

Building Blocks for New Kinship Partnerships and Coalitions

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*Practice Brief***Building Blocks for New Kinship Partnerships and Coalitions**

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Abstract

Building successful kinship partnerships and coalitions requires intentional effort to establish trust, align goals, and foster inclusivity. These collaborations are essential for addressing the unique and evolving needs of kinship families, who often face limited access to resources due to the informal nature of many caregiving arrangements. Effective partnerships prioritize clear missions, open communication, and active engagement with stakeholders, particularly those with lived experiences such as kinship caregivers. Research demonstrates that coordinated efforts among organizations enhance resource availability, improve advocacy capabilities, and strengthen service delivery. By integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion principles, coalitions can ensure that diverse perspectives shape solutions and drive meaningful progress. Collaborations also facilitate the development of innovative strategies to fill resource gaps, provide comprehensive support, and maintain responsiveness during times of crisis. This article highlights the importance of building robust partnerships and offers insights into best practices for forming coalitions that empower kinship families, foster resilience, and contribute to long-term success. Through collective action and shared commitment, agencies and organizations can effectively support kinship caregivers and children in their care.

Keywords: Kinship, partnerships, coalitions

A workshop titled “Strategies and Tools for Building Successful Partnerships” was presented at the 2023 Brookdale Foundation Group National Orientation and Training Conference. The aim of this session was to provide conference attendees with varied examples of successful partnerships addressing the needs of kinship families. Four kinship professionals

shared insights on program collaborations that positively impacted both kinship caregivers and the professionals serving this population at local, state, and national levels. The workshop presenters were selected for their representation of diverse kinship caregivers and professionals/stakeholders from various regions (urban, rural, and inner city), collaborations across state lines, and the inclusion of private, public, and faith-based programs, as well as national perspectives.

In 2020, the four agencies adapted their strategies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to more effectively meet the needs of kinship families in several key areas: program location, client definition, participation guidelines, virtual programming utilization, funding sources, and volunteer involvement. Collaborative partnerships were established to address challenges related to food insecurity, housing, financial issues, support for rural kin caregivers, legal matters, and access to supportive services.

The approach taken involved the establishment of community partnerships to meet the needs of kinship families. Two of the Relatives as Parents Programs (RAPP) programs adopted a task force/advisory board model. The objective of this model was to assess existing services and policies, make necessary adjustments to service delivery, and enhance the research foundation. The third RAPP formed a partnership with a university, local stakeholders, the military, and volunteers to tackle the issue of food insecurity. Additionally, the fourth RAPP utilized a program from another state to consolidate data, share operational resources, and seek evaluation through the Title IV-E Clearinghouse to receive a more concrete funding source to continue providing kinship resources.

The consensus among the authors and workshop participants is that partnerships offer a valuable opportunity to improve the delivery of essential support and services for kinship families.

Overview of Programs

Community Partnerships Success Stories

Collaboration with community partners and stakeholders was instrumental in addressing the needs of kinship families and enhancing the services provided to them by various agencies. RAPPs from Montana, Minnesota, Virginia and Georgia shared their experiences regarding successful collaborations and partnerships at the local, state, and national levels.

Minnesota

Lutheran Social Service (LSS) of Minnesota's Kinship Family Support Services (KFSS) Program History. LSS's Kinship Family Support Services (KFSS) supports both informal and formal kinship caregivers in Minnesota. To help them care for themselves and the children they support, KFSS offers a kinship resource line to provide caregivers with information on legal options, financial support, educational opportunities, childcare resources, mental health assistance, and additional resources. Caregivers can access the kinship resource line via phone or email. Additionally, KFSS provides training and workshops, individualized support for kinship caregivers, support groups, and on-demand webinars.

KFSS recognizes the valuable contributions of kinship caregivers and ensures they have nonjudgmental access to essential support and services. The organization has a longstanding history of collaboration and partnership with community organizations and government agencies,

including mental health agencies, adoption agencies, county service providers, healthcare providers, educational institutions, and other organizations dedicated to supporting families.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, one-on-one consultations were conducted in person, along with support groups and training sessions. KFSS operated on-site or within the community full-time and provided only a limited selection of online resources and training on their website.

When COVID-19 emerged, all support groups and training sessions transitioned to online platforms via Zoom. Partnerships and collaborations were reassessed to determine what would be effective when serving kinship caregivers remotely. Enhanced communication between organizations was facilitated by conveniently scheduled virtual meetings. The latter streamlined our collaborative efforts, eliminating travel time when arranging meetings. The use of virtual meetings for collaborative initiatives proved to be a valuable lesson learned.

