

IMPROVING KINSHIP PLACEMENT IN PENNSYLVANIA

Children who experience abuse, neglect and trauma cannot always safely remain in the home of their parents or caregivers, necessitating the need for out-of-home placement. Placement in the foster care system is a traumatizing event, impacting all facets of a child's life, such as connection to their extended family, school, friends, communities, and cultures. If a child must be removed from their home, the best option is placement with kin. Kinship care is the full-time care, nurturing, and protection of a child by a relative, either by blood or marriage, and can include informal connections that are not legally related but have a positive, supportive relationship with the child or family. Children in kinship foster care experience better outcomes than placement in non-relative care, including:







- Placement stability and long-term permanency
- School stability and positive educational outcomes
- Preservation of race and culture, including community connections
- Positive outcomes in physical, medical, and behavioral health
- Increased opportunity for connections and visitation with biological parents and siblings



Pennsylvania has made great strides in increasing kinship placement for children in foster care, demonstrating a more than 5% increase since 2017. In 2021, 20,490 children and youth were placed in foster care, and 42% were placed with kin. Children who enter foster care for the first time are more likely to be placed with kin. However, if a child experienced a re-entry into care, only 36.4% were placed with family. Older youth in foster care also were placed with kin less frequently—of the total foster care population served in 2021, only 30% were placed with kin.

While research shows children have better outcomes when placed with kin, these family members or other close connections can be arbitrarily disqualified from becoming licensed foster parents as a placement resource. Far too often, disqualification is due to bias in decision-making, misinterpretation of regulation or policy, or refusal to issue a waiver for non-safety factors. Some examples of this would be not having items like dressers and beds or having to meet regulatory needs like well water testing, which can be costly to caregivers and an unexpected need. Not all counties will cover these costs or have adequate funding to eliminate these barriers. Other regulatory challenges can include disqualifying a kin caregiver for having too many children in their home or having prior involvement with the agency. These can be waived as long as it does not present a current risk to the foster child, but practices vary across counties.

Policy solutions can be made that prioritize and simplify kinship placements, allowing children and youth to be raised by and connected to their family. Policymakers should consider the following:

- 1. *Pass HB 1058 (“Giving Kin a Voice in Court Proceedings”)***—  Representative Krajewski’s bill would allow kin to be heard by the dependency judge overseeing a foster child’s case. When a kin caregiver is denied placement or connection to a child, they are not allowed to present their case and facts to the judge tasked with making placement decisions. Allowing kin a voice in court will let the judge hear directly from them about their qualifications and determine if reconsidering placement, ongoing visitation, or contact is appropriate.
- 2. *Update the state waiver bulletin***—  Certain non-safety-related regulations can be waived to allow a kin caregiver to become a licensed foster parent. There is little guidance for county child welfare agencies regarding waiver authority, causing subjective decision-making. Outlining specific regulations that can and should be waived will help limit the bias in decision-making.
- 3. *Provide dedicated state funding to child welfare agencies to support licensing kin***—  At times, kin need support to obtain items necessary to pass licensure and prepare to care for a child. Providing essential items can be expensive and an unexpected immediate need. While licensed kin receive a monthly stipend to care for a child, upfront costs can present a barrier. Providing state funding can assist counties in alleviating the burden of absorbing those costs.
- 4. *Engage older youth and kin caregivers***—  Listening to the lived experiences of older youth and kinship caregivers will help identify barriers to kinship care and develop targeted policy solutions. County agencies and the state must prioritize mechanisms to hear directly from impacted communities and have processes to include them in all aspects of policymaking.