

# NEEDS OF KINSHIP FAMILIES IN NEW YORK STATE

## PRACTICE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### What is Kinship Care?

Kinship care is the full-time care of children by grandparents, relatives or other close family friends without a parent present in the home.

In the majority of kinship care arrangements children and caregivers are not part of the foster care system. Informal<sup>i</sup> kinship families include private custody arrangements, direct placements, and guardianship arrangements.

Kinship caregivers in informal arrangements do not receive the same level of services given to foster caregivers.

### Characteristics of Kinship Families

As part of an evaluation project,<sup>ii</sup> a survey of kinship caregivers (N=303) in five upstate NY counties was conducted from 2012 to 2014. The surveyed families had the following characteristics:

- Caregivers were predominately female (93%) and typically grandparents (66%), though great grandparents, aunts/uncles, and family friends were also represented.
- The average household size was four. Most families had 1 child in their care. 33% of families had 2 or more children.
- **67%** of families had a household income under \$50,000 (see figure 1), and the majority of children have been involved in the child welfare system.
- **23%** of caregivers were black. Black caregivers were more likely to be in need of resources than white caregivers.

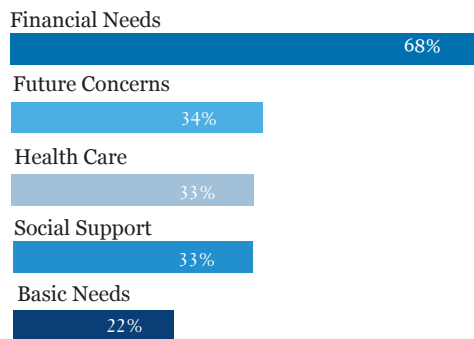
Figure 1. Family Income



### Needs of Kinship Families

Kinship caregivers reported on their most pressing needs using the Family Needs Scale<sup>iii</sup> (figure 2).

Figure 2. Caregiver Needs



- **68%** of caregivers expressed financial needs, including struggling to pay bills or saving for the future.
- **34%** of caregivers indicated that they had future concerns for the children in their care, including education planning.
- **33%** indicated the need for social support and/or the desire to have someone to talk to about the child.
- **33%** expressed health care needs, including medical, dental, and emergency care for children and family members.
- **22%** of caregivers expressed basic needs including, food, furniture, clothes, toys, and housing.

# Recommendations to Address Unmet Needs of Kinship Families

## 1. Increase Collaboration between Child Welfare and TANF Agencies to Assist Informal Kinship Families.

Many informal kinship families live in or near poverty and have dire financial needs. Yet unlike families in the formal foster care system, these families are not provided with the same resources. Vulnerable kinship families would benefit from policies that ensure access to already available support such as TANF Non-Parent Caregiver (NPC; also known as child-only) grants. Child welfare workers and TANF workers should collaborate on kinship cases to ensure that families gain access to needed financial, supportive, and child care services.

## 2. Enhance Outreach to Identify and Serve Informal Kinship Families.

Informal kinship families outside of the foster care system are often invisible to community-based agencies and therefore are not easily identified. Agencies need to improve outreach efforts to find and serve needy families. Assisting these families with applications for public benefits (*i.e.* Food Stamps, NPC), and making referrals to services to address social support and health care needs will improve child outcomes and stabilization. Agencies should collaborate with OCFS-funded kinship programs and the Kinship Navigator program to reach and serve more families.

## 3. Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Meet Needs of Informal Kinship Families.

Informal kinship families provide the majority of out-of-home care for children who could no longer safely stay with biological parents. Services and financial assistance available to these families are not only limited but also are not widely accessible. The state and the federal government should explore the development of a comprehensive plan to address the lack of services and financial assistance to informal kinship families.

The Center for Human Services Research (CHSR) is located within the School of Social Welfare at the University at Albany. CHSR has over 20 years of experience conducting evaluation research, designing information systems, and informing policy and program development for a broad spectrum of agencies that serve vulnerable populations. For more information, visit [www.albany.edu/chsr](http://www.albany.edu/chsr)

## Notes

- i Studies and reports use different definitions of the term "informal." We view any families providing out of home care but not receiving foster care or KinGap payments as informal given the similar circumstances of placement and their eligibility for NPC.
- ii This study is part of a demonstration grant awarded by the Children's Bureau to the NYS Kinship Navigator program (Grant Number: HHS-2012-ACF-ACYF-CF-0510, 90CF0050) to promote the well-being of children in informal kinship care, particularly those who have been involved with the child welfare system. Participants for the study were recruited from kinship caregivers who came into contact with county child welfare services, public assistance, community-based agencies, and the New York State Kinship Navigator. There were 303 kinship caregivers in the study from five counties in upstate New York. Data was collected through telephone interviews or mail surveys. Since the sample was recruited through social service and community agencies in select counties, the findings are not *representative* of all NYS kinship families.  
  
For further information, see Lee, E, Choi, M. & Clarkson-Hendrix, M (forthcoming). Examining needs of informal kinship families: Validating the Family Needs Scale. *Children and Youth Services Review*. Catherine Kramer and Ryan Johnson contributed to writing of this brief.
- iii FNS does not ask about other critical need areas. Literature identifies needs for children's mental health services and legal assistance as major concerns.

The NYS Kinship Navigator is a state wide information, referral, and advocacy program funded by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. It provides information and referral services including about NPC applications and legal referral through its help line (877) 454-6463 and website at [www.nysnavigator.org](http://www.nysnavigator.org).