

Site Visit Report:

The Children's Home Society of New Jersey Kinship Connections Program

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/funding/funding-sources/federal-funding/cb-funding/cbreports/fgdm/>

Award #: 90CF0030

Cluster: Family Connection Grants: Using Family Group Decision-Making to Build Protective Factors for Children and Families

Grantee: The Children's Home Society of New Jersey (<http://www.chsofnj.org/>)

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SUMMARY

In fiscal year 2011, the Children's Bureau awarded a Family Connection Grant to the Children's Home Society of New Jersey (CHSofNJ) for a 3-year project to use family group decision-making (FGDM) to build and/or enhance protective factors for kinship families that are not actively involved in the child welfare system, but are caring for relative children and youth at risk of entering or reentering the State's care. Project staff recognized that kinship families, many of which live on low and/or fixed incomes, often experience challenges, including the inability to meet the basic needs of the children in their care, assist school-age children with homework, and manage difficult adolescent behavior. However, unlike foster families served by the child welfare system, kinship caregivers have access to and receive fewer support services. So, project staff posited, if kinship caregivers are provided with the necessary services and supports they need, then children can be safely maintained in their homes and families will experience less stress, thereby reducing the likelihood of placement disruption and child welfare involvement.

The CHSofNJ's Kinship Connections Program (KCP) of Mercer County addresses the daily needs of grandparents and other family members voluntarily raising their kin children by providing support services, family activities, and referrals to resources and services in the community. Relative caregivers are also given the opportunity to participate in Family Success Conferences (FGDM meetings) with KCP staff to informally discuss the issues and needs of the family. CHSofNJ also maintains other interrelated grandparent/kinship caregivers programs, including the following:

- GrandFamily Success Center – a community-based center for kinship caregivers that provides information, support in group settings and one-on-one, referrals, and services aimed at supporting the physical and behavioral health of caregivers and children
- Kinship Navigator program – helps kinship caregivers explore government assistance programs, benefits, and eligibility; Kinship Navigator benefits and eligibility; and guides families through the Kinship Legal Guardianship process

The KCP, the highlight of the project and subsequent site visit and resulting report, includes three service phases, and families are free to choose whether they participate in each graduated phase or participate in only Phase 1 or 2. They include:

- **Phase 1 – Recruitment/Engagement:** Caregivers and children are invited to visit the GrandFamily Success Center; participate in support groups, educational activities, programs, and events; receive information and referral to a variety of services, including those related to parent education, housing, employment, mental health and counseling, Early Head Start, respite care, youth mentoring, tutoring, life skills training, Kinship Legal Guardianship assistance, and more; and discuss the KCP project with staff and whether or not the caregiver wishes to proceed to Phase 2.
- **Phase 2 – Trust Building/Service Provision:** A KCP Family Service Worker is assigned to each kinship family to serve as case manager and FGDM meeting facilitator. At the beginning and end of this phase, families are asked to complete several assessments to determine their needs, the

results of which, in conjunction with other information and interviews, informs the Family Service Plan. The plan, developed by the KCP Family Service Worker and caregiver, includes a list of goals that KCP staff will help the family achieve.

- **Phase 3 – Family Success Conferencing (FGDM meeting):** If, after discussion about FGDM, the caregiver wishes to proceed with a Family Success Conference, the KCP Family Service Worker will work with the caregiver to identify and invite family, friends, and other supports and identify the issues that should be addressed in the meeting. At a location selected by the family, the meeting begins with introductions and a facilitator-led general discussion about the meeting and its purpose and agenda. This is followed by information sharing between staff and family of the issues and concerns, after which the KCP staffer leaves the meeting. During the family private time, a plan is developed, which includes goals and action items. The KCP Family Service Worker returns to the meeting to discuss and finalize the plan, and once the meeting is over, he or she monitors the plan's progress and assists the family in reaching goals.

To determine project outcomes, data from assessments administered at the beginning of Phase 2 and at case closure were used to measure the results of project activities and services to participating families. Comparison data from the State child welfare agency was also analyzed to determine if project participants had child welfare involvement in the months following case closure. At the completion of the program, client satisfaction surveys and follow-up phone interviews were also conducted with program participants.

Pre- and posttest data and surveys completed by KCP facilitators and program participants show¹:

- Families who participated in Phase 2 experienced improvements, showed an increase in family functioning, and a decrease in parent stressors, but improvements in all measured areas increased more for families who also participated in Phase 3.
- Families who completed Phase 3 were able to address 70 percent of Family Service Plan goals; this percentage decreased for families not participating in Phase 3.
- Family Success Conferences were well received, closely followed the FGDM model, and successfully focused the kinship family on the needs of caregivers and children.
- Program participants were able to list the best things about Family Success Conferences as well as areas that could be improved upon.
- Overall, caregivers were very satisfied with the KCP program, felt that the project and Family Success Conferences were effective at addressing and resolving family issues, and believe that other families would benefit from KCP services.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Abstract

Through the Kinship Connections Program (KCP), the Children's Home Society of New Jersey (CHSofNJ) uses voluntary Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) to build protective factors for kinship families. KCP

¹ This is based on the results/data available in July 2014 when the site visit was conducted.

of Mercer County is funded by a Children's Bureau Family Connection grant. It serves kinship families that do not have an open case with the State child welfare system but are caring for children at risk of entering or reentering the child welfare system. The purpose of KCP is to address the needs of grandparents and other family members who are raising children by offering support services, family activities, and referrals to community resources and services. Additionally, relative caregivers have the opportunity to participate in Family Success Conferences (FGDM meetings). Family Success Conferences are voluntary, informal family gatherings held with the assistance of KCP staff to address the issues and needs of the family.

