

A Culture of **Kin**

**Texas Kinship Care Steering
Committee Workgroups
Recommendations Report**
October 2022



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Executive Summary

Texas Kinship Care Steering Committee
Workgroups Recommendations Report: 2022

Texas places more children and youth with kin than the national average.

According to the most recent data from the Administration for Children and Families, Texas places a higher percentage of children and youth in kinship placements (44.5 percent) than the national average (34 percent). Kinship caregivers can be a life-changing resource for children and youth entering care, ultimately reducing the numbers of children placed in out of home group care settings.

A child placed in kinship care:

- Is less likely to re-enter care than a child in foster care;
- Experiences fewer placement changes;
- Is more likely to be placed with siblings and maintain relationships with birth parents and relatives;
- Is more likely to remain in their community of origin and maintain connections to cultural identity;
- Experiences less trauma than a child placed with strangers; and
- Lives with people they know and trust.

As part of current federal litigation involving the Texas child welfare system, *M.D. v. Abbott*, a team of experts (Expert Panel) released child welfare system improvement recommendations on January 10, 2022. In their report, the Expert Panel stated: “Kinship caregivers are a backbone of child welfare systems” and also “DFPS officials acknowledge that they want the number of Texas children living with kin to be higher.” Specific to kinship care in Texas, the Expert Panel recommended:

- Assess current practice and policy related to relative care.
- Request funds to increase rates for kinship care so they are equivalent to rates for non-kin foster care.
- Seek changes in policy that will allow for greater support of kinship families with both concrete and mental health services.
- Get external TA (Technical Assistance) to educate stakeholders, including the courts, on the benefits of kinship care.

In Texas, only 5% of children and youth exit to a relative or fictive kinship caregiver with Permanency Care Assistance in place



- Adopt a relative-first placement strategy and build practices to support it. Develop a robust family-finding approach utilizing skilled workers and supportive technology.
- Adopt the recommendation of the Child Protection Roundtable to appropriate funding for a kinship caregiver support pool from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, directing this funding “with particular emphasis on kinship caregivers serving high-needs children requiring specialized services” and for providing training and supports to these caregivers so they can provide a treatment foster care level of services.

In Texas, only 5.35 percent of children and youth exit to a relative or fictive kinship caregiver with Permanency Care Assistance in-place. To further increase kinship placements and positive permanency exits with Permanency Care Assistance and to implement the Expert Panel recommendations, the Texas Kinship Steering Committee (Committee) was formed in January 2022.

The Committee is a collaboration among the Department of Family and Protection Services (DFPS), the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), Single Source Continuum Contractors (SSCCs), the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services (TACFS), Casey Family Programs (CFP), child welfare professionals, a youth previously in DFPS custody, and a kinship caregiver with lived experience.

The charge of the Committee was to assess barriers and generate system reform recommendations so that children and youth are placed with kinship caregivers as quickly and as safely as possible, to stabilize and support kinship caregivers through positive permanency, and to address the kinship recommendations from the Expert Panel.

The Steering Committee was supported by a Core Team and Workgroups which met with regular cadence to discuss the processes for kinship caregivers. A Core Team from within the Steering Committee ensured that workgroups were developed and focused on dissecting specific topics, from initial and subsequent placements to positive permanency. The work resulted in formal recommendations from the workgroups to the Steering Committee.



"Texas will continue to make familial placements a priority"

- A New Vision for DFPS, 2020

Workgroup recommendations relate to:

- Kin as a first and best placement (including creating a kin-first culture)
- Supporting kinship placements (including Kinship Navigator Programs in Texas)
- Addressing concrete supports and daycare needs for kinship caregivers
- Increasing verification (including a kin-specific provisional license)
- Kinship care as a means for capacity building

At the conclusion of the Steering Committee's work, all recommendations are hereby delivered to DFPS and HHSC. The various community stakeholders mentioned in this report will continue to support both agencies throughout implementation – in fact, much of the work is already underway.

Several of the recommendations may need additional detailed implementation work. This report is intended to offer additional depth on general recommendations for agency decision making but is not intended to cover every aspect of implementation.

The workgroups' members are generally available to continue this work depending on the decisions of the leadership of the relevant entities. In addition, preliminary drafts related to potential implementation steps were developed and can be made available through the core group should an entity determine it will move forward with implementing a particular project.

Also, while several of the recommendations may require a small outlay of funding, the groups believe that offsets to other more significant costs may be realized within a 2–3-year period, due to funding being shifted away from traditional foster care and residential treatment, and instead being used to procure comprehensive and innovative services to support kinship families. For this reason, projects such as flexible funding may be optimally suited for one-time ARPA funding to test these options for success and return on investment. Finally, the group recommends a strong data tracking approach to any implementation in order to measure whether improvement efforts are showing success.

Enhancing kin-first culture in Texas allows families to flourish and thrive, and is a critical component of Texas Department of Family and Protective Services Commissioner Masters' New Vision for DFPS.

A Timeline of Steering Committee & Workgroup Progress in 2022

DFPS and Casey Family Programs identify a team of independent consultants and technical assistance providers to form Core Team which is charged with creating the Steering Committee by recruiting members, setting meetings, developing agendas, and following up after Steering Committee meetings.

January

February

First Steering Committee meeting held.

