System Improvement 4.10 Kinship Engagement Unit

System Improvement Lead: Kinship and Guardianship Program Manager

Overview

The D.S. Settlement Agreement requires DCYF to create a Kinship Engagement Unit (KEU). DCYF implemented pilot KEU and the pilots concluded in May 2025. Based on our assessment of the pilot KEU as well as of our kinship-related practices and resources, we have determined that a dedicated unit is not needed execute the 5 Kinship Engagement functions identified within the Settlement Agreement. The functions are referenced by number throughout this revised system improvement implementation plan:

1. Conducting initial and on-going family engagement methods that utilize individualized communication methods to enlist support of extended family members and family friends that the child and/or family have identified as trusted and familiar individuals
2. Providing information about available supports and resources for immediate and extended families, including family reconciliation services, evidence-based practices, and the Emerging Adult Housing Program, Hub homes, and Professional Therapeutic Foster Parent options;
3. Offering peer support and system navigation support to address barriers to engagement and assist in accessing resources and supports that extended and immediate families need;
4. Guiding extended and chosen family placements through the licensure process as requested; and
5. Assisting extended and chosen family placements with the requirements of RCW 13.34.065 or 13.34.130 as requested.

Framework

As specified in the August 2023 D.S. Implementation Plan, DCYF developed and implemented pilot KEU in two regions. The pilots concluded in May 2025. A formal evaluation of the KEU pilot was completed to assess effectiveness, identify lessons learned, and inform future implementation strategies. This effort included a landscape analysis, data collection and analysis, key participant interviews and youth engagement.

Themes identified across the assessments included:

- The importance of early identification of kin and extended networks;
- The need for equitable access to resources and supports;
- The value of empowering caregivers through peer support and system navigation;
- The benefit of streamlining licensing and legal guidance; and
- The critical role of system-wide coordination that centers family, culture, and belonging.

The KEU assessment included a review of roles, responsibilities, resources and functions across DCYF, and more specifically within child welfare and licensing as well as of current available contracted and community resources.

The assessment found that many of the elements required by the KEU were already established, developed or were in the process of implementation. While the Monitor and DCYF both identified strengths within the pilot, it was found that the pilot KEU teams often operated in parallel to existing systems and processes for identifying and placing with kin, resulting in role confusion and duplicate efforts.

DCYF is committed to a kin-first culture and we have continued to strengthen our practice related to kin since the entry of the Settlement Agreement in September 2022 and the finalization of the Implementation Plan in August 2023. We recognize the significant role relatives and kin play for children, youth and families involved in the child welfare system. By continuing to prioritize a kin-first approach, DCYF aims to promote placement stability, strengthen lifelong connections, and ensure that every child has the opportunity to grow up with people who know and love them. We are continuing to strengthen supports and create parity between community foster parents and kin by providing kin access to the same supports and resources, recognizing and supporting the unique circumstances and challenges that come with being a kinship caregiver. While DCYF has made significant progress in identifying and engaging with kin, multiple regional and statewide initiatives, responses to legislation, and individual division updates have resulted in a system that is complex and not always integrated or aligned.

The revised strategies and activities identified below address the 5 functions identified within the Settlement Agreement through overall system improvement and integration rather than establishing a standalone unit. They identify activities to strengthen and streamline practice, procedures and supports and processes to fill and improve identification of additional needs and gaps. Strategies also include additional oversight, support and monitoring through child welfare regional Kinship Engagement Task Forces. The strategies and activities take into account the findings from the KEU pilots and processes and improvements DCYF has implemented since the execution of the Settlement Agreement in 2022. They are grounded in the lived experiences of caregivers and youth, the insights of frontline staff involved in the KEU pilot in Regions 1 and 6, findings from the 2025 Landscape of Kinship at DCYF report, findings from the May 2023 Washington State DCYF Kin-First Culture Research and Recommendations report, and the 2023 D.S. stakeholder engagement. Each of these sources contributed valuable perspectives and generated actionable ideas for improving how DCYF engages with kin and youth.

The revised strategies and their associated tasks and activities have been reviewed and assessed to ensure they address the 5 kinship engagement functions. They build on the many efforts already underway to strengthen the identification, engagement and support of relatives and kin and emphasize activities to clarify and strengthen existing requirements and practices to increase and stabilize kinship placements and expand the role of kin as supports to children, youth and families. To further support this work, DCYF has implemented additional support and oversight and monitoring functions through regional Kinship Engagement Task Forces.

