourage states and tribes to adopt kin-specific licensing and approval standards

Tailored standards help ensure that kinship caregivers can be approved quickly and fairly without being subject to unnecessary requirements designed for non-kin foster homes. States, territories and tribes should adopt kin-specific foster home licensing/approval standards, eliminate unnecessary burdensome rules, and provide financial resources to address legitimate safety barriers when they exist. Doing so ensures that kinship foster families receive equitable financial support and that children safely remain with people they know and trust.

“The system treats us differently just because we are family. We do the same things as non-relative foster parents, but without the same supports.”

Grandmother who is raising her grandchildren

CITATIONS

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³Generations United. (2023). *Children Thrive in Grandfamilies*. <https://www.gu.org/resources/children-thrive-in-grandfamilies/>

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⁵Generations United. (2023).

ABOUT GENERATIONS UNITED

For four decades, Generations United’s mission has been to improve the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit of all. We are the catalyst for policies and practices that stimulate cooperation among generations. Generations United houses the National Center on Grandfamilies and the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network, the only federally supported national technical assistance center on kinship families. Learn more at www.gu.org and www.gksnetwork.org.



ABOUT DAVE THOMAS FOUNDATION FOR ADOPTION

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption is a national, nonprofit public charity dedicated to finding permanent homes for the more than 130,000 children waiting in North America’s foster care systems. Created by Wendy’s® founder Dave Thomas, who was adopted, the Foundation implements evidence-based, results-driven national service programs, foster care adoption awareness campaigns and innovative grantmaking. To learn more, visit davethomasfoundation.org.



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