March

Workgroups formed; Steering Committee meets to approve Workgroup Structure.

April

Workgroups formed; Steering Committee meets to approve Workgroup Structure.

May

Workgroups continue to meet; in person meeting held in Austin, TX on May 20 for all Supporting Kinship Placements workgroup and sub-group members to advance recommendations.

June

Day Care group forms and meets to discuss changes. Core Team compiles recommendations and project plans developed by workgroups and subgroups. Steering Committee meets to review and contribute to the identified priorities. Workgroups discontinue regular meeting schedule (available to meet ad hoc).

July

Core Team outlines final deliverables plan, including final Steering Committee report and activity tracking tool being used by Deckinga Group.

August

Steering Committee report drafted by Core Team and shared with workgroup and sub-group members for feedback. Steering Committee receives draft report for review (end of August).

September

Steering Committee meets to give final approval to report.

October

Final Report Released; Core team continues to meet monthly to track activities.

Report Background

In December 2021, Casey Family Programs, the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services (TACFS), state agency representatives, and Community Based Care providers came together to look at how to strengthen kinship in the state of Texas, particularly in the realm of licensed kinship care and Guardianship Assistance/Permanency Care Assistance (PCA). As a result of that collaboration, TACFS began to work toward the development of a kinship care steering committee to drive changes forward. At the same time, an Expert Panel that had been formed to make system change recommendations in response to the federal lawsuit, *M.D. v. Abbott*, released its final report, which included specific recommendations and suggestions to improve kinship care.¹

As a result of the two efforts to assess and recommend changes to kinship care, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and the Health and Human Services Service Commission (HHSC) partnered with Casey Family Programs and TACFS to form a time-limited Steering Committee with diverse representation from within DFPS as well as the private provider community to align the kinship care recommendations already moving forward with the expert panel recommendations, and suggest changes to policy and practice in order to reduce the numbers of “children without placement” who end up in non-family or family-like settings, even though a family/home setting is in their best interest.

THE STEERING COMMITTEE’S THREE GOALS

1.

To strengthen kinship care and out of home care in Texas by recommending changes to policy and practice;

2.

To create a streamlined cross-agency approach to implement changes to policy and practice; and

3.

To address recommendations made by the Expert Panel.

¹ *Recommendations for Improving Texas’ Safe Placement and Services for Children, Youth and Families A Report of the Expert Panel Appointed under the Collaboration Agreement of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Texas Health and Human Services Commission and the M.D. v. Abbott Plaintiffs.*



STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The following agency representatives and members comprise the Steering Committee.

Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS)

Commissioner

Deputy Commissioner

Associate Commissioner, Child Protective Services

Chief of Staff

Deputy Director of Finance

Director of Strategic Initiatives

Director of Permanency

Director of Field, Child Protective Services

Director of Field, Child Protective Investigations

Kinship Caregiver

Consultant with Lived Experience

Youth Formerly in Kinship Care

Consultant with Lived Experience

Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC)

Deputy Associate Commissioner

Associate Commissioner, Child Care Regulation

Children's Commission

Executive Director

Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services

CEO

ACH Child and Family Services

CEO

Office of Community-Based Care Transition

Statewide Director

Casey Family Programs

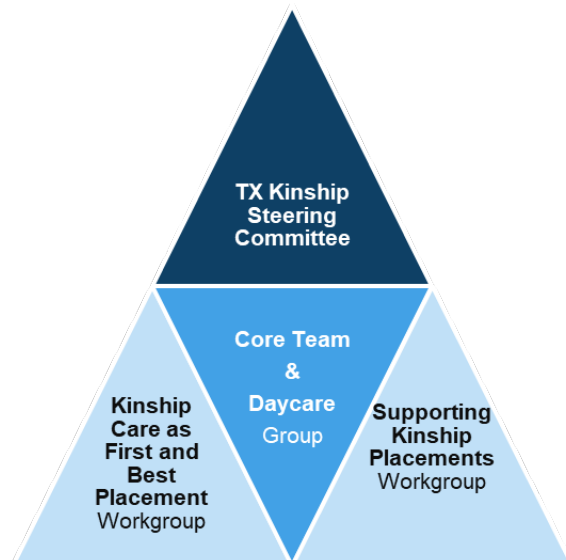
Strategic Consulting & Technical Assistance for the Steering Committee

TEAMING STRUCTURE

The **Steering Committee** is a group of advising leaders working across domains to identify, prioritize, and recommend changes to current policies and practices which will improve outcomes for children and youth through improvements to kinship care and placement settings for children and youth who are unable to reside with kin.

The **Core Team** members are the drivers of the work through project planning, facilitation, and support. The members connect resources, ensure the right voices are at the table, and provide subject matter expertise.

The **Workgroups** are teams with specific goals and objectives. The workgroups are made up of diverse team members who bring an array of knowledge and expertise. The workgroups are responsible for developing recommendations for change to be considered by the Steering Committee.



WORKGROUPS DESIGN AND PURPOSE

One of the first actions of the Steering Committee was to develop a Kinship Experiences Map (Appendix A) which documents the child protection process from intake through permanence, highlighting differences between verified and unverified kinship caregivers.

