

# **Kinship Care Navigator Programs: An Overview of Existing Programs and a Look to the Future**

## **The Need**

49% of kinship caregivers polled in 2003 by Casey Family Programs described the caregiving experience as both "challenging and rewarding."<sup>1</sup> Yet even in the best case scenario-where a caregiver is fortunate to have both adequate financial resources and a support network of family and friends-assuming full responsibility for a relative's child is no easy task. Kinship care providers often speak of the difficulties they have "navigating" through complicated child welfare laws and policies. Many don't contact the state agency for fear that the children will be removed from their care or because they do not want to further disrupt an already-volatile family dynamic. Kinship caregivers also relay unique personal and professional challenges associated with caring for their relative's children-oftentimes late in life and with little or no notice. Retirement is put on hold; vacations are canceled; and older relatives confront modern parenting challenges for the first time. Struggles with finances and emotional ups and downs are commonplace.

## **Kinship Care Navigator Programs: What are they?**

Though all states have responded in some way to the unique needs and challenges of kinship care providers, three states are leading the national response through comprehensive and innovative Kinship Care Navigator Programs. The programs serve as a "one stop shop" for relatives seeking accurate and up-to-date information about the benefits, services, supports, and programs available for kinship caregivers in their respective states. New Jersey and Ohio offer toll-free assistance to grandparents and other relatives caring for children

## **New Jersey**

The New Jersey Department of Human Services established the Kinship Navigator Program to "help kinship caregivers coordinate the various government and community resources that may be available to them."<sup>2</sup> The program provides information and referral services to kinship caregivers for a wide range of needs, including but not limited to: cash assistance; family support groups; Work First New Jersey; Medicaid coverage and services; child support; housing assistance; custody procedures and other legal services; respite services; educational services; wraparound services that help caregivers cover short-term or one-time expenses such as furniture and moving fees; and a toll-free number where a

Navigator representative is available to answer questions Monday through Friday during business hours.<sup>3</sup> More information and a link to download a two-page Kinship Navigator brochure are also available on the [Department's web site](#).

## Ohio

Ohio's Code provides more specifics than New Jersey's Code about the state's Kinship Care Navigator Program. It begins by stating the legislative purpose of the 1998 program: "to assist kinship caregivers who are seeking information regarding, or assistance obtaining, services and benefits available at the state and local level that address the needs of those caregivers residing in each county."<sup>4</sup>

It goes on to specify that the Department of Job and Family Services will make payments to public children's services agencies "for the purpose of permitting the agencies to provide kinship care navigator information and referral services and assistance obtaining support services to kinship caregivers pursuant to the kinship care navigator program."<sup>5</sup> It also articulates that the Department may provide training and technical assistance to employees or contractors of public children's services agencies looking to implement kinship navigator programs.

The statute provides that information and referral services include: publicly-funded child care; respite care; training related to caring for children with special needs; and legal services.<sup>6</sup> However, different counties have implemented the program differently in practice. For instance, some counties also provide case management, money management, emergency food services, and support groups. Others solely provide information and referral services.<sup>7</sup>

Ohio has also published a 50-page self-help manual, *Relatives Caring for Children: Ohio Resource Guide*. Access it through the [Department of Job and Family's web site](#).

## Washington

Washington established two kinship care navigator pilot projects in 2003; a final evaluation is expected by the end of January 2006.<sup>8</sup>

Washington's Code instructs the Department of Social and Health Services to "collaborate with one or more nonprofit community-based agencies to develop a grant proposal for submission to potential funding sources...to establish a minimum of two pilot projects to assist kinship caregivers with understanding and navigating the system of services for children in out-of-home care."<sup>9</sup> It further instructs that the proposal must include at least one project in eastern Washington and one project in western Washington.<sup>10</sup> Each project must also be managed by a participating community-based agency.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, kinship care navigators funded through any submitted proposal are responsible for at least the following: understanding the various state agency systems serving kinship caregivers; working in partnership with local community service providers; tracking trends, concerns, and other factors related to kinship caregivers; and assisting in establishing stable, respectful relationships between kinship caregivers and department staff.<sup>12</sup>

With evaluation pending, it is still unclear how effective Washington's Kinship Navigator programs have been. Yet the Department seems to be on the right track. A special portion of the Department's website is devoted to kinship care<sup>13</sup>, and a well-organized and downloadable list of all Navigator programs and support groups is available on the [Washington State University web site](#).

### **The Federal Response**

In a bold move to advance the legal rights and opportunities for kinship caregivers, Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), Olympia Snowe (R-ME), and Tim Johnson (D-SD) introduced the Kinship Caregiver Support Act (S.985) into the United States Senate on May 10, 2005. More than one year later, the bill has yet to be approved by the Senate, and advocates remain skeptical that it will pass at any point in the near future. Nevertheless, one of the three main goals of the bill is to establish a national Kinship Navigator Program<sup>14</sup>, to be administered by the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The Assistant Secretary would also be required to periodically consult with the Assistant Secretary for Aging within HHS.

The proposed program is very specific about what funds must be used for and may be used for. For instance, funds must be used to establish toll-free hotlines (modeled after New Jersey and Ohio) as well as resource guides and other information and referral service. Funds may also be used to establish a state kinship care ombudsman or support kinship caregiver trainings.

Several national organizations have provided critical analyses of the proposed national Kinship Care Navigator Program. We recommend the following web sites and publications:

#### [The Children's Defense Fund](#)

- "Summary of Kinship Caregiver Support Act"
- "Kinship Caregiver Support Act: Questions and Answers"

#### [The Child Welfare League of America](#)

- "Summary of the Kinship Caregiver Support Act"
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Jones, Ernestine F., Sandra Chipungu & Suky Hutton. "The Kinship Report: Assessing the Needs of Relative Caregivers and the Children in their Care." Washington, DC: Casey Family Programs National Center for Resource Family Support, August 2003, 84-5.

<sup>2</sup>N.J. STAT. ANN. § 30.4C-90 (2006).

<sup>3</sup>You must call from in-state to access this telephone number.

<sup>4</sup>OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 5101.851 (2006).

<sup>5</sup>Id.

<sup>6</sup>Id.

<sup>7</sup>Henderson, Dionne M. "AARP Outreach Training." Dayton, Ohio: Wright State University, Center for Healthy Communities. June 1- 3, 2005.

<sup>8</sup>"Highlights of Recent Kinship Care Legislative Enactments." Washington, DC: National Council of State Legislators. July 25, 2006  
<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/kinshiphigh.htm>

<sup>9</sup>WASH. REV. CODE ANN. § 74.13.610 (2006).

<sup>10</sup>Id.

<sup>11</sup>Id.

<sup>12</sup>Id.

<sup>13</sup><http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/kinshipcare>

<sup>14</sup>The other two goals are 1) to establish a Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program; and 2) ensure notice to relatives when children enter the child welfare system.