Kinship families experienced significant challenges as a result of the pandemic. These included food insecurity, limited access to technology, and financial pressures stemming from job loss, frontline work, and the necessity of managing remote learning for children at home. A key takeaway was the opportunity to provide coaching for kinship caregivers on utilizing technology, while engaging the youth in their care to assist caregivers in accessing virtual meetings. Furthermore, self-care was a focal point in group discussions. Training programs were expanded to include a series focused on strengthening families, promoting self-care for caregivers, sharing kinship experiences, and navigating trauma.

Success Story: Legal Issues. Lutheran Social Service (LSS) of Minnesota's Kinship Family Support Services (KFSS) program has established partnerships aimed at assisting kinship families with legal issues. Kinship families often encounter difficulties in understanding their legal rights when they care for the child of a relative or friend, and they frequently face financial constraints when seeking legal representation. To address these challenges, KFSS has sought collaborations with local legal aid organizations, private practice attorneys, adoption agencies, and law schools to support kinship caregivers in accessing both legal information and representation. KFSS also offers caregivers access to legal resources through written materials, one-on-one consultations, training sessions, and referrals to legal agencies and clinics. This service provides caregivers with increased knowledge and satisfaction on how to approach their unique legal needs, with referrals to legal aid and unbundled or flat fee legal services, and ultimately with help for caregivers to find the best fit to meet their immediate and future needs.

In addition, the agency provides training on legal issues specific to kinship caregivers to TANF providers, school staff, and other professionals who support kinship families. LSS works to educate the broader community and legal professionals about the critical importance of legal representation and information for kinship families. KFSS has established a partnership with the Institute to Transform Child Protection to offer legal representation to kinship caregivers, along with resource fairs, legal clinics, training sessions, and community gatherings. As part of this collaboration, a list of attorneys and legal aid resources have also been developed for kinship caregivers.

Program Replication: This program has the potential to be replicated in various geographic regions including promotion of written information and supports specific to the legal needs of kinship caregivers, collaboration with Family and Community Resource Centers, education to professionals and service providers on who to contact for assistance, and professional education provided by KFSS. Partnerships can be established with local law

schools, adoption agencies, and other organizations that provide services to kinship caregivers. In areas lacking a law school, collaborations can be developed with private attorneys, agencies serving kinship caregivers, local or regional legal aid offices, and/or the local bar association. Private attorneys may be unaware of the specific needs of kinship caregivers, and once they understand the needs, we have seen attorneys unbundle legal services or offer a flat fee to make it more affordable for those who do not qualify for legal aid services.

Success Story: Advisory Councils (Local). KFSS established a Kinship Advisory Council composed of a diverse group of kinship caregivers from across the state. The Council's objective was to amplify the voices of kinship caregivers to more effectively inform the public and decision-making professionals about their needs. A result of the establishment of the Kinship Advisory Council, has been a positive shift in the language used to describe services for these kinship caregivers. Additionally, advisory members have provided legislative testimony to educate state legislators on the challenges and strengths faced by kinship caregivers and their families.

Program Replication. This program can be replicated by establishing an advisory council comprised of diverse kinship caregivers. It would be beneficial to allocate funding, if feasible, to offer stipends for kinship caregivers participating on the council. Furthermore, additional training should be provided to equip kinship caregivers with the skills needed to communicate effectively and efficiently with state legislators and decision makers.

Virginia

Kids, Kin 'n Caregivers Inc.: Grandfamilies-Relatives as Parents Program (KKNC RAPP). Kids, Kin 'n Caregivers' Grandfamilies-Relatives as Parents Program (KKNC RAPP) was established in 2016. The program serves informal and formal kinship families that reside primarily in southeast Virginia. The agency provides educational workshops, support groups, linkage to needed resources and services, family enrichment activities, holiday assistance, programs for children and youth, resources, and school supplies.

COVID-19 required KKNC RAPP to move in-person meetings and training to virtual services. Weekly dinners and dialogue meetings for the families were discontinued. The elimination of in-person services ended respite time for kinship caregivers, fellowship and educational programs for the children and youth, and the weekly meals. Kinship caregivers were also faced with providing 24-hour care for children, food insecurity, financial challenges, mental health issues, and technology challenges. However, the loss of in-person meetings for both kin caregivers and the children/youth was addressed through the provision of virtual weekly support group meetings, a virtual educational series, the development of a Kin 'n Kids Adventure Club (led by college interns), virtual Teen Cuisine cooking classes and chats, check-in phone calls, help with obtaining internet access, and continued linkage with needed community resources.