The process of mapping the current system led to the creation of two main workgroups. The **Kin as First and Best Out-of-Home Placement** workgroup was charged with identifying recommendations to improve the “front end” of the system to create a culture and processes to support placing with kinship caregivers as early and often as safely possible. The **Supporting Kinship Placements** workgroup focused on supports needed by caregivers once a child enters kinship care. The Core Team also determined that **Daycare** was so critical to both workgroups, efforts to improve daycare would be best addressed by identifying a team of key individuals in roles related to daycare to explore the policy, fiscal, and practice changes needed to improve kinship caregiver access to daycare. The Daycare Team meets separately from the kinship workgroups although there is significant crossover.

Kin as First and Best Out-of-Home Placement Workgroup: Summary

The Kin as First and Best Placement workgroup was asked to explore policy and practices which would increase the agency's capacity to recruit and support kinship placements for infants, children, and youth who cannot remain safely with their birth parents until the parents can make changes to create a safe home.

To better understand the administrative actions required to place with kin, the workgroup reviewed barriers to placement, current policies and practices, and data. The group's initial task was to create an experiences map highlighting the various activities required to place with kin at the time of removal. This map was used to further identify opportunities for changes in practice (See Appendix A).

After prioritizing the barriers to initial kinship placements, two subgroups were created to explore solutions which would address policy barriers and other system challenges which impact staff practice for choosing kin as the first placement or delay placement with kin.

SUBGROUP 1: ENHANCED TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Subgroup one was tasked with exploring more robust training and education for DFPS staff to further develop their kinship caregiver engagement skills as progress toward enhancing Texas' kin-first practice culture. The subgroup suggested that finding family and kinship placement supports should be highlighted as priority topics for education and skill building. Other topics identified by the subgroup include:

- Understanding family dynamics and the changes that can occur when a family member agrees to become a kinship caregiver.
- Using search tools and other techniques to successfully locate and screen family members who may be potential kinship caregivers.
- Skillfully explaining child welfare system requirements and expectations and accurately responding to kinship caregivers' questions about services and supports available to them.
- Exploring and overcoming biases staff may have to placing children with kin (examples: assuming kinship caregivers will not have the skills to provide quality care "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree;" or believing kinship caregivers should provide care without financial and other system supports).
- Understanding how to interpret criminal and DFPS background checks, specifically understanding what may be waivable.
- Helping kinship caregivers (and youth) navigate information and resource gaps.

- Managers will also need specialized training in supervising new practices and evaluating kinship caregivers home assessments.
- Engaging kinship caregivers who do not immediately respond or agree to placement

SUBGROUP 2: POLICY AND PRACTICE CHANGES

Research shows outcomes for children are better when they are placed with kinship caregivers. That said, it takes more time for removal staff to locate kinship caregivers and family friends and move them through safety approval processes than it does to place a child in an already verified foster home, and the nature of the work is to place children as quickly as possible. Staff report that they frequently operate in crisis mode.

This subgroup explored policy and practice changes needed to reduce the time it takes to find and approve kinship caregivers as foster placements, such as:

- Streamlining kinship caregiver approval processes, and
- Increasing supports for child removal workers.

Another critical barrier to overcome includes the gaps that can exist for removal workers related to child behavioral and/or medical needs. Without this information, appropriate supports or preparation for the caregiver can be limited.

MEMBERS OF SUPPORTING KIN AS FIRST AND BEST PLACEMENT WORKGROUP

The following agency representatives and members comprise the Kin as First and Best Placement Workgroup.

Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) Deputy Director of Investigations and Alternative Response Investigations Program Specialist Kinship Program Specialist Director of Field Division Administrator for Permanency, Child Protective Services Regional Director, Child Protective Services Best Practice-Mental Health Program Specialist, Child Protective Investigations Division Administrator for Family Based Safety Services (FBSS) Relative with Lived Experience Consultant with Lived Experience Young Adult with Lived Experience Consultant with Lived Experience	Texas CASA Collaborative Family Engagement Director Supreme Court of Texas Children’s Commission Legal Representation Director Belong Senior Regional Director Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services Vice President of Public Affairs Family Support Network Coordinator Our Community Our Kids Senior Director of Care Management and Placement Services
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Supporting Kinship Placements Workgroup: Summary

The Steering Committee formed a second workgroup to address kinship caregivers’ capacity to care for youth after placement through permanence. This Supporting Kinship Placements workgroup focused on identifying solutions to barriers that lead to less access to resources and other supports for kinship caregivers. Members of the workgroup first identified those barriers, and then focused on exploring solutions that if implemented, could increase placements and permanence with kin. The workgroup took the following approach:

- Consider the landscape of existing supports based on input from the workgroup members;
- Review different kinship best practice models;
- Develop a list of solutions to known barriers and issues and come to consensus/vote on priorities; and
- Work in smaller groups to implement solutions or develop actionable plans for implementing solutions.

The Supporting Kinship Placements workgroup settled on three priorities for action:

1. Improving kinship navigation
2. Increasing availability of concrete supports
3. Improving the verification process for kinship caregivers

Each of these topic areas was assigned to a subgroup which included workgroup members and other stakeholders with expertise in the topic area. Each subgroup explored a priority area and developed project plans to outline considerations for the design and implementation of such a project. Each of the prioritized topics are summarized below.