Below is an overview of the practices and activities that informed the revised strategies:

- Child welfare (CW) caseworkers hold primary responsibility for the work with children, youth and families. They provide case management and overall case planning in collaboration with the family. They engage with youth and families to identify and engage relatives, kin and family friends for placement and support, as is reflected by DCYF's kinship placement rate of approximately 60%. They also provide the initial supports that enable kin to care for children and youth as contemplated by RCW 13.34.065 and 13.34.130 including assistance with completing background checks and concrete resources to support placement and provide ongoing resources and supports for families.
- Each CW region has expanded access to formal relative search resources, including for afterhours staff, to support caseworkers to improve timely relative identification and outreach.
- Formal relative search resources and engagement supports are embedded in CW headquarters through the Relative Engagement Unit (REU) and within our Administrative Services Division through the Relative Search Unit (RSU).
- Meeting Program Consultants (MPC) support the incorporation of kin voice and the role of kin in action planning. During meetings, they can help to identify additional relatives and family friends, the roles they can play, and supports kin need to successfully care for children and youth. The Youth and Family Meeting (YFM) refresh that is in process will further reinforce identification of and engagement with kin through the shared planning process.
- The licensing division (LD) has implemented revised kinship WAC, streamlined the licensing process and made organizational changes that will better support relatives and kin. LD staff are able to access concrete supports to assist kinship families. Implementation of initial licenses for kin allows them to begin receiving foster care reimbursement starting on the date the DCYF approves the initial license.
- We have established contracted support services for caregivers including CaRES and Caregiver Support available to all licensed and unlicensed caregivers. The availability of these services to kin, including unlicensed kin, helps to ensure they have the same level of support as community foster parents.
- We established a cross-divisional kinship workgroup to help design a cohesive and updated process for identifying, engaging, supporting, and sustaining kin.

For purposes of this plan, kin is defined as relatives and extended family members and family friends that the child or family have identified as trusted and familiar individuals.

Revised Kinship Engagement Strategies

DCYF has developed the revised kinship engagement strategies and associated tasks to meet the 5 requirements of the Kinship Engagement system improvement.

This will be accomplished through new and strengthened practices, supports and resources with consistent, centralized support and oversight by regional Kinship Engagement Task Forces.

The strategies and activities are DCYFs best and most current plans to meet the exit criteria for the Settlement Agreement. While the exit criteria are fixed by the Settlement Agreement, these strategies and activities may change based on ongoing assessment of implementation and impact.

DCYF's revised kinship engagement strategies fall into three broad categories, each further described below:

- Child Welfare: Aligning and strengthening roles, responsibilities and practice within CW to support identification, engagement and support with relatives and kin for placement and ongoing connection/support.
- Connecting Kin with Supports and Resources: Informing kinship caregivers of available supports and resources and providing or connecting them with those resources.
- Supporting Kin Through the Licensing Process: Supporting kin through the licensing process and following licensure or completion of their home study if not licensed.

Child Welfare

Revised strategies and activities within child welfare will address the following kinship engagement functions:

- Kinship Engagement Function 1: Conducting initial and ongoing kinship identification and engagement methods that utilize individualized communication methods to enlist support of extended family members and family friends that the child and/or family have identified as trusted and familiar individuals.
- Kinship Engagement function 2: Providing information about available supports and resources for immediate and extended families
- Kinship Engagement function 5: Assisting extended and chosen family placements with the requirements of RCW 13.34.065 or 13.34.130 as requested

Implementing and maintaining a kin-first approach requires all staff to recognize their role with kin. DCYF staff who interact with children, youth and families as well as staff who support placement decisions or provide supervision or consultation are in pivotal roles to identify and engage with kin who may be able to provide placement or support. While we have made significant progress in these areas, the emphasis DCYF has on a kin-first culture has created opportunities to identify areas of improvement and reinforce and support the priority and urgency on identifying and engaging kin as supports in addition to placement resources.

As we continue to emphasize an integrated kin-first culture, it is essential that staff understand their roles and responsibilities, how they intersect with those of other staff and that they have the needed support, knowledge and resources to carry out kinship engagement and support functions.

As part of the process to revise and refine our kinship engagement strategies, we established a short-term working group of child welfare leadership representatives to clarify roles and responsibilities related to kinship identification, search and engagement functions; identify regional and statewide kinship search and placement support functions, identify statewide vs. regional approaches and areas for focused improvement. This team completed their work in November 2025 and the activities were further refined throughout December.