Maintaining and establishing new partnerships was essential to the capacity for supporting our families both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. A partnership with the Virginia Cooperative Extension provided curricula to facilitate the above-mentioned Teen Cuisine cooking class, along with staff support that enabled KKNC RAPP to conduct a virtual cooking session. Virtual workshops conducted by the Virginia Poverty Law Center assisted kinship families in gaining a better understanding of court processes and legal issues. Healthy

Chesapeake offers several kinship caregivers opportunities to participate in the HUB, a monthly program staffed by a registered nurse, social worker, and dietitian. This program aims to monitor diabetes and high blood pressure, provide healthy food options, and connect caregivers to necessary resources. Collaboration with the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia enabled the acquisition and distribution of fresh vegetables, produce, and other food items to address food insecurity and facilitated referring families to faith communities and/or community organizations in their geographic area for emergency food assistance. The partnerships with the Endependence Center and St. Paul's United Methodist Church enabled the agency to secure office and storage space, as well as access to facilities for training sessions, dinners, educational workshops, support groups, youth activities, and family enrichment events. In addition, the Endependence Center staff supports families with educational matters, including Individualized Education Programs and 504 Plans, as well as vision and mobility challenges, housing concerns, and issues related to special needs. St. Paul's Church generously provides access to their kitchen, fellowship hall, classrooms, and nursery. Furthermore, the church assists families by donating clothing.

Post-COVID-19, Kids 'n Kin has continued to offer weekly virtual support groups, which were established during the pandemic, for kin caregivers. Additionally, in-person meetings have been reintroduced, allowing caregivers to select the option that best meets their needs. The agency also offers in-person support groups at multiple locations. In addition, it has continued their partnership with the Foodbank and other local faith communities to address the issue of food insecurity. The Youth Rapp Program was modified to include a combination of virtual and in-person activities. This change allowed them to offer youth life skills classes, cooking classes, and recreational activities. Kids Kin 'n Caregivers also offers in-person family enrichment activities on a quarterly basis. Overall, the combination of virtual and in-person activities have been well received by kinship families. These collaborations and partnerships, both prior to and following the COVID-19 pandemic, have enabled KKNC to connect with caregivers in their current environments and deliver essential, responsive support.

Success Story: Faith and Community Volunteers and Donations (Local). Kids Kin 'n Caregivers has established a partnership with JustServe to receive in-kind, financial, and volunteer assistance from the local community. JustServe, a service offered by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is a free program that connects community volunteers with the needs of local organizations to enhance the quality of life in the community. As a result of this partnership, the agency has benefited from volunteer support for kinship family enrichment programs, as well as donations of in-kind items and resources for holiday assistance, back-to-school initiatives, learning kits, hope packs, and care baskets for kin caregivers. This collaboration has allowed the agency to forge enduring connections and garner support from the broader community to benefit the families it serves. Additionally, the partnership has facilitated the expansion of essential services and resources for kinship families.

Program Replication. The program can be replicated in other geographic areas by contacting the local JustServe representative from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. JustServe is available throughout the United States and in several foreign countries. Their website allows nonprofit organizations to develop specific requests for both community volunteers and donations (in-kind and direct). Similar partnerships can be achieved by reaching out to local faith communities, service organizations, high schools, and military installations.

Success Story: Advisory Board (State). Kids Kin 'n Caregivers collaborated at the state level with private agencies, universities, public organizations, kinship navigators, and kin caregivers to establish a statewide kinship coalition known as the Virginia Kinship Convening Group. This coalition reviews current legislative policies, addresses issues related to the implementation of policies and procedures, provides support for kinship navigators, and advocates on behalf of kinship families to ensure that adequate resources are available to meet their needs. The central concept of the coalition is that collaboration among service organizations can enhance the support provided to kinship families. Additional guidance for the establishment of the Virginia Kinship Convening Group was provided by the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network. As a result of the coalition's efforts, Virginia's Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services made policy adjustments and allocated funds to create Lifespan Respite Vouchers for kinship caregivers. Furthermore, education was provided to benefit workers at Virginia's Department of Social Services to enhance their understanding of how the TANF child-only policy requirements affect kinship families. Additionally, the Mountain Empire Older Citizens KinCare coordinator and Kinship Navigators from Dinwiddie, Virginia, partnered to better address the needs of rural kinship caregivers residing in the western part of Virginia.

Program Replication. This program can be replicated by forming an advisory board comprised of organizations, agencies, and individuals who are directly and/or indirectly involved with the provision of services and/or policies that impact kinship families. Kin caregivers should also be part of this advisory board to provide feedback and assistance and to ensure that the Board is responsive to their needs. Additional assistance can be provided by the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network (2024).

