



## KINSHIP CARE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES 2023 UPDATE



Washington State Department of  
**CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES**

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### Executive Summary

The annual Kinship Care Oversight Committee (KCOC) report for September 2022 through August 2023 is required by [RCW 74.13.621](#). The KCOC was formed in 2003 to provide guidance to the Legislature in identifying, supporting, and strengthening kinship care families. Kinship care includes relatives and unrelated kin raising children. The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and Department of Social and Health Services Aging and Long-Term Support Administration (AL TSA), and Economic Services Administration (ESA) staff participate in the KCOC with kinship caregivers, child and caregiver advocates, nonprofit service providers, tribes, and legal community representatives.

### Introduction

The KCOC meets monthly to provide a forum to exchange information about state policy changes, local initiatives, and concerns and monitors, guides, and reports on kinship care recommendations and implementation activities.

KCOC achievements this past year include:

- Revisited the structure of the KCOC.
- Continued to build a collective of community partners that can support and strengthen kinship families.
- Provided subject matter expert guidance (i.e. Lived experience and professional) on kinship specific grant projects (i.e. Kinship Navigator and the Kinship Plus evaluations).
- Continued to provide specific presentations as requested (i.e. health care, child care, and legal advocacy).
- Provided feedback to various agency initiatives (i.e. Kinship Navigator Evaluation, State funded guardianship program, child specific licensing, and child support good cause waivers).
- Revisited the structure of the KCOC, focusing on how best to monitor, guide, and report on kinship care recommendations and implementation activities for the good of all kinship households in Washington.
- Created a collective of community partners that can support and strengthen kinship families.

**In addition, Washington state continued to move toward establishing programs and infrastructure to support kinship families:**

- Kinship Navigator grant award for an additional year of funding from the federal Administration for Children and Families to DCYF to partner with ALTA to support implementing an evidence-based Kinship Navigator program as required under the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) and to build state infrastructure to support kin.
- Kinship Plus grant awarded from Federal Administration for Children and Families for AMARA to partner with DCYF and The University of Washington (UW) on implementing an evidence-based kinship program in King County. This will provide kinship families with a six-module course for parents and caregivers to effectively engage in shared parenting. Families will be referred to local kinship navigators for support groups.
- New legislation provided the opportunity for new initiatives such as:

- Initial Licenses - Many kinship caregivers unexpectedly open their homes to children who cannot safely remain in their own homes. The initial license is a way to alleviate the financial strain of having a new child join the home. Once the Initial License is issued, the caregivers can claim foster care payment.
- State funded guardianship subsidy gives more opportunities to all kinship caregivers and foster parents to establish guardianships as a permanency plan with a subsidy. Prior, only a limited number of families were.

## KCOC Activities and Discussions

During the reporting period of Sept. 2022 through Aug. 2023, the KCOC convened 12 times. During these meetings, DCYF, AL TSA, and ESA staff discussed how they could best support the KCOC and listened to the feedback and interests of KCOC members. **Discussions included:**

**KCOC Structure: Revisiting the structure of the KCOC, focusing on how best to monitor, guide, and report on kinship care recommendations and implementation of kinship activities.**

- An ad-hoc committee made of caregivers, nonprofit, and key agencies (DSHS and DCYF) explored options for the KCOC structure. The recommendations of the ad-hoc committee presented to the broader KCOC group included:
  - Develop Kinship Caregiver Oversight Steering Committee (KCOSC) to monitor, guide, and report on kinship care recommendations and implementation activities to the legislation, appropriate state agencies, and the general membership of the KCOC. Duties would include:
    - Report outs from kinship serving programs.
    - Providing policy and legislative updates.
    - Providing updates from DCYF and DSHS related to kinship issues.
    - Presentations about kinship-related topics identified by the group.
    - Addressing and identifying solutions to immediate needs impacting kinship families.
    - Identifying improvements and innovations that will benefit kinship families.
    - Providing ongoing advertisement/awareness building about kinship and kinship-related resources.
  - Meeting structure of the steering committee
  - Quarterly meetings including an annual, in-person gathering.
  - Meetings held via Zoom until gathering in-person is possible based on proclamations, plans, and directives from the Governor.
  - Includes protected time for discussions driven/requested by kinship caregivers.