In other words, the group of experts charged with looking at how best to support kinship caregiver placements considered a variety of solutions and services and recommend the following three approaches to improving outcomes for youth in kinship care:

1. **Kinship Navigation:** A consistent and urgent barrier cited by workgroup members (and across workgroups) was the need for centralized information for youth, kinship caregivers, DFPS staff, DFPS partners, and the public to learn about kinship care. Youth, kinship caregivers, and the staff supporting them need a way to “navigate” the complexities of kinship care, including but not limited to:
 - Kinship caregiver roles and expectations
 - The overall kinship caregiver experience of the child protection process from intake through permanence, including the roles of different staff positions and provider agencies²
 - Youth and kinship caregiver eligibility criteria for federal and state benefits, and clear instructions to apply for those benefits
 - Local (and/or regional) services and supports
 - Information about caring for youth who have experienced maltreatment and other trauma
 - Opportunities for peer support

² The state needs to clarify the roles and responsibilities of Kinship Development Workers (KDW), Child Placing Agency (CPA) case managers, and conservatorship caseworkers. Once role clarification is achieved, the funding model should be reviewed to ensure alignment between funds and effort.

2. **Concrete Supports:** This straightforward proposition is based on the understanding that tangible and concrete supports are what many kinship caregiver families need most. Exploration of this priority issue included moving beyond a declaration that supports are needed to making specific recommendations toward development of a kinship care benefits package. The benefits package could include information about supports available to kinship caregivers, eligibility criteria, and programmatic recommendations.
3. **Verification:** This priority is built upon the recommendations to increase the verification of kinship caregiver homes generated during the December 2021 Capacity Symposium. Verification is the process of approving a family's home to meet foster home safety standards, educating/training requirements, and other child protection system requirements. Verification opens the door to financial benefits as well as the support of a case manager who can guide kinship caregivers through the process of meeting court and child welfare system expectations including managing formal visits with birth parents, participating in family team meetings, meeting child specific needs (medical, educational, behavioral, etc.). Kinship caregiver placements that are verified also receive case management through the Child Placing Agency (CPA). Regular visits with a case manager add measures of safety and support. The case manager can connect kinship caregivers with resources like peer support, funds for positive youth experiences (like birthday parties and school trips), and respite care which along with the case manager's expertise serve to increase well-being and safety. Moreover, increasing verification earlier in the case could speed time to permanency and limit the number of families who exit to Permanent Managing Conservatorship (PMC) without the support of PCA and associated benefits. Re-entry into care for children who exit to PMC with the support of PCA are essentially non-existent³. Given the stability of this arrangement, it is imperative that the state increase its reliance on PCA for the betterment of children and families who are involved in the system.

The subgroups created a list of prioritized projects and developed high-level project plans for each of those ideas.

³ According to data provided by DFPS to the Kinship Symposium held in December 2022 the rate of re-entry is 0.0 for fiscal year 2021, and the rates are similar or the same in other years.

MEMBERS OF SUPPORTING KINSHIP PLACEMENTS WORKGROUP

The following agency representatives and members comprise the Supporting Kinship Placements Workgroup.

Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) Director of Permanency, Child Protective Services Research Specialist, Analytics and Evaluation Division of Data and Systems Improvement Director of Field, Child Protective Services Regional Director, Child Protective Services Kinship Specialist, Child Protective Services Medical Services-Trauma Informed Care Program Specialist Office of Finance, Interim CFO Federal Funds Program Specialist Medical Services Well-Being Program Specialist Mental Health Specialist, Child Protective Investigations Relative with Lived Experience Consultant with Lived Experience Young Adult with Lived Experience Consultant with Lived Experience Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services VP of Legal & Regulatory Affairs	Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) Minimum Standards Program Specialist CCR Rule Writer ACH Child and Family Services Kinship Connections Program Manager Texas Supreme Court's Children's Commission Staff Attorney Texas CASA Director of Public Policy Monarch Family Services CEO Deckinga Group CEO Our Community Our Kids CEO Casey Family Programs Strategic Consulting & Technical Assistance for the Steering Committee
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Daycare Team

Improving daycare is a recommendation that cuts across both Steering Committee workgroups and is a need for all formal caregivers, both kin and non-kin foster parents. The Steering Committee's Core Team recognized improvements to daycare access as an important recommendation best explored by a special team with daycare policy expertise. Being able to quickly approve kinship caregivers for daycare may allow an early placement that will be more stable and supportive of reunification. Improving daycare access recognizes the needs of foster families for summer and after school supports, which could allow those foster parents to care for additional children and aid in overall foster parent retention. Knowing DFPS was already

engaged in making improvements to daycare, members of the Core Team convened a meeting of DFPS experts in daycare policy, Steering Committee workgroup members, and representatives of the provider community to discuss policy and practice changes that would improve kinship caregiver as well as foster parent access to daycare.

MEMBERS OF IMPROVING ACCESS TO DAYCARE FOR CHILDREN IN KINSHIP CARE

The following agency representatives and members comprise the Improving Access to Daycare Workgroup.

