Kinship Care in the U.S: Policy Developments and Best Practices

Presentation for the Virginia Commission on Youth

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Overview of Presentation

- Kinship care in context
- Recent policy developments at the federal level
- Best practices in the states for finding, engaging, approving and supporting kinship families
- Kinship care in Virginia
The Kinship Care Continuum

**Family Arranged Care**

- No Child Welfare Involvement
  - Families need supportive services and may need access to benefits.

**Child Welfare Arranged: Non Custodial**

- Child placed with kin as a result of CPS investigation
  - Minimal court oversight
  - May or may not be open for services

**Child Welfare Arranged: Custodial**

- Child placed with kin and is in custody
  - Case is open for services and permanency planning with court oversight
  - Licensed or unlicensed care

**Permanency and Post Permanency**

- Child achieves permanency
  - Reunification
  - Adoption
  - Guardianship
  - Legal Custody
  - Family may need access to on-going services
Why Kinship Care for Abused and Neglected Children?

- Increases stability for children during time in foster care
- Reduces trauma
- Increases likelihood of being placed with siblings
- Helps children maintain familial and cultural ties important to their well-being
Recent Research

Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (June 2008)

- National sample -- 1,309 children removed from their homes 3 years post placement
- 2/3 in long last settings as compared to 1/3 of children in traditional foster care
- 32% were at risk of behavioral problems as compared to 46% risk in traditional foster care

*Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*
Recent Research

Colorado State University (2006)

- Children in kinship placements experienced fewer placements
- Children in traditional foster care were 2X more likely to re-enter care and 6X more likely to be involved with Youth Corrections
- Children in foster care were 2X more likely to be reunified with their parents

Child Welfare Outcomes in Colorado: A Matched Comparison between Children in Kinship Care and Foster Care
Data Snapshot

Pew Center for Research report released September 2010 based on 2008 Census data

- 2.9 million children living with grandparents who are the primary caregivers in 2008
- 6% increase between 2007-2008
- 16% increase since 2000
Data Snapshot

- In 2009, 24% of children in foster care were placed with relatives
- 30% of the families who adopted from foster care with relatives (increase of 9% since 2000)
- 7% of children exited foster care to guardianship; 8% “living with other relative”

(AFCARS, preliminary estimates for 2009)
Kinship Care Challenges: Philosophical

- When government intervenes on behalf of a child, what are the legal and moral responsibilities to support that child?

- How do we undo corrosive myths about vulnerable families (i.e. the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree)
Kinship Care Challenges: Systemic

- How do we take a system designed for traditional foster care and make it work for kin families?

- How do we find the right balance between kinship care as a diversion from foster care and kinship care for children in state custody?
Children and Families Speak Out for Kinship Care

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008
- Relative Notice
- Kinship Guardianship Assistance Fund
- Sibling Connections
- Licensing Waivers
Best Practices in Kinship Care

Finding kin
Engaging kin families
Approving kin as foster parents
Supporting all kin families
Finding Kin

Compliance with Notice Provision of Fostering Connections

- Majority of states have written notice
- Best practices:
  - strategies for documentation of notice (i.e. SACWIS)
  - asking relatives to identify others in family network
  - State technical assistance for implementation of notice
Finding Kin

Other diligent search methods

Using a broad definition of kin
Talking to youth and parents
Genograms
Family team meetings and court hearings
Applying technological resources
On-going diligent search
Fire walls at initial placement
Engaging and Educating Kin

- Full disclosure of all options
  - What is in the best interests of the child: diversion from foster care or state custody?
  - Family team meetings, orientation sessions, resource parent support, court hearings
- Presentation of roles beyond placement
- Support for kin to become full members of the family team
- Respect for the role that kin can play to reduce trauma and enhance stability
Approval of Kin

- Developing a team approach to initial, expedited placements
- Creating special kinship care units or specialized contracts with providers
- Developing specialized training for kin caregivers
  - Help kin deal with immediate needs of child
  - Incorporate content on challenges of changing roles and family dynamics
Approval of Kin

- Removing Barriers to Licensing
  - Identify licensing barriers for kin
  - Are barriers safety or non safety issues?
  - Appreciate the differences between kin and non-kin placements
  - Change agency policy/administrative rule to create a clearly articulated policy
  - Create a higher level of review
Support for Kin Families

- Ensuring equity for kin families through licensing as foster parents
- Identifying community resources for kin (support groups, legal counsel, aging departments, etc.)
- Federal guardianship assistance program to achieve permanency for children and youth in foster care who cannot return home or be adopted
Progress for Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP)

9 states have approved state plan amendments and are implementing GAP:

RI, PA, TN, MI, OR, NJ, MT, IL, and DC

10 states are awaiting federal approval for their plans:

CO, CT, ME, MA, MD, MO, NE, SD, TX, WA
Virginia “Diversion” Study

Collaboration between Virginia Department of Social Services and the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Learn current practices and philosophies in Virginia for using kin as prevention from custody

Inform development of kinship practice model
We think, based on experience in many states, that diversion is a common practice sometimes being implemented without sufficient attention to safety, permanency or well-being.

**Assumptions About Current Common “Diversion” Practice**
(preventing foster care by placing children informally with kin)

- Minimal safety assessment
- Short-term reunification plans/services to birth parents
- Limited legal authority, services or resources for kin
- Often no disclosure to kin of available options
- Limited follow up to determine if child is safe
- Unclear plans for permanency
- No data tracking (re-entry)

**IMPLICATIONS**

- Lack of Permanency
- Safety/Stability Concerns
- Parents/Kin without Services/Supports
Given the reality that questionable practice often exists and will likely continue, we may be in a position to develop a practice model that improves supports for children & families.

### Improved Safety & Permanency Outcomes

#### Potential New Practice Model

**Children**
- Permanency Planning
- Home Safety Assessment
- Data Tracking

**Birth Parents**
- Rights Honored
- Connection to Child
- Reunification Resources/Supports

**Kin**
- Legal Guardianship
- Available Options
- Services and Supports
Virginia will lead the country in helping develop a prevention strategy focused on building system practice, and hopefully evidence-based practice, for kinship diversion to be applied in other states and localities.

**Kinship Diversion Framework**

**Can we do diversion well and ensure safety and stability for children?**

**DEVELOPMENT**
- Conduct research study with ChildTrends
- Visit best practice sites around the U.S.
- Interview/convene national experts
- Develop, pilot & evaluate new practice model

**DESIGN**
- What are the current practices being used to divert children from the system?
- Are there models that can used to assure:
  - Child protection,
  - Reunification efforts, and
  - Prevention of placement?
- Can a practice model for kinship diversion be developed?

**IMPACT**
- Can it be made into an evidence based strategy?
- Can it be brought to scale?
- Is the strategy sustainable?
- Can it be integrated in to broader practice model of the system?
Study Participants

- County administrators and program managers
- Intake and investigative unit supervisors
- Intake, investigative, ongoing workers, TANF child-only workers
- Kinship caregivers
- Judges, community stakeholders
Issues to Guide the Research Questions

- Family awareness of options
  - Kin awareness of options available with being in or out of the system
  - Child welfare staff understanding of available resources for kin

- Birth parent rights
  - Birth parents role in decision to divert
  - Reunification services and support (with and without the assistance of the agency)
Issues to Guide the Research Questions

- Assessing safety and stability
  - Ensuring child will be safe and stable in kin caregiver’s home
  - Ongoing supervision of case

- Services and supports for youth, birth parents, and kin including financial supports
  - Ongoing services to maintain the placement and ensure family well-being
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