

## **C-2b. KINSHIP CAREGIVER SUPPORT SERVICES**

Washington State and the US Congress have seen the wisdom of and fiscal benefits resulting from support services to unpaid family caregivers in delaying or eliminating premature placement of loved ones in more costly residential facilities. The same principle applies when it comes to kinship caregivers providing care for relative children placed in their care rather than in more costly foster care. This has led to the passage of legislation to support kinship caregivers in their efforts to provide stable homes for displaced relative children. ALTC coordinates and monitors three programs designed to assist kinship caregivers.

The first program is the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) serving kinship caregivers 55 years of age and older who provide primary care for children living with them who are under the age of 19. Older Americans Act (OAA) dollars fund this program. SE/ALTC has contracted with Catholic Family and Child Services (CFCS) to provide information and assistance to this group of caregivers. Federal funding is limited to 10% of the entire Family Caregiver Support Program (FCSP) budget. Each year since its inception, this program has used all of these available funds in service of grandparents and other relatives over 55 who have selflessly taken in their vulnerable relative children.

The second program is the Kinship Caregivers Support Program (KCSP), funded by the Washington State Legislature. CFCS is the contracted agency for this

program as well. This program is designed to provide services to adult kinship caregivers of any age who are at the greatest risk of being unable to maintain their caregiving role. Funding is limited and must be dispersed to those kinship caregivers experiencing the most urgent/emergent needs.

The third program is the Kinship Navigator Program. ALTC has again contracted with CFCS to house and supervise this position, dovetailing well with the other kinship programs they administer. The Kinship Navigator provides information and referral to kin caregivers concerning a range of services, resources and supports including:

- ❖ Child care
- ❖ Legal issues
- ❖ Respite care
- ❖ Medical, dental, vision, mental health, and chemical dependency services for caregivers and the youth in their charge
- ❖ Assistance navigating the education system
- ❖ Assistance navigating the child welfare system
- ❖ Parenting skills education and training
- ❖ Emergency financial assistance
- ❖ Caregiver support groups

The Kinship Navigator offers advocacy and follow-up. Navigator services are offered throughout ALTC's eight-county area. Referrals the Kinship Navigator often come from information specialists and case managers in ALTC's Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRC).

## **Challenges in the Kinship Caregiver Support and Kinship Navigator Programs**

The following are some of the challenges and barriers to serving kinship caregivers:

- Lack of awareness of this program, especially in rural communities
- The rapid increase in the number of kinship families
- The limited funding to serve so many in great need
- The expansive territory served by 1 full-time and two very part-time Navigators
- Language barriers for monolingual Spanish speakers can be daunting.
- The only bilingual Spanish speaking Navigator works only 10-15 hours per week and is housed in the Yakima CFCFS office. She assists the primary Navigator with monolingual kinship families, but not having her available for home and office visits in other counties is less than optimal.
- The general distrust of governmental agencies by these informal families; privacy concerns
- How incredibly overwhelmed kinship caregivers can be when they first begin providing a home for their relative children
- The complicated and confusing regulations surrounding third party custody can be a stumbling block to kin caregivers who have never had to deal with the court system.
- Custody regulations can vary from county to county.
- Insufficient funding to meet the most basic of needs. Funding allocation

levels from the State do not reflect historic needs/usage

A Los Angeles Times article in July of 2011 recounted the rapid increase in the number of kinship families across the US. Census data reported shows that the number of kinship family households jumped by 64% in 10 years. It is estimated that for every child in foster care, there are 20 children in relative placement. The economic turmoil our country is currently enduring has added to the numbers and the financial needs of kinship caregivers.

Unlike foster parents, kinship caregivers do not receive monthly stipends with which to care for their relative children. Many are on fixed incomes and find themselves paying more for food, utilities, and car maintenance with no increase in funds. Others have had to leave senior housing in order to take in young relatives, incurring moving expenses for which they had not planned.

Because the territory served by the navigators is roughly the size of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined, travel time and expenses can be a barrier to efficient service. ALTC is working with the Kinship Navigator to try to minimize some of these costs. Should an emergent need arise in the lower four counties, kin caregivers are instructed to schedule an appointment with ALTC staff. Staff verifies the caregiver's identification and makes copies of any documentation requested by the Navigator. The copies are faxed to the Navigator, thereby eliminating the delay that would have resulted from having to mail in required documents.

During the 2013 Washington State

Legislature's budget negotiations, KCSP funds narrowly escaped elimination. An advocacy campaign successfully brought about a change of heart on the part of the State Senate. ALTC's Kinship Navigator wrote a moving piece about how having a bed of their own is something most children take for granted, but children uprooted from their homes often don't have a guarantee of a bed to crawl into that they can call their own and where they can feel secure.

Many kin families in the Hispanic community are mistrustful of governmental agencies. They often do not reach out for help because of fear of government intrusion into their lives. Or they may be embarrassed at the failure of their own children or relatives as parents and not want agencies to have yet another reason to monitor or judge their family members.