Georgia

Athens Community Council on Aging: Program History. The Athens Community Council on Aging (ACCA) is a private, nonprofit organization that has been helping people age and live well since 1967. ACCA's long history of successful program administration and innovative service delivery is made stronger through a broad variety of community partnerships. Annually ACCA engages over 16,000 individuals through direct service and support, as well as providing opportunities for engagement and enrichment. The core values of ACCA include imagination and innovation, kindness and respect, quality and commitment, generosity and gratitude, and learning and sharing.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren program serves kinship families in six northeast Georgia counties. Program resources include case management, support groups for caregivers, parenting education, educational supports for children, family activities, and emergency assistance with utilities and groceries.

When ACCA had to suspend in-person services during COVID-19, the agency quickly pivoted to address the urgent and growing food insecurity of both their members and the community. Building on the Meals on Wheels model, and in partnership with multiple organizations and businesses, ACCA dramatically expanded their meal and grocery delivery and distribution. Throughout the public health emergency, kinship families were provided multiple food options, including prepared meals, pantry staples, and fresh produce, while ongoing support groups and parent education classes were offered virtually.

Success Story: Food Insecurity. As a standard practice, ACCA seeks out partnerships that meet the following criteria: it is mutually beneficial to both partners; the goals and desired impact of the partners are aligned; partners equally share resources; there is clear and open communication; both parties have the capacity to manage the partnership well; and the partnership will result in measurable results.

To address food insecurity within kinship families, ACCA's Grandparents Raising Grandchildren program partners closely with the University of Georgia's Campus Kitchen at UGA, a student-run food reclamation program, and UGArden, a student-run organic farm, and the Food Bank of Northeast Georgia. Through these partnerships, families receive prepared meals, fresh produce, and staple items either through home deliveries or regular community distributions.

At intake, ACCA's kinship families complete a standardized food insecurity screening, and using this data, staff can identify the families most in need of nutrition support. Interventions are introduced based on need, and families are reassessed at 90 days to determine if the support provided has alleviated the need, or if additional interventions are needed. At intake, approximately 63% of families measure as food insecure, and after 90 days of regular intervention that number drops to 40%.

Program Replication. This program can be replicated by networking with local food banks, colleges (four-year programs, community colleges, private schools), and community organizations. Additionally, colleges are a key connection for intern and volunteer recruitment, generating additional support for programs and rewarding experiences for students and volunteers.

Montana

Montana Kinship Navigator Program: Program History. The Montana State University (MSU) Extension Montana Kinship Navigator Program (MTKNP) serves kinship caregivers for the entire state, including rural communities, all of Montana's eight Native American Tribes, and 10 cities. The MTKNP began as a statewide program in 2002 by developing support groups in 16 rural and five urban communities. The program grew to almost 20 support groups, and the need arose for information and referral services. A program manager was hired to gather and distribute a list of services that supported kinship caregivers in their local communities. The program has since evolved. The goals of the program are twofold: to support kinship families caring for children through building safety, stability, permanency, and well-being, as well as to build community capacity to link kinship families to community resources.

MTKNP continues to provide access to state and community resources through support groups, educational classes for caregivers (Powerful Tools for Caregivers), and direct personal connection with trained navigators at MSU Extension offices. In addition, to respond to the needs of these special families, the program partners with child protective services, area agencies on aging, and a network of statewide partners in community health agencies.

Success Story: Creation of a Caregiver Respite Program. The Montana Respite Retreat Program was developed in 2021 as an innovative approach to caregiver well-being. The program aims to provide caregivers with a respite day and engage them in sustainable self-care practice education. The overarching concept of the program is that when caregivers are healthy

and well, they will provide better care and attention, which promotes a smoother transition for the caregiver and the child in kinship families. Caregivers engage in four experiential activities promoting personal self-care, particularly when they have only a few minutes to care for themselves. In addition to the day of respite, a food box program has been integrated to provide five premade meals for families and a break from standard meal preparation. The caregivers receive a combined 10 hours of respite through both programs. One caregiver, describing how feelings of helplessness and isolation during the COVID-19 affected her, shared the benefits of attending the program, stating, “It has been life changing . . . The respite retreat brought us together, and I do not feel alone in this caregiving journey. The activities taught me I can care for myself, even if for only five minutes. I can recalibrate my day at any point when I get frustrated.” Many caregivers share similar feelings about the impact of the respite retreats and the food box program on their well-being. It has provided them with a break and has allowed them to recharge and better equip them to care for themselves and their families