Integral to the development of the revised strategies was the following:

- Caseworkers should continue to have a clear role in the identification and engagement of kin for placement, connection and supports. They are in a unique position as they have ongoing connections and communication with kin, children, youth and families, caregivers and stakeholders and are responsible for overseeing the case plan and planning process.
- Caseworkers need additional support, resources and tools for the completion and monitoring of key tasks related to kinship identification, engagement and support. Support varied depending on the structure and assignments within the region; including use of placement teams, Meeting Program Consultants (MPC), and other roles. It was important to continue to allow regional flexibility based on each region's unique assignments and structure while providing the necessary supports and oversight.
- Outcomes, core activities (the "what") and how information is captured needed to be consistent statewide.
- Supervisors are essential to the success of kinship engagement work.
- Clear, consistent oversight and support for kinship identification, engagement and support needed to be established and it needed to sit at the regional level to support improved practice and systemic change. Additional support, coordination and oversight of those teams and for implementation should be provided from the headquarters level.
- Activities related to kinship identification, engagement and support need to be integrated into the updated Youth and Family Meetings (YFM) model and additional support and guidance was needed for MPCs to be able to effectively implement and incorporate these activities into meetings.
- Role-specific training needed to be provided on all core practices to ensure consistent statewide implementation. This included, but is not limited to, training for staff conducting semi-annual check-in calls with kin, staff fulfilling oversight/support functions, MPC and caseworkers.

Revised strategies and activities with child welfare will revise, clarify and reinforce staff roles and responsibilities and include:

- Establishing six (6) regional Kinship Engagement Task Forces responsible for providing oversight and support to ensure kinship identification and engagement tasks are completed for D.S. class members.

This includes formal completion of relative searches using available databases as needed and follow up with identified relatives, engagement with children/youth and families to identify people important to them, and follow up with identified kin. Each regional task force will report to the Regional Administrator who will oversee the work in their region. Regional Administrators will meet monthly with their task force to review progress, performance, successes and barriers. Data/progress will be maintained by region on a centralized document and rolled up for statewide reporting.

- Updating the "All About Me" form to include questions regarding important connections for the child/youth and establishing practice requirements for caseworkers to engage with children and youth and follow up with identified connections.

  Caseworkers meet with children and youth on their caseload monthly. The form is a tool to guide discussions and capture youth voice. Caseworkers will complete the form for all children/youth in out of home care who are able to complete the form themselves or provide input during February Health & Safety visits. Caseworkers will document completion of the form and identified connections in a case note. They will also complete the form with children and youth who newly enter care. Caseworkers will review the information with children/youth every 6 months and update as needed. Information gathered during these contacts will be used to engage with important connections for children and youth. Task forces will monitor completion and documentation of the information for D.S. class members.
- Establishing and providing support and oversight for supervisory review and consultation with caseworkers regarding practice and activities for identification and engagement with kin and follow up for placement and ongoing connections.
- Clarifying the role of MPC, establishing consistent processes for inviting kin to Youth and Family Meetings (YFM), engaging them during meetings, identifying additional kin during meetings, and incorporating plans for placement, connection and support during YFM.

  All MPCs will complete a 4-day in person training January – March 2026. Engagement with kin will be a component of that training. In addition, DCYF is standardizing the practice for inviting participants to meetings to better support participation of key individuals, including kin.
- Integrating the work of the Relative Search Unit (RSU) and Relative Engagement Unit (RSU) teams into a single unit and centralizing them within child welfare headquarters to improve identification and engagement with kin and support to child welfare casework staff.
  The RSU completes the federally required relative searches at the time of placement. The REU completes updated relative searches and follows up on the results of the searches when requested.

- Establishing and maintaining consistent guidance for documentation and tracking processes to ensure that kinship identification, outreach and engagement activities are occurring.
- Finalizing and implementing a revised Relative Search and Kinship Engagement (RSKE) module in FamLink, our SACWIS system.
- Providing training for Kinship Engagement Task Force representatives, staff making caregiver connection calls, regional and office leadership, MPC, caseworkers and others as needed.
- Establishing a D.S. dashboard on the child welfare SharePoint site. This will allow caseworkers, supervisors, administrators and others to easily identify D.S. class members and to also easily access supporting documents and resources.

Embedded in the strategies and ongoing work will be guidance to improve documentation of efforts and outcomes to support and reflect practice. DCYF will be launching the updated Relative Search and Kinship Engagement module in FamLink (June 2026). This module expands and centralizes information regarding relative and kinship placement and support resources for families. This will improve our ability to document and revisit information regarding prospective relative and kin placement and support resources to include how the kin were identified, how they wish to be involved, contact information, and if and when they would like to be recontacted if they are not a current resource. The information will be able to be easily reviewed and extracted for use. Any DCYF staff working with the family with FamLink access will be able to add or review information as it is learned.

Connecting Kin with Supports and Resources

Revised strategies and activities for connecting kin with supports and resources will address the following kinship engagement functions:

- Kinship Engagement function 2: Providing information about available supports and resources for immediate and extended families
- Kinship Engagement function 3: Offering peer support and system navigation support to address barriers to engagement and assist in accessing resources and supports that extended and immediate families need

The strategies and activities outlined below will increase DCYF staff and kinship caregiver knowledge of resources available to support kin and how those resources are accessed and support ongoing opportunities for connection to available resources.

Communication

DCYF has established resources for general communication with kin including the Kinship Caregivers webpage and the Kinship Caregiver Connection newsletter. DCYF recently revised the webpage and usability testing was completed in the fall of 2025. In addition to making information easier to find, it was designed to be printable for easier access and sharing. In addition, the Kinship Caregiver Connection is a monthly newsletter, distributed through a list serve to all interested caregivers and it includes resources, general information about caregiving, and updates. Information about kinship caregiving and available supports is included in these communications and will be provided on an ongoing basis.

Support Resources

DCYF has two voluntary, contracted support resources which are available to all kin. These are the CaRES Program and Caregiver Supports. These resources are available to all caregivers; licensed kin, unlicensed kin and community foster parents. The resources available through these two programs work together and each provides information about the other to the families they engage.

Contact information for kinship caregivers is automatically provided to CaRES and Caregiver Supports providers at the time of placement; no separate referral is needed. Automatic referrals and targeted support for caregivers are intended to eliminate some of the barriers to access and concerns caregivers may have about asking their caseworker or licensor for assistance. In addition to the automatic referrals, child welfare and licensing staff can make follow up referrals at any time and caregivers can self-refer at any time to request support.

Despite our communication efforts, we have identified that many caregivers and DCYF staff are still not aware of these resources, including the availability of peer support and support groups for kin. Additional communication and coordination is needed to effectively educate child welfare staff and licensing staff about these programs so they can share information and facilitate access for caregivers when needed. Ongoing communication to kin about these resources is also needed to increase awareness and to help them remember the resources and supports are available if they initially choose not to participate. The strategies below aim to increase knowledge and understanding to address these gaps.

In addition to our contracted support resources for kinship caregivers, kinship supports, including support groups are available through county-based Kinship Navigator programs across the state.

These programs are contracted through the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and are available to support kinship caregivers, regardless of their involvement with the child welfare system.

CaRES Program

In March 2021, approximately a year and a half before the settlement agreement was finalized, the Alliance and DCYF launched the CaRES program.

DCYF contracts with CaRES to provide peer support, system navigation, and information about available support and community-based resources to all licensed and unlicensed caregivers. CaRES contacts:

- All kinship caregivers with a new placement within seven business days
- All licensed kinship and foster caregivers when they are initially licensed and again 6 (six) months post-licensure
- All licensed kinship and foster caregivers when they receive their first placement
- All caregivers who inquire or are referred within five business days

Automatic referrals of kinship caregivers to CaRES have helped to improve timeliness and delivery of kinship engagement services.

While annual reporting reflects positive connections and support for caregivers who engage with CaRES, we identified that there is a lack of understanding and underutilization of this valuable, supportive resource.

Caregiver Supports

Caregiver Supports launched in July 2024 and is being rolled out statewide. We will complete full implementation by July 2026. This is still a new resource and strategies focus on implementation and education about its availability and benefits.

This contracted support resource is available to all licensed and unlicensed caregivers. Caregivers are automatically referred to the provider at the time a child or youth is placed in their home. If a caregiver chooses not to engage in Caregiver Support services initially, the provider continues monthly outreach to let them know about the program. Caregivers can access the service at any time during the placement through response to the provider, self-referral or referral from DCYF staff.

Caregiver Supports contractors:

- Reach out to the caregiver for initial engagement and to answer questions and provide information within 72 business hours after receiving notification of a placement.
- Schedule planning visits with the caregiver to develop a caregiver support plan based on the areas of needed support identified by the caregiver.
- Maintain contact with the caregiver as needed/agreed upon after the plan is developed, but at least monthly.
- Maintain contact with the caregiver at least monthly if the caregiver declines to engage in services when first offered. The caregiver may choose to access services at any time during the placement.

The supports may include assistance with, but are not limited to:

- Connections to support educational needs
- Accessing medical and dental care including appointment scheduling and locating providers
- Identifying and accessing child care or early childhood programs
- Parenting skills – resources and skills training to support the children and youth in their care
- Identifying culturally relevant services
- Identifying, accessing and providing adulthood planning for youth
- 24/7 crisis phone support and coaching
- Locating and scheduling respite care
- Facilitating connections to family and other important individuals in the child or youth's life
- Accessing other community resources

For caregivers of children and youth with higher levels of need (levels 4-7) enhanced supports in addition to the ones listed above include but are not limited to:

- Additional educational support to include monitoring school progress, supporting stability of school placement
- Assistance accessing medical, dental and behavioral health care
- 24/7 crisis response that includes after hours phone coaching and assistance and in-person coaching and assistance as needed
- Assisting with creating and implementing supervision plans as needed
- Providing and coordinating case aide supports (levels 3-7). Case aide supports assist caregivers in meeting the unique needs of children and youth in their care by providing direct support and supervision.