In addition to KCP, CHSofNJ maintains other grandparent/kinship caregiver programs. These kinship programs help grandparents and other relatives raising their kin children find resources for medical coverage, housing, child care, educational issues, legal issues, and family support. The CHSofNJ maintains the GrandFamily Success Center, which is a community-based center for grandparents and other family members who are raising their relative children. The services of the GrandFamily Success Center focus on supporting the physical and behavioral health of caregivers and children, providing information and support in group settings, referrals to community resources, and individual support. The goal of the program is to assist caregivers in providing safe and stable homes for the children in their care. In addition, the CHSofNJ houses the Kinship Navigator program. The Kinship Navigator program assists caregivers in exploring eligibility for government assistance, determines if the caregiver's family is eligible for Kinship Navigator program benefits such as help with short-term expenses for the relative child (e.g., furniture, moving expenses, and clothing), and provides technical support and guides the family through the process of Kinship Legal Guardianship if the caregiver wishes to make a legal commitment to the child.²

Need for Service

Project staff reported that kinship families often have low incomes and limited resources and generally receive fewer support services from child welfare agencies than foster families. Project staff reported that many of the kinship caregivers served by CHSofNJ often have difficulty in meeting the basic needs of the children living in their homes, and many have issues with assisting school-age children with homework and managing the behavior of teenagers. The premise of the project is that if kinship caregivers are provided the support and resources necessary to maintain the children safely in their homes, the caregivers and children will experience less stress, thus minimizing the possibility of placement disruption and child welfare involvement.

VIRTUAL SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The virtual site visit occurred July 28 and 29, 2014. During the course of the virtual site visit, group interviews were conducted with CHSofNJ project management team, evaluator, and project staff, including the following individuals:

- Dolores Bryant – Project Director
- Tonya Powell – Kinship Connections Supervisor
- Leonard Feldman – Project Evaluator
- Debbie Piccione – Family Service Worker
- Isaira Rosario – Family Service Worker
- Robert Obrzt – Senior Family Service Worker

² State of New Jersey, Department of Children and Families (2014). Kinship navigator program. Retrieved from <http://www.nj.gov/dcf/families/support/kinship/>

The following topics were discussed during the group interviews:

- The reasons for the development of the project
- The successes of the project
- The challenges of the project
- The early results of the project
- The evaluation process
- The sustainability of the project

Additional information to inform this site visit report was obtained from the project's semiannual report and semiannual evaluation report for the reporting period ending March 31, 2014, and the Family Connection Grantee Profile completed by Evaluation Technical Assistance Liaison, Connie Vu.

Project Highlights

CHSofNJ established a "one-stop shop" continuum of care for voluntary kinship caregivers. Through KCP, the caregivers can receive assistance in providing for the daily needs of children in their care, education and support to address the issues affecting the caregivers, and tools to resolve issues within the family. The Family Success Conference aspect of KCP introduced an effective means of problem solving to kinship caregivers and their families.

CHSofNJ conducts extensive outreach in order to recruit families for KCP. The project has distributed fliers and brochures, advertised in newspapers, and made presentations to community organizations, including churches, child care facilities, treatment centers, and senior citizen centers. Internally, KCP has become involved with families through the Kinship Navigator Program and the GrandFamily Success Center, as well as other CHSofNJ programs. In addition, kinship caregivers who have participated in the KCP project have spoken about their experience to groups of kinship caregivers.

The KCP includes three graduated, integrated service phases. Families may move sequentially through all of the phases or choose only to participate in Phase 1 or Phase 2. The following is a description of the services offered during each phase:

Phase 1 - Recruitment/Engagement – KCP project staff invite kinship caregivers and children to visit the GrandFamily Success Center; participate in support groups, educational activities, programs, and events; receive general information and referral services, and participate in the Kinship Navigator program. Some of the services provided during this phase include:

- Kinship wraparound services
- Parent education
- Housing-related services, including assistance with utilities
- Mental health services/counseling
- Referrals to Early Head Start
- Youth mentoring
- Literacy programs
- Respite care
- Tutoring
- Life skills training
- Employment assistance
- Kinship Legal Guardianship assistance

During Phase 1, KCP staff discuss the project with the kinship caregivers, who decide whether or not to proceed to Phase 2.