Impacts during and after COVID-19. While the respite programs were started after COVID-19, the impact of national and statewide partnerships held the program together. The Kinship navigators are housed on the main Montana State University campus and have always communicated by phone. Now, they also connect virtually because of the limits to personal contact that were necessary during the pandemic. The program maintained monthly connections with local extension agents and statewide meetings with stakeholders. Support groups transitioned to the online platform Zoom, and additional funding was secured through national partners to distribute personal protective equipment and other needed support to kinship families. Throughout the pandemic, the MTKNP developed a research process to develop an evidence-based case management model by fostering a regional partnership with Wyoming 211, which administers the kinship program in that state. The partnership is currently completing an evaluation of this model and will be publishing a manuscript of the results soon. A main lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic was that partnerships are crucial for connecting and sharing ideas and resources. We found that statewide programs can thrive during enormous challenges and times of national crisis with strong partners and collaborators.

Success Story: Interstate Partners and Kinship Navigator Program. The Montana Kinship Navigator Program collaborates nationally with Generations United, Annie E. Casey Foundation, University of Washington, and regional partner Wyoming 211. MTKNP and Kinship Connections of Wyoming have been awarded the Exemplary Kinship Program designation from the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network. Both states are partnering to conduct a case management research study collectively because of their unique status as rural frontier states. Combining caregiver data will provide sufficient data to complete a joint program evaluation to create an evidence-based case management model. This collaborative approach included combining workflow processes, procedures, forms, focus groups, and some of the caregiver education and support groups. Kinship navigator programs decrease family needs, increase caregiver self-efficacy, and improve safety and stability among kinship children in informal and formal kinship care. The partnership is a one-of-a-kind model in the country and thrived during the Covid-19 pandemic, given communication was already being used via virtual technology. The research project has continued through and after the pandemic and is now heading into its sixth year. These partnerships are a model for others to foster connections with other agencies to accomplish similar goals.

Program Replication. Others can replicate these partnerships to gain knowledge from those with similar populations and caregivers' cultures. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network, University of Washington, and Montana Kinship Navigator Program can provide additional guidance on program replication (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). If your program is not connected with your state's land grant universities, we encourage you to contact them to determine how a partnership could be developed. Program staffing can include a kinship navigator/program director, student interns, and staff at outlying extension offices. The program can be offered by training extension agents who may provide an entrance into rural communities where there are unmet needs. Additional assistance for program development can be obtained by contacting the MSU Extension Gerontology Specialist.

Discussion

Forming new coalitions and partnerships requires dedicated effort to ensure their success. Building relationships, understanding the dynamics of the partnership, and establishing trust takes time. While coalition members often work toward shared goals, approaches may differ based on unique experiences or cultural backgrounds.

To cultivate successful partnerships, it is crucial to establish a clear purpose, mission, and set of goals. This process involves developing guidelines for open communication that encourage transparency, maintain confidentiality as needed, and set clear standards for media and public communication. Regular meetings with active participation from stakeholders, particularly those with lived experiences such as kinship caregivers, are vital for keeping the partnership grounded in real-world insights and sustaining momentum. It is equally important to define measurable outcomes and identify the necessary resources for achieving them. To foster an inclusive and equitable environment, it is essential to integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles into the partnership's operations, recognizing the significant value that diverse perspectives contribute to the coalition's objectives (Agonafer et al., 2021; Fynn et al., 2022).

According to national research, (Rushovich et al., 2024), most kinship placements and living arrangements for children are made informally, thus limiting the direct access to support and resources needed by kinship families. Furthermore, kinship families move in and out of programs at different times, with the caregiving relationship often lasting for multiple years, and the needs of both the child and the kinship caregiver continuously changing (Kekeh et al., 2024).

Collaborative efforts by kinship organizations have resulted in the creation of a broad array of resource opportunities for kinship families, including training, support, and community services (Wu et al., 2023). By uniting their efforts across common goals and values, agencies and organizations were better able to support the needs of kinship families. Research has shown that kinship caregivers and their children benefit when systems designed to meet their needs collaborate to offer easily accessible and available resources (Rushovich et al., 2024). Furthermore, partnerships and coalitions increased the capacity of kinship organizations to have more effective advocacy and problem-solving capabilities, contributed to the expansion of services, allowed for shared resources, filled in gaps in resources, and provided greater assistance to kinship families during both national and individual crises.

Agencies that work with kinship families may utilize the examples provided in this practice brief to engage with other organizations, agencies, faith communities, military groups, universities, and community volunteers in forming partnerships aimed at addressing the comprehensive and unique needs of these families. Establishing strong partnerships and collaborations both now and during times of crisis will enable organizations to respond

effectively, to bridge gaps in services, and to develop innovative strategies to ensure they are responsive to caregiver families and support their success.

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