Community based kinship support groups

In addition to DCYF's contracted supports, every county has a community based Kinship Navigator program that has a variety of resources as well as support groups. The groups are in-person, online or a mixture of the two to support kinship caregivers raising children. Many support groups are led by current or former kinship caregivers. Support groups connect kin with resources and other kin.

Revised strategies and activities focus on educating and communicating caregivers and DCYF staff about available resources and include:

- Providing caregivers with placement packets at the time of placement. These packets include information regarding the child welfare system, kinship care, and resources such as CaRES, Caregiver Supports and Kinship Navigator programs.
- Fully implementing Caregiver Supports statewide.

- Establishing and maintaining check-in connection calls with licensed and unlicensed kinship caregivers at least twice per year in addition to monthly caseworker/caregiver visits.
- Providing education and outreach to caseworkers and other key DCYF staff including MPCs, placement coordinators, licensing staff, Kinship Engagement task force representatives, and staff completing twice yearly check-ins regarding CaRES and Caregiver Supports through multiple avenues, including region, office and unit meetings, program newsletters, Foundations of Practice, and updated postings on intranet and SharePoint sites to support staffs' ability to inform caregivers and prospective caregivers about the resources and facilitate connections as needed.
- Integrate education to caregivers about available resources into YFM, monthly caseworker/caregiver visits, caregiver connection calls, kinship engagement outreach through the task force and during the home study/licensing process.
- Provide practice oversight to include:
    - Supervisors of the staff completing the semi-annual connection calls will ensure calls are occurring and requested/needed services and resources are being provided
    - YFM meeting documentation will reflect needs and resources identified and plans for placement stability support
    - Child welfare supervisors will incorporate follow up and coaching regarding kin engagement and support, to include resources, into their monthly supervision

Supporting Kin Through the Licensing Process

Revised strategies and activities for supporting kin through the licensing process address the requirements of:

- Kinship Engagement function 4: Guiding extended and chosen family placements through the licensure process as requested

DCYF's Licensing Division (LD) has made changes to practice, policy and rules and how the work is organized related to the licensing process to better support kin since the finalization of the D.S. Settlement Agreement.

August 2022: implemented child specific licenses to allow kinship caregivers equitable access to non-safety exemptions and waivers, removing barriers to licensure and encouraging more kin to engage in the licensing process to receive resources.

November 2022: Automated referral to LD for the licensing process after a child is placed in an unlicensed kinship home. LD reaches out to the family to guide them through the licensing process, increasing our licensure of kin to about 80% today.

July 2023: DCYF implemented an initial foster care license process that allows kin who meet the requirements to receive foster care maintenance payments as of the date DCYF approves their initial license. Initially it was available when court-ordered at shelter care hearings. In October 2024 this was expanded to any kinship caregiver who meets the requirements. The initial license Is valid for 90 days while caregivers work toward their full kinship license.

January 2024: DCYF implemented the 7-level foster care reimbursement system for all licensed caregivers, including licensed kinship caregivers. Reimbursement is based on the child/youth's assessed level of need.

2024: DCYF launched a Kinship Standards project to develop new kinship WAC with supporting policies, procedures, and home study process for kinship caregivers, making the licensing process more accessible for kinship families to become licensed and receive equitable support from staff.

July 2025:

- Launched new Kinship WAC.
- Updated the Kinship Caregiver webpages. The revised pages were codesigned with kinship caregivers.
- Streamlined the licensed kin application process and reduced paperwork by 50%.
- Implemented LD reorganization. Previously licensing was completed by one program and the family was transferred to another program for ongoing license monitoring. Staff carried both kin and community foster care licensed caregivers on their caseloads. Under the revised structure, LD has established two teams. Kinship Care Licensing and Foster Care Licensing. The family no longer transfers once the license is issued, they experience continued support and service with one licensor. The intent of this change is to better support families and support development of staff expertise.
- Established a process and guidance for certified kinship respite care.

Revised strategies and activities related to Kinship Engagement function 5 reflect the recent changes and the need for monitoring for implementation and impact. Strategies and activities include:

- Monitoring the implementation of the LD organizational changes made July 1, 2026.
- Providing items needed for home study and licensure approval.
- Completing outreach to licensed and approved unlicensed kinship caregivers at least twice per year. CW will complete outreach to caregivers without approved home studies or who declined to participate in the home study process at least twice per year. Support caregivers to access/receive resources and support to meet unmet needs identified during the calls.
- Improving LD/CW coordination to support alignment and timely decision-making regarding placement approval and supports.

- Maintaining DCYF kinship webpages to ensure current, accurate information is available to kin.

System Integration

The identified strategies and activities will improve DCYF efforts to engage and support class members and their kin. This system improvement aligns with System Improvements 4.11 Family Group Planning and 4.13 Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP).

The Kinship and Guardianship Program Manager or their designee is responsible for overseeing these various initiatives to ensure the work is coordinated, staff are supported and that kinship support is presented to families in a streamlined way.

Strategies to Achieve the System Improvement

Based on best judgement, the strategies and activities are DCYF's best and most current plans to meet the exit criteria for the Settlement Agreement. While the exit criteria are fixed by the Settlement Agreement, these strategies and activities may change.

Staffing

The strategies and activities will be completed within existing staffing resources.

Within the Child Welfare Division, the requirements of the Settlement Agreement are integrated into current policies and practices. The strategies and activities focus on communication, integration and staff support for effective identification, engagement and support of kin and will help to identify strengths and areas for additional improvement. The additional staff received for Family Group Meeting facilitation support the strengthening of that model and the ability for it to be a strong platform to better engage kin as placement and supports. The Kinship Engagement task forces are being established using current staff.

Within the Licensing Division, the reorganization allows us to strategically assign staff. Previously, licensing staff were assigned both kinship and community foster care licenses. The case then transferred to a different worker for ongoing monitoring after the license was issued.

The new structure separates staff into teams providing kinship licenses and community foster care licenses. The cases no longer transfer at the time the home is licensed but instead remain with the same staff to monitor and support the home overtime. This allows staff to develop expertise in working with kin or community foster parents and to develop ongoing relationships with the caregivers. The caseload for the kinship licensors following this reorganization is approximately 1:20.

Training

DCYF will develop and update training for DCYF staff as needed. Information will be incorporated in a variety of ways including, but not limited to standalone training, additions or revisions to existing curriculum and Foundations of Practice. Training topics and concepts include, but are not limited to:

- Normalizing the concrete goods and service requests of caregivers to support offering ongoing help without judgement
- Normalizing caregivers asking for help and making sure all staff know how to connect caregivers to resources
- Expanding kinship-specific content in staff onboarding and ongoing training, with a focus on resource navigation, cultural humility, and trauma-informed engagement.
- Culturally responsive engagement with youth and kinship caregivers.
- Documentation guidance/training for kinship search and engagement to include for all kinship

Advanced Relative Search, Engagement, Assessment Workshop

The Advanced Relative Search, Engagement, and Assessment Workshop was designed to address challenges faced by regional staff in identifying, engaging, and assessing relatives for placement. The workshop provides a hands-on, interactive environment where participants work through real cases, applying current policies and best practices.

This workshop was piloted in Region 6 and received strong positive feedback from both staff and supervisors. Participants appreciated the hands-on approach and the opportunity to apply learning in real time. As a result of its success, the workshop rolled out statewide in fall 2025.

Key Features:

- Interactive format: Unlike traditional training, this workshop emphasizes real-world application and collaborative problem-solving.
- Skill development: Participants will enhance their technical skills and refresh their understanding of relevant policies.
- Case-based learning: Working through actual cases provides practical experience that can be directly applied to daily responsibilities.
- Outcome-focused: The goal is to improve engagement strategies and ensure better outcomes for children through more effective relative placements.

Policy

DCYF has existing policies and procedures related to working with kin that will be revised as needed. These include:

4527. Kinship Care: Searching for, Placing with, and Supporting Relatives and Suitable Other Persons

4250. Placement Out-of-Home and Conditions for Return Home

4519. Concrete Goods | Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families

4265. Caregiver Support Level and Foster Care Rate Assessment Determination

4251. Relative Search and Notification

3.15 Licensing Division Policy: Kinship Care

Engagement

Stakeholder feedback from PCG and TOU, which informed this System Improvement and the KEU pilots, is intentionally incorporated into the development and implementation of additional Kinship Engagement strategies.