The number of Native American kinship families is also on the rise. Their elders can recall in tragic detail the disastrous results of foster placement in the past, where government policy was to place native children in non-native homes. Native children were forbidden to speak their language and perform their cultural practices. Families were splintered and devastated. Children lost sight of their heritage and identity. Understandably, Native American kin caregivers can be mistrustful of governmental interference in their lives. The Yakama Nation has hired a Native American Kinship Navigator who is working to improve understanding and trust.

Often kinship caregivers take in relative children suddenly. Many have not parented recently; some have never parented. Most are unprepared for the change and problems

that come with raising someone else's child, even a beloved one. The Navigator reports that one barrier to seeking help is how overwhelming the new role of relative caregiver can be. Knowing how and where to go for help with custody paperwork can be just one thing too many to deal with. The children placed in their care often come with emotional scars and needs and can exhibit trying behaviors. Many are special needs children. The effort to find resources to help with these challenges can appear daunting.

In 2011 Cornell University published an article based on their study that found that grandparents or older relatives agree with these statements:

- Parenting is hard work and grandparenting can be even harder
- Grandparenting a child who's come out of a crisis is harder still
- Grandparenting when you have less energy than you used to have doesn't help

Fatigue and depression can often be a side effect of parenting the second time around.

Often kinship caregivers must petition the court for a legal form of custody in order to protect the children they are raising. Filing for third party custody can be a confusing and expensive process. Each county has its own procedures, its own set of potentially confusing forms. Having a family court facilitator can help with this, but Kittitas and Walla Walla counties do not have one. Navigators are forbidden by statute to assist with filling out the paperwork as it is tantamount to giving legal advice. However, the Navigator can accompany kin caregivers to court as an advocate and as someone who can help the caregiver to know where to go next in the maze.

Navigators can help with obtaining criminal background checks required by courts for third party custody and can make copies of all forms for caregivers.

### **Meeting the Challenges**

The primary Kinship Navigator and the FCSP Coordinator both serve on the Kinship Oversight Committee for Washington State. In doing so, they try to represent the interests of kinship caregivers in rural Southeastern Washington. In addition, the Navigator has been an integral part of a Yakima Valley collaboration with representatives from agencies involved with kinship and foster care concerns and including some kinship caregivers themselves. This collaboration, called KINdred Spirits, publishes a bi-monthly newsletter and has been instrumental in starting kinship support groups in Yakima Valley. The newsletter contains parenting tips, information about programs, and listings of events and activities that may be of interest to kin families. One version of the newsletter is specific to Yakima and Kittitas Valley families while another contains information pertinent to families in the other six ALTC counties.

The Kinship Navigator also writes grant applications which have sometimes served to augment KCSP funds. Since 2011, the KINdred Spirits collaboration has secured donations that fund a back-to-school barbeque where school supplies are distributed to kin families. Back packs filled with school supplies are distributed to elementary through senior high students. It has been a great success. Since 2012 an annual back-to-school event has been held in Yakima's Franklin Park that includes a

backpack giveaway, an ice cream social, and free swim passes for the children. Children's Administration staff assists in the planning and implementation of this event, as well as ALTC's FCSP Coordinator.

In the spring of 2011, the Navigator, in partnership with Casey Family Programs, Catholic Family and Child Services, the Northwest Justice Project, and a volunteer attorney association (VAS), began offering Legal Options Clinics monthly. Attorneys working pro bono in these clinics provide assistance to caregivers with preparing and filing the paperwork necessary to apply for third party custody. In addition, the Navigator has worked out an agreement with the Yakima County Family Court Facilitator who works under the auspices of the Superior Court. Kinship caregivers are able to schedule appointments to receive assistance with filling out and filing third party custody petitions at a greatly reduced fee.

Kinship caregivers needing respite care struggle trying to find reliable providers at affordable rates. Kinship Navigator Mary Pleger and the FCSP Coordinator both have been a part of state-wide discussions on this topic. The Lifespan Respite Washington coalition was formed under a grant to try to address the need for respite for caregivers providing care to people of all ages. The Lifespan Respite Washington coalition has looked into unique ways of providing respite to caregivers of children

**GOAL: KCSP and Navigator services will work with kinship caregivers needing assistance with custody issues.**

**OBJECTIVES:**

- The Kinship Navigator will ascertain whether there is sufficient interest in other counties besides Yakima to start Legal Options Clinics.

**GOAL: Awareness of and referrals to KCSP and Navigator will increase throughout eight county region.**

**OBJECTIVES:**

- ALTC staff will continue to make referrals to the Kinship Navigator as appropriate and will acquaint FCSP caregivers raising kinship children with KCSP. There will be at least 10 kinship referrals per year. *Ongoing.*
- Special emphasis will be placed on reaching Spanish speaking kin caregivers through outreach to Hispanic churches and community groups by Kinship Navigator staff. *Ongoing.*