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- Annually review and update the committee charter.
- Representation at the steering committee should come from a diverse community and should represent the diversity of the communities in Washington State (Race, gender) (one year commitment – term July-June) from:
  - Kinship alumni
  - Kinship support leader
  - Kinship caregivers
  - Kinship navigators
  - Tribal Kinship Program
  - Kinship Support Programs (non-Kinship navigator programs)
  - Nonprofit partners such as Casey Families
  - Kinship legal advocate
  - State agencies (TANF, ALTA, DCYF)
  - Area Agency on Aging (AAA)
  - OSPI (Special education/needs)
  - Community-based organizations
- The current monthly meeting would continue and serve as a collaborative space for agencies to share with caregivers and have special presentations based on requested topics by the KCOC members.
- This is still a work in progress and no final decisions have been made by the KCOC committee to move forward with this recommendation.
- Concern: There is a lack of funding to compensate for lived experience representation and participation on steering committee.

**Creating a collective of community partners that can support and strengthen kinship families.**

- The opportunity to network and share information and resources.
  - The KCOC includes numerous individuals who support informal kinship caregivers (families not involved with the child welfare system). The

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KCOC requested that those agencies serving the kinship community provide information and resources specific to their services (i.e., food benefits, kinship legal advocacy, support groups) to the committee.

- These individuals rely on the networking that occurs during KCOC meetings to help support kinship families. Frequently, KCOC members will share a resource or event that sparks an idea for another KCOC member. This web of kinship-specific resources does not have another forum; thus, the information shared is vital to supporting kinship families across Washington State.
- Including representatives and agencies that serve the formal and informal kinship care community.

### **The KCOC's unique ability to elevate the voices and interests of the kinship community.**

- DCYF staff presented information to the KCOC with the request for feedback and direction on how to best serve the kinship community on the following initiatives:
  - HB 1227 – Initial licenses,
  - SB 124 – State funded guardianship,
  - Caregiver Support Project
  - Foster care continuum of care
  - [DCYF Kin-First Culture Research and Recommendations](#)

### **Child support as a barrier to financial stability in Kinship families' homes**

- TANF Child-Only Grants and Child Support Collections continues to be a barrier
  - Financial support for unlicensed and informal kinship providers can be obtained through the TANF child-only grant.
  - Many kinship caregivers, while eligible for the much-needed TANF funds child-only grant, do not apply for the services. The typical reason is because their adult children would be assessed for child support. This can result in emotional and physical safety concerns for both child and caregiver. So instead of accessing financial support to stabilize the home, caregivers do without.

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- ESA continues to be a great community partner and heard the concerns of the kinship caregivers. They are open to working to create an easier good cause process. While the KCOC’s preference would be to mimic that of DCYF’s which is to wave collection automatically in nearly all circumstances.
- The State of Vermont has a much simpler model that allows for being a kinship caregiver as an automatic reason to exempt child support collection if the caregiver makes the request. The KCOC Legislative subcommittee has spent a great deal of time and research. The number one question asked by the caregivers is “Why can’t Washington State follow Vermont’s best practice?”

**The KCOC Committee provided information on the following topics as requested by the KCOC.**

- Office of the Education Ombuds
- Health Care Authority
- LAARK Legal Assistance
- ESA/TANF
- UW – Caregivers Unmet Needs
- Voices of Children
- Kinship Navigators
- Lived experience compensation.

## Subcommittees

### 1. Evaluation Sub-Committee

A KCOC kinship navigator evaluation sub-committee was established to inform, guide, and vet evaluation-related materials. During this last reporting period this subcommittee was used to provide subject matter expert and lived experience feedback to three different evaluations:

- A. Kinship navigator evaluation – ALTA, DCYF, and UW (Partners for our Children)

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B. Kinship PLUS – Amara, DCYF, and UW (Partners for our Children)

C. Kinship Project Sprints 1-4

A. Kinship Navigator Evaluation:

- During this reporting period, the KCOC continued to be updated and provided with information and reports specific to the kinship navigator evaluation.
- The UW researchers presented the Washington Kinship Navigator Program Manual and the Clearinghouse report for final review and comment before submitting to the Title IV Prevention Clearinghouse.
- A Washington Kinship Navigator Program Manual and fidelity training videos were created.
- All reports, manuals, and videos produced by the project can be reviewed by visiting: [Kinship Navigator Research Reports](#).
- With the assistance and feedback from the KCOC, Washington State submitted the six-month post intervention data to the Title IV-E Prevention Clearinghouse for review for evidence- based status.