Phase 2 - Trust Building/Service Provision – If the caregiver chooses to continue, a KCP Family Service Worker is assigned to work with the family in order to build trust with the family. The Family Service Worker is the primary case manager assigned to the case; however, these staff members are also trained to facilitate FGDM meetings. At the beginning of Phase 2, as well as at case closing, families are asked to complete several assessments in order to determine their needs. The assessments include:

- Social Support Questionnaire – provides a measure of caregiver social support
- Parenting Stress Index – assesses the level of stress in parent-child systems
- Family Needs Scale (adapted for the KCP project) – identifies the expressed needs of the family
- Child Well-Being Scale – measures various domains of child well-being, including health care, physical and environmental well-being, child behavior, education, community engagement, and child and family relationships

The results of these assessments, as well as information gathered from staff interaction/interviews with the family, guide the Family Service Worker and the caregiver in developing the Family Service Plan that lists mutually agreed upon goals that staff will help the family achieve during their involvement with KCP. During Phase 2, KCP staff will continue to provide direct services to the family, and the family may continue to participate in support groups and activities provided by the GrandFamily Center.

Phase 3 - Family Success Conferencing – After building rapport with the kinship caregiver and the family, the Family Service Worker discusses Family Success Conferences with the family. If the caregiver agrees to a Family Success Conference, the family service worker will work with the family to identify the family, friends, and other supportive people to invite, as well as to help identify the issues and problems that would be addressed during the Family Success Conference.

The Family Success Conferences are conducted in a location selected by the family. The facilitator of the conference begins the meeting with a brief introduction, a discussion of general "housekeeping" issues, and the establishment of meeting ground rules. The facilitator and Family Service Worker then discuss the agenda and the purpose of the meeting and begin the information sharing portion of the meeting. During this time, the family and the professionals discuss the issues and concerns that brought the family together for this meeting. Once information sharing is complete, the KCP staff leave the room and family private time commences. During family private time, the family establishes a plan that includes goals, tasks to be completed, and who is responsible to complete and/or assist with each task. The facilitator and Family Service Worker return to the room and discuss the plan with the family, and, if necessary, address any gaps or issues that the family may not have considered while developing the plan. A copy of the plan is provided to each participant. The Family Service Worker monitors the progress of the plan and assists as needed in accomplishing the goals. Some of the issues addressed during Family Success Conferences include:

- Helping the child understand and adhere to household rules
- Integrating the biological parents into child care responsibilities
- Helping extended family resolve their differences in order to provide support to the caregiver
- Identifying and obtaining resources to establish custody and address the child's behavioral needs
- Establishing a plan for the child in the event the caregiver can no longer provide for the child

Families may have more than one Family Success Conference during their involvement with KCP. Project staff reported that kinship caregivers and extended family members sometimes request another Family Success Conference when issues have not been resolved or when new problems arise.

Kinship caregivers who have completed all three phases of KCP are invited to join the KCP advisory board, which allows the caregivers to interact and engage with other kinship caregivers and community service providers, as well as provide input into the KCP project.

According to project staff, the most popular aspects of KCP are the monthly support groups and the special events sponsored by KCP and the GrandFamily Success Center. KCP offers transportation to some of the group support sessions. The topics for the support and education groups vary but include a number of topics relevant to the kinship caregivers, including the following:

- Achieving Balance and Making Time for Yourself
- Active Living and Healthy Eating
- ADHD Nutrition
- Breast Health
- Cervical Cancer
- Child Growth and Development
- Conflict Resolution Strategies: Family Success Conferences
- Custody/Legal Advice Presentation
- Dads are Important, Too
- Dealing With Behavior Problems
- Family Game Night
- Food Stamps Presentation
- Foot Care
- Good Dental Health
- Grand Family Center Holiday Party
- Healthy Eating on a Budget
- Hypertension
- Exploring Our Support Systems
- Care for Caregivers Workshop
- Kinship Support Services
- Knowing Your Education Options
- Making the Transition from Grandparent to Primary Caregiver
- Medication Safety
- Planning a Safe Summer for Your Children
- Preparing for Back to School
- Stress Reduction
- Stroke Awareness
- Teens and Sexual Health
- Teens and Substance Abuse Education & Resources
- Yoga

A number of the support group topics are geared toward women caregivers and elderly caregivers based on the demographic of the project participants. The majority of the primary caregivers in KCP were women. The typical caregiver in Phases 1 and 2 was in her mid-to-late 50s with ages ranging up to 88, and the median age range for Phase 3 was 58 years of age.

In addition to the education/support groups for caregivers, KCP also provides activity groups for children that occur simultaneously with the morning and evening caregiver groups.

Challenges

KCP staff report that engaging families in the process and building trust with the families were challenging for staff. Caregivers were often hesitant to share information with KCP staff out of fear that the information would somehow be used against them. Project staff stated that building rapport and establishing trust

took mindful and purposeful family engagement and often took time to develop. The Family Service Workers developed trusting relationships with the families through multiple contacts, group activities, and service provision over a period of time.

The issue of trust also contributed to whether caregivers chose to participate in the Family Success Conferences. Many caregivers, according to KCP staff, were hesitant to include their extended families and their friends in Family Success Conferences out of fear of embarrassment and fear that the family and friends would not be willing to participate in the process.

OUTCOMES

Evaluation

The research design for the project is