Department of Family and Protective
Services (DFPS)

Child Protective Services (CPS)
Office of Finance

Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services
VP of Legal & Regulatory Affairs
VP of Public Affairs

2INgage
Senior Vice President

Deckinga Group
CEO

Our Community Our Kids
Kinship Connections Program Manager Senior
Director of Care Management & Placement
Services

Casey Family Programs
Strategic Consulting & Technical Assistance for
the Steering Committee

Priority Recommendations

The Core Team, Steering Committee, and Steering Committee Workgroups met regularly between February – September 2022 to explore barriers and solutions related to kinship caregiver engagement and placement stability. Workgroups defined and refined the issues that need to be addressed to improve outcomes for youth in kinship care. In September 2022, Workgroups presented the following prioritized recommendations to the Texas Kinship Steering Committee members. These recommendations were developed primarily for DFPS, and its kinship care partner agencies represented on the committee. Moving forward, DFPS and other agencies are encouraged to advance these recommendations as a means for improving kinship care as one way to address the needs of children who do not have placements.

OVERVIEW: KIN AS FIRST AND BEST OUT OF HOME PLACEMENT WORKGROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

The Kin as First and Best Out-of-Home Placement Workgroup developed and prioritized recommendations intended to increase the number of youth initially placed with kinship caregivers upon removal and shift the front-end work culture and resources needed to prioritize kinship placements, even in an emergency. The workgroup recommendations align with recommendations included in the Expert Panel report.

KIN AS FIRST AND BEST WORKGROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Separate Preliminary Kinship Home Assessment Forms.** Create a user-friendly preliminary home assessment form that can be utilized by workers during all stages of service within Child Protective Investigations (CPI) and CPS. The preliminary home assessment form will be available for DFPS and SSCC staff to use when a kinship placement is needed and there is not enough time to complete and receive approval of a full home assessment. There is a need for two separate forms: 1) for emergency home assessment requests and 2) for non-emergency home assessment requests. The requirements included on a shortened form should be concrete and focused on child safety, providing greater assistance to the removing worker who has competing priorities during a tight timeframe. DFPS legal was consulted about this recommendation and no statute changes are required to implement this change.
- 2. Kinship Connection Meeting (KCM).** Family Team Meetings (FTMs) can be difficult to convene prior to an emergency removal. To address that challenge, the workgroup recommends the creation of Kinship Connections Meetings (KCMs). A KCM would be required for all removals with the goal of it occurring prior to the removal but no later than the Adversary Hearing. The meeting would allow DFPS and potential kinship caregivers to discuss the concrete and financial supports available or needed for the placement. The meeting would include investigations staff, the Conservatorship Specialist (CVS), and kin-specific staff such as the KDM. The focus of this meeting would not to be to discuss the facts of the case, but to support ongoing

CORRESPONDING EXPERT PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Assess current practice and policy related to relative care.

Build practices to support a relative-first approach

Seek changes in policy that allow for greater support of kinship families with both concrete and mental health services.

connections for the child and support services needed for both the child and potential kinship caregiver (i.e., mental health, medical, counseling, etc.). Clear guidelines are needed on how the Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) coordinator would be notified, timeline for the meeting to occur, and responsibility of coordinating the meeting. Those invited to the meeting would be those required to be notified to the fourth-degree consanguinity. It is recommended that the system develop and implement a plan to collect data including youth and caregivers' experiences of KCMs, to determine if this practice should be expanded to assist children and youth who are not currently placed with kinship caregivers.

3. **Family Finding.** The DFPS process to identify potential kinship caregivers and help them through the required approvals for placement and services is lengthy and requires time. This creates a barrier to placement with kinship caregivers, especially during an emergency. To mitigate this, family finders should be paired with each investigations Program Director position. The family finders would work with investigators on removals and would visit potential kin placements to gather information, complete background checks, conduct preliminary home assessments, and help kinship caregivers meet the approval requirements for placement. Considerations would need to be made for how this process would work in the Community Based Care catchment areas. This recommendation is based on work in Pennsylvania as well as a current pilot project in Tarrant County, Texas. Note: the Tarrant County work is being managed by Our Community Our Kids (OCOK, a division of ACH Child and Family Services. After four months of participation, OCOK reports that the two Tarrant County units participating in the pilot have seen a 17% increase in children being placed in kinship care within 60 days of being removed.
4. **Education and Training.** Increasing initial placements with kinship caregivers and advancing an overall kin-first culture will require education and training. Changes are needed to existing training curricula to infuse information and knowledge about the benefits of kinship care, increase knowledge of current and changing kinship policies, and to build skills related to engagement and support of kinship caregivers and the family dynamics they navigate. Training for all staff should emphasize the benefits for children and youth when they are placed with kinship caregivers and the importance of making an initial placement with kin. Other goals of education and training improvements include enhancing staff understanding of kin-specific placement and verification, as well as the benefits that verification provides during placement and potentially post-permanence via adoption or guardianship assistance. In addition to the topics already described, the workgroup developed a more specific list of topics to be included in education and training:
 - Understanding CPS and criminal background checks and their impact on child safety.
 - Conducting and reviewing home assessments.