**B. Connections for Kinship Families Project – Kinship PLUS**

- Amara partnered with DCYF and UW’s School of Social Work (UWSSW) for a five-year federal grant (starting 2021 through 2026) to support children and families experiencing out-of-home placement with a kinship caregiver. This is one of five partnerships across the country chosen to implement this program.
- Amara recruited members from the KCOC to participate in an advisory board that has informed planning, program design, and iteration. A focus of this board is to uplift and prioritize the voices of lived experts like kinship caregivers and youth while developing programs to support kinship families.
- Amara has been deliberate in the development of the Kinship PLUS program as a home-visitor style program that works in support of already existing and successful Kinship Navigator Programs. The Kinship PLUS program partners with the Kinship Navigator program in its service delivery area for referrals to and from each program.
- Kinship PLUS program goals:
  1. Increase the well-being of children and their caregivers in formal kinship through a hybrid preparation and support model between DCYF and Amara

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that provides caregivers with home-visiting support in licensing and placement.

2. Improve parent engagement and parent-caregiver relationships by promoting shared parenting principles that are centered on what is best for each child
3. Utilize current partnerships and existing kinship and family support services in King County by developing a strong network of services that promote kinship caregiving whenever possible.

### C. Kin-First Culture Evaluation

- KCOOC participants participated in the evaluation.
- KCOOC main meetings received findings presentations.
- Purpose of the evaluation was to answer the questions “What does a kin-first culture for Washington look like and how do we get there?”
- Between Oct. 2022 and March 2023 researchers interviewed DCYF Staff, Service Providers, Child Placing Agencies, and Kinship caregivers and Kinship youth.
- Key findings:
  - Read the full report: [DCYF Kin-First Culture Research and Recommendations](#)
  - Kinship caregivers need more support to achieve equity.
  - Kinship caregivers feel friction when interacting with DCYF systems.
  - Kinship caregivers feel abandoned in a complex process.
  - Tribes have always used a kin-first philosophy and the state can learn from their practices.
  - DCYF staff want more guidance and training when policies are shifted.
  - Non-kin placements are seen as quicker and easier. The search for kinship could begin earlier and should also include suitable other persons.
  - Kinship caregivers have a unique set of challenges – they are often grieving family and role changes, as well as haven’t had time to prepare their homes or finances.
  - Kinship caregivers want more support with navigating processes and knowing where to turn for assistance.
  - Funding stabilizes kinship homes. Kinship caregivers resist applying for TANF because of the child support burden assessed against the parents.
  - Kinship caregivers need legal support and assistance navigating the permanency process.

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## 2. Kinship Legislative Sub-Committee – Led by Laurie Lippold

- Kinship Legislative Subcommittee meets almost every month, providing a forum to elevate considerations for future policy development to support kinship providers. Additionally, the subcommittee monitors, and interprets bills, both federal and state, and policies and procedures that impact the welfare of kinship families.
- While an excellent place for exploration and considerations of future legislation the subcommittee understands the limitations and lack of ability to submit legislation recommendations on behalf of an agency. However, agencies that serve the kinship community participate and listen in the meetings.
- Themes that have been discussed this year include:
  - **Barriers and solutions for financial stability and access of TANF Child-Only Grants as related to Child Support Collections** – as discussed above child support continues to be a barrier for kinship families in accessing TANF, because of the child support burden it places on the adult children. The subcommittee established a work group to address the issue.
  - **Barriers to Legal Aid.** This resulted in funding from the legislature in Jan. 2022 to create a hotline where kinship caregivers can receive free legal advice. The LAARK program launched in Nov. 2022.
  - **Kinship Navigators** - Increased funding for additional kinship navigators for counties that do not have a kinship navigator.
  - **Informal Kinship Caregiver** – Lack of overall parity in supports provided to licensed foster parents. Informal kinship providers step in to avoid a dependency and when a parent realizes they cannot support the child, however informal Kinship providers feel the state does not support kinship providers in these arrangements even though they are often in the best interests of the child.
  - **Kinship Navigator Case Management Model** - As the Kinship Navigator Evaluation comes closer to completion, discussion of implementation of the model across the state has begun. The new case management model is making a difference and caregivers are accomplishing goals, accessing more services, and keeping children not involved with DCYF from entering the formal child welfare system. While all of this is fantastic – there is a concern that the new case management model takes twice as long to work with a family. The kinship navigators are already at capacity, and it is unclear if the new case management model can be sustained without additional funding.

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## The Future of KCOC

In 2024, DCYF will continue holding monthly KCOC meetings to collaborate and coordinate services to benefit all kinship care families in Washington. The two existing sub-committees (Kinship Evaluation and KCOC legislative subcommittee) will hold additional meetings as requested. KCOC members continue focusing on kinship caregivers and reminding agencies of the saying “nothing for us, without us.”

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