Additional stakeholder engagement that will be used to inform practice improvements, communication and training revisions include:

- Second round of D.S. stakeholder engagement for this Settlement in 2026
- Washington State DCYF Kin-first Culture Research and Recommendations
- DCYF Caregiver Survey Report
- The Kinship Caregiver Oversight Committee (KCOC)

Communication

DCYF's communication plan will include communicating system changes and clarification and guidance regarding roles and responsibilities of the child welfare staff, supports and resources available to kin, and home study and licensing processes to child welfare and licensing staff, caregivers, Tribal partners, other impacted parties and internal and external stakeholders. Information developed for kin will be communicated through updates and posts to websites, the Kinship Caregiver Connection and other processes as identified.

Budget

DCYF will review budget and policy authority annually and consider submitting Decision Packages when necessary and permitted.

Activities/Timeline

Table 1

Kinship Engagement Function 1: Conducting initial and ongoing kinship identification and engagement methods that utilize individualized communication methods to enlist support of extended family members and family friends that the child and/or family have identified as trusted and familiar individuals.

Kinship Engagement Function 5: Assisting extended and chosen family placements with the requirements of RCW 13.34.065 or 13.34.130 as requested.

Activity	Target Start Date	Target Completion Date
Improve identification of and engagement with extended family members and friends		
Establish regionally based Kinship Engagement task forces responsible to ensure tasks for kinship identification and engagement are completed for D.S. class members and that all efforts to establish kin connections have been made.	12/2025	01/2026 for initial. Ongoing.
Develop communication, guidance and supports for staff to support initial and ongoing kin identification, engagement utilizing individualized communication methods and support that incorporates role expectations, and processes to support completion of background checks and assisting with requirements of RCW 13.34.065 and 130 as requested.	11/2025	12/2025
Develop and disseminate guidance for Supervisors to use as a reference during monthly check-ins and consultations with staff to support identification, engagement and follow up with kin resources.	10/2025	02/2026
Establish statewide and regional processes and QA.	11/2025	01/2026
Establish and disseminate guidance and template for consistent documentation of kinship engagement activities to ensure statewide consistency.	01/2026	01/2026
Update the "All About Me" form to include questions regarding important connections for the child/youth. Issue practice memo setting expectations and providing guidance for use.	01/2026	01/2026
Provide support to remove barriers to placement: • Caseworkers to identify needs and barriers when engaging with potential kinship placements and assist in removing barriers placement • Kinship Engagement Task Force members who identify prospective kinship placements will ask about needs/barriers to placement and will share details learned with assigned caseworker and supervisor for follow up and support • MPC will include inquiry about barriers/needs to be addressed to support placement and will incorporate into meeting action plan	01/2026	Ongoing
Develop and implement a new module in FamLink to improve documentation of relative search and kinship engagement.	01/2026	06/2026
Develop implementation plan and resources to provide training and guidance for use of the new FamLink module.	04/2026	06/2026

Activity	Target Start Date	Target Completion Date
Strengthen integration of kin into Family Team Meetings		
Caseworkers will ask children, youth and families about relatives and kin and will share contact information with facilitators. Facilitators will invite family members and kin to YFM.	09/2025	04/2026. Initial implementation. Process will be ongoing.
MPC will engage kin in planning and supports during YFM. Develop a statewide meeting facilitator guide that prompts facilitators to ask : • Who else can support this family? • What roles can each person play, even if they can't be a placement?	09/2025	04/2026. Initial implementation. Process will be ongoing.
Incorporate activities for engaging and placing with kin and incorporating kin as child/youth and family supports into the meeting action plans.	09/2025	04/2026. Initial implementation. Process will be ongoing.
Train facilitators to draw out informal family maps during YFM to create a family support map to identify extended networks.	09/2025	04/2026

Table 2

Kinship Engagement Functions 2: Providing information about available supports and resources for immediate and extended families.

Kinship Engagement Function 3: Offering peer support and system navigation support to address barriers to engagement and assist in accessing resources and supports.

Activity	Target Start Date	Target Completion Date
Provide information about resources and supports to for kinship caregivers		
Complete rollout of contracted Caregiver Supports. Once fully rolled out, Caregiver Supports will be available to all licensed and unlicensed caregivers statewide.	07/2024	07/2026
Develop and disseminate guidance and provide training, information and resources to DCYF staff to support their understanding of Caregiver Supports, CaRES, licensing process, and other kinship supports.	07/2025	02/2026. Ongoing as needed.

Activity	Target Start Date	Target Completion Date
Provide information about resources and supports to for kinship caregivers		
Caseworkers will provide every kinship caregiver with a Placement Packet and CWP_0074 Kinship Care: Relatives and Suitable Others at the time of placement.	09/2025	12/2025 Initial implementation. Process will be ongoing
Develop and implement a process for twice a year check-ins by CW with unlicensed kinship caregivers	01/2026	Ongoing
LD staff will check-in with 100% of licensed kinship caregivers at least 2x/year.	07/2025	Ongoing
Share information regarding the licensing process, CaRES and Caregiver Supports with kin during monthly meetings with caregivers, during YFM, during the licensing process and during semi-annual LD and CW check-ins.	10/2025	Ongoing
Review and update existing internet webpages as needed to include current information regarding kin resources.	06/2023	Ongoing as needed
Caseworkers will discuss support needs during monthly visits with caregivers and document needs and resources provided/referred in a case note.	02/2026	Ongoing

Table 3

Kinship Engagement Functions 4: Assisting and guiding with the placement process and licensure

Activity	Target Start Date	Target Completion Date
Expedite kinship licensing for caregivers		
LD will monitor the implementation of the organizational changes and streamlined licensing processes aligned with the new Kinship WACs, effective July 1, 2025.	07/2025	06/2026
Support for kinship caregivers		
LD staff will offer direct support and process requests for essential items to support licensure of kin.	07/2025	07/2025. Training completed. Processes ongoing.
Licensing staff will engage with caseworkers on licensing progress and activities to support alignment and timely decision-making.	07/2025	Ongoing
LD will update the DCYF Kinship webpages using feedback from kin.	07/2025	09/2025

Activity	Target Start Date	Target Completion Date
System Supports: Intranet Page and Training		
Develop a dedicated child welfare kinship intranet page that will serve as a central location that houses all kinship supports for CW staff to access.	9/2025	03/2026
Advanced Relative Search, Engagement, and Assessment Workshop	06/2025	12/2025

Methodology and Exit Criteria

The Exit Criteria for this System Improvement details key benchmarks that will be monitored.

Exit Criteria

Exit criteria established in the Settlement Agreement are:

1. 41(1) Kinship Engagement Unit with family finding model, including providing individualized communication methods about available community-based services and resources, is established statewide.
2. 41(2) Kinship supports, including peer support, system navigation, licensure assistance, and information about available supports, are available to kin of Class Members.
3. 41(3) Defendants have received and considered stakeholder feedback as described in Attachment A regarding any additional kinship supports.
4. 41(4) Data is collected and demonstrates improvements in timeliness and delivery of kinship engagement services.

Benchmarks

- Complete the launch of FamLink module able to track engagement with relatives and family friends.
- Complete the statewide rollout of the updated Advanced Kinship Engagement, Assessment training
- Complete the roll out of Caregiver Support

Measurement

- Percent of children/youth in class placed with kin will increase
    - Numerator: Number of children/youth in class placed with kin
    - Denominator: All children/youth in class
    - Data Source: FamLink data, class report
- The percentage of class members with an SPM with kin participation will increase

- Numerator: Number of children/youth in class with family invited to YFM during the reporting period
- Denominator: Children/youth in class with a YFM during the reporting period
- Data Source: FamLink data, class report

Provision of supports

- The percentage of kin caring for children/youth in class who are engaged with Caregiver Support services will increase
  - Numerator: Number of kinship caregivers with a completed caregiver support plan caring for a class member
  - Denominator: Number of kinship caregivers caring for a class member
  - Data Source: Caregiver Support billing data, class report

Supporting connections

- Child(ren)/youth in class not placed with kin or on trial return home have at least one supporting connection with an extended family member or family friend.
  - Data Source: Semi-annual targeted case review of a sample of class members not placed with kin

Guiding family placements through the licensure process

- Percent of kinship families licensed to care for a child/youth who is a class member
  - Numerator: Number of kinship families licensed to care for a class member
  - Denominator: Number of kinship families caring for a class member
  - Data Source: FamLink data, class report

Quality Assurance

The Program Manager will review data as well as input from existing sources to gather feedback as part of the continuous quality improvement strategy for improving outcomes for class members. The second round of stakeholder engagement required under the Settlement Agreement will offer additional guidance to improve this System Improvement in 2026.

DCYF will complete semi-annual targeted reviews of a sample of cases for class members not placed with kin to review practice related to identifying and engaging with kin to support youth. Results of the reviews will inform additional strategies and activities to improve outcomes for class members.

Reporting

Data, narrative updates and evidence will be included in the semi-annual reports.

Measuring Progress

- Percent of children/youth who are class members placed with kin
- Number and percent of licensed kinship families caring for a class member
- The percentage of kin caring for children/youth in class who are engaged with Caregiver Support services
- The percentage of class members with an SPM that included kin

Narrative update

- Progress toward implementation of strategies and completion of activities/achievement of benchmarks
- Results of quality assurance activities
- Description of supporting connections
- Report of CaRES connections with kin
- Results of qualitative reviews

Supporting Documents

- Communications developed for Kin and DCYF staff
- Annual Caregiver Survey