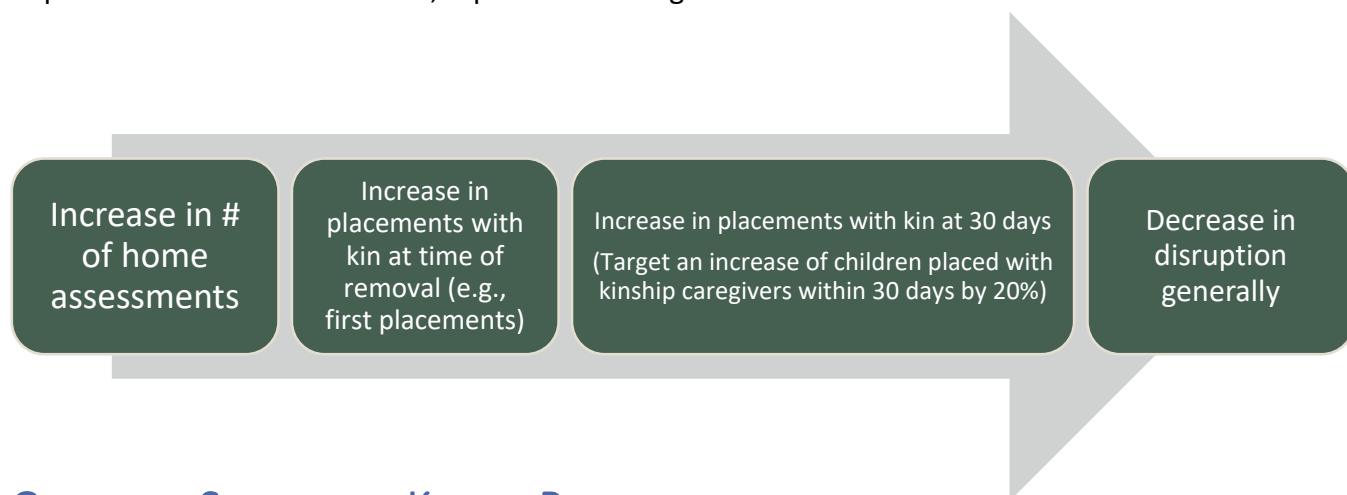
- The role of DFPS in identifying and engaging kinship caregivers.
- Understanding the dynamics of kinship relationships and protective factors.
- Understanding the impact of bias and actions taken when kinship caregivers do not immediately respond or agree to placement and the long-term impact to child outcomes.
- Education/training for DFPS and advocates on outcomes for kinship placements, expectations, and how-to best support kinship caregivers.

The workgroup also discussed the following methods to deliver kin-first culture, policy, and best-practice information, including but not limited to:

- Program Meetings: Trainings will be conducted during segments of regional program meetings.
- Leadership Conferences: Trainings will be conducted during sessions of leadership conferences and break out sections.
- Lunch and Learns: Trainings will occur over Teams where staff are invited to bring their lunch as program specialists discuss training materials.
- Weekly Wednesday: Tips addressing myths and facts about the kinship process will be submitted to the weekly CPI publication distributed to staff.
- CPI Highlights: A submission to the CPI publication with articles related to policy, best practice, and interviews with kinship caregivers and/or workers.
- Community Stakeholder Meetings: Program Specialists may conduct meetings with stakeholders within the community either in person or via Teams.
- Computer Based Training (CBT): The Center for Learning and Organizational Excellence (CLOE) may develop web-based trainings for staff and supervisors.
- CPI Professional Development (CPD): CLOE may modify the current classroom curriculum for new investigators regarding kinship learning material.

KIN AS FIRST AND BEST ANTICIPATED OUTCOME IMPROVEMENTS

The Workgroup anticipates the following safety and stability outcomes because of its implemented recommendations, represented along the child welfare continuum.



OVERVIEW: SUPPORTING KINSHIP PLACEMENTS WORKGROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

The Supporting Kinship Placements Workgroup identified and prioritized policy and practice changes which could improve kinship placement stability and permanency outcomes. To explore the issues the workgroup identified, three subgroups were formed to focus on specific areas: 1) kinship navigation, 2) concrete supports, and 3) verification, which are each described in detail below.

KINSHIP NAVIGATOR SUBGROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Still very much in the early implementation stages, Kinship Navigator Programs (KNP) have not fully arrived across Texas, per Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) standards. Currently, there are informal kinship navigation efforts across the state. More formally, through partnership with DFPS's Prevention and Community Well-being Division, there are four agencies providing KNP services; however, these services are limited by geography and resources. DFPS has utilized federal grant funding to assess the impact of the pilot KNPs on kinship care outcomes. The workgroup recommends further exploration of KNP pilot findings.

CORRESPONDING EXPERT PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Assess current practice and policy related to kin care.

Build practices to support a kin-first approach

[Consider request for] funds to increase rates for kinship care so they are equivalent to rates for non-kin foster care.

Seek changes in policy that allow for greater support of kinship families with both concrete and mental health services.

In addition to building on the work of KNP pilot programs, the workgroup respectfully recommends consideration of the following system improvements. These recommendations, which came from the voices of current KNP providers, DFPS staff, and community partners, focus on: tangible/accessible resource locators for kinship caregivers, better communication regarding when KNP could be or should be accessed by a kinship caregiver, as well as the ongoing need to further expand and fund Kinship Navigation Programs, per the FFPSA standards, in Texas. Specific priorities include:

1. **Create a website with links to kinship resources in each county in Texas.** Additional work is recommended to determine budget, design, development, and testing, and launch of such a website.
2. **Seek additional funding for Kinship Navigator Service pilot programs.** Request funding to maintain and learn from the four existing pilot programs, and to develop additional programs.
3. **Develop Kinship Navigation Service continuum.** Developing educational materials to increase understanding of the child welfare process from initial involvement of DFPS through permanence and post-permanence.

CONCRETE SUPPORTS SUBGROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Flexible Funding and Supports Package.** This package would help to increase kinship placements by making a small amount of funding available to support the initial placement with kinship caregivers. Flexible funding will be available between the time a kinship caregiver is identified (can be prior to placement) and up to 60 days after placement. Funds should be used for immediate placement needs, needs identified during an assessment to facilitate placement, or “bridge” funding until other funding streams, public benefits, or kinship funds are available. This support would be for all families with open CPS cases (both verified and unverified) who accept placement and address immediate service gaps.
2. **Kinship Specialized Needs Fund.** This recommendation is for a specialized fund for goods and services, such as rent, utilities, personal care, or other tangible services, that are purchased directly by kinship support staff (either DFPS or SSCC) to help support the short and longer term needs of a potentially identified kinship caregiver; either unverified or verified to allow for or stabilize child placement. This fund would be a type of concrete service that could be utilized in an agile way for critical placement-related needs like housing, car repairs to support employment, essential home repairs or specialized medical equipment not covered by another source. Unverified homes would be prioritized, though the fund could be utilized for verified homes. The primary anticipated outcome would be an increase in proportion of kinship placements and a decrease in placement disruptions. There is a potential cost offset to paid daycare if stable unverified placements can be increased.

3. **Decreasing Time for Home Screening.** Delays in completing home studies create barriers to making timely kinship placements and can result in the loss of kinship opportunities. This recommendation focuses on creating a timelier process for completing kinship home studies. Timeliness can be achieved by having a ready pool of home study specialists and by identifying families who are best candidates for more timely studies.
4. **Creating Designated Home Study Funding.** The workgroup also recommends creating designated funding for every Region to be used to complete a most of the low-risk home studies in a timelier fashion. Home studies would be conducted by contracted home study specialists who can respond quickly to referrals, and whose performance is tracked in accordance with the timeliness and quality of the home studies produced. Families eligible for this process would have no criminal history or history of referrals to CPS. Conducting home studies faster can reduce the average time of securing an approved home study to 14 days, which would support more timely kinship placements.

INCREASING VERIFICATION SUBGROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Foster home verification (licensure) can bring important support and safety enhancement to families. The requirements to become licensed are extensive and may be infeasible for some families depending on specific family dynamics and needs. Therefore, supports and resources should be made available for those families for whom verification is not likely. To move improvements forward, the group focused on recommending specific steps to be taken within the existing Texas system. Specific recommendations include:

1. **Kinship Benefits Package.** The workgroup recommends developing an easily understood “Kinship Benefits Package” to present financial and concrete supports available to kinship caregivers support a child(ren) in DFPS conservatorship. The benefits package should make kinship caregivers aware of all services and supports available to them and the youth in their care, comparing benefits available depending on whether the caregiver completes verification or not. A well designed and disseminated benefits package should empower kinship caregivers to make educated placement and permanency decisions, empowering them to make decisions about what options are best for them. The benefits package content co-designed with youth and kinship caregivers to ensure the information is presented in a way that is “grandparent friendly” with accessible content.
2. **Best Practices Collaborative.** The goal of the Best Practices Collaborative is to educate the provider community about kinship care policies and best-practices. Agencies, CPAs, need consistent instruction on the kinship caregiver licensing/verification process. There is also a need to create or strengthen a kin-first culture within agencies. The Best Practices Collaborative has begun to meet and work on the following deliverables: 1) A Best Practices Manual with practical tools and information for CPAs that are working to

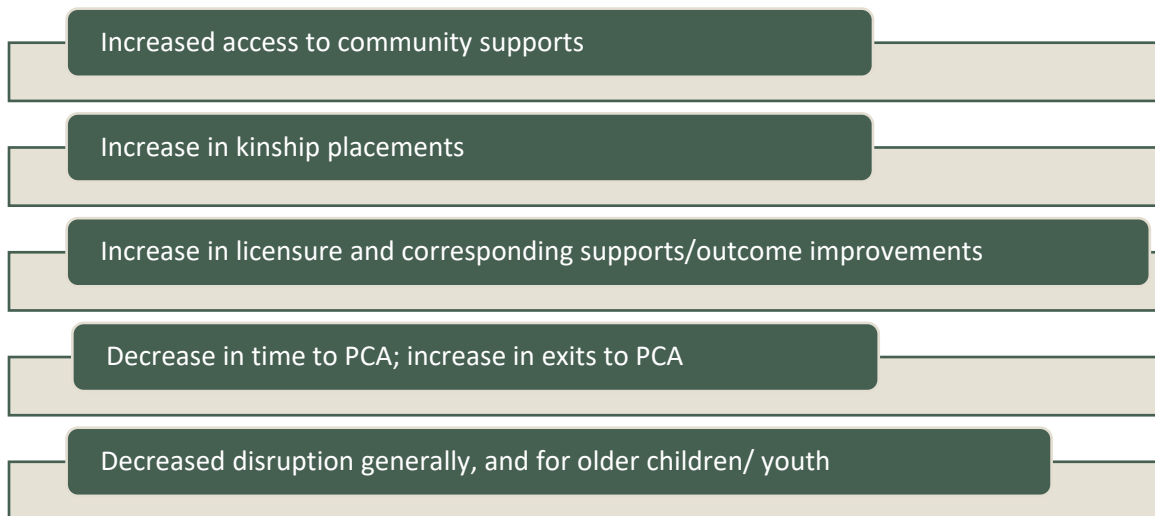
increase their focus on kin and 2) a Best Practices Symposium in early winter 2023 to work toward demystifying some of the more challenging aspects of working with kinship caregivers. Going forward, the Best Practices Collaborative will work to:

- Review and make recommendations around staffing models for state/SSCC kinship verification support (i.e., what should be the role of FAD/DFPS/SSCC v. the CPA in helping families through the process).
- Get input from those with lived experience about what worked/did not in verification process itself.
- Review best practices from other states related to verification (that are supported by outcome data).
- Explore existing kin-specific training that are offered now, and how could they be made more available.
- Regional consortia. How could families' info be given to CPAs to conduct outreach to families about the verification process? Could regions replicate consortia that are already in place? What efficiencies can there be to support families?

3. Provisional licensure. Provisional licensure allows a near-immediate infusion of key support to stabilize a placement and get a caregiver connected to an agency that can help them reach verification. Many states have such a process in place. This recommendation is focused on development of information desired by HHSC to carry out legislative direction in SB 1896 and to provide any additional information needed/desired by DFPS to inform DFPS' funding projections. While implementation of the legislation is HHSC's charge, the workgroup felt it could provide support or information as needed to aid in implementation. Given that provisional licensure will involve two different agencies, the workgroup recommends that it continue to support HHSC as needed beyond the conclusion of the Steering Committee's work. Any deliverables or follow up will be provided to HHSC and DFPS after the publication of this report.

SUPPORTING KINSHIP PLACEMENTS ANTICIPATED OUTCOME IMPROVEMENTS

The Workgroup anticipates the following safety and permanency outcomes because of its implemented recommendations, including enhancements to the prevention continuum.



OVERVIEW: DAYCARE TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

As described earlier in this report, the Core Team convened a team of daycare policy experts to explore changes that could improve kinship caregivers' access to daycare benefits. DFPS has made some key improvements as noted in the discussion under "Accomplishments and Next Steps." However, kinship staff and providers who work directly with kinship families and foster parents think it will be important to continue exploring additional improvements, including the feasibility and expected outcomes of:

- Further limiting or eliminating the need for kinship caregivers to seek and wait for a waiver if they do not work 40 (or 32 hours). Daycare provides essential safety protection, improves child development and socialization, and provides consistent quality coverage. Access to daycare could make a difference between whether or not a member of the child's family is able to become a kinship placement.
- Considering additional flexibility for aftercare and summer supports, as well as increased sports for children in the 7-12 year old age group.
- Reviewing whether DFPS populations could be made a mandatory service group with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC).
- Exploring pre-approval processes for foster parents and potentially also kinship caregivers.

- Making policy changes to allow SSCCs to manage daycare budgets similarly to other concrete services.

Accomplishments and Next Steps

KINSHIP WORKGROUPS AND SUBGROUPS ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND ACTIVITIES UNDERWAY

Completed activities include:

- ✓ Comparison chart for high level information on practices in other states
- ✓ Exploration of kinship training used by other states
- ✓ Kinship policy review
- ✓ Investigative actions required to place with kinship caregivers mapping
- ✓ Compilation of information on provisional licensure in other states

Ongoing activities include:

- Follow up conversations to gain practice information from other states including Florida, New Jersey, and Ohio
- Document “What is Kinship Navigation” so that participants can have mutual understanding of terms
- Drafting of Kinship Best Practices Manual and planning for Best Practices Symposium (in progress)
- Develop white paper or other information needed in support of provisional licensure (in progress)

DAYCARE IMPROVEMENTS

DFPS made the following changes to improve daycare:

- ✓ Simplification of waiver approvers/work on consistency in regional approvals/MIAB
- ✓ Waiver of TAC rule about the hours of employment required
- ✓ Next steps include development of options for legislative consideration/action and corresponding fiscal estimates

EXPANSION OF TREATMENT FOSTER CARE

Expansion of Treatment Foster Care is a high priority for DFPS and the provider community to increase placement capacity in a family setting.

It is hoped that providers will respond to the open enrollment and recruit and train Treatment Foster Care Providers and Kinship Treatment Foster Care Providers as professional foster parents. Kinship Treatment Foster Care Providers would have the support and training needed to keep children safe in the kinship caregiver's home.

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Conclusion

The Texas Kinship Care Steering Committee workgroups and subgroups respectfully present the recommendations included in this report to the members of the Committee for consideration and potential implementation of policy and practice changes that will improve identification of and support for kinship caregivers. We also feel that it is imperative to develop a strong tracking and data monitoring approach for outcomes related to any implementation. As the various entities and agencies consider their next steps, they should also consider the best way to embed mechanisms to track current trends and whether any improvement efforts are demonstrating success.

Appendix A

Texas Kinship Caregiver Experience Map: **Intake to Permanence** 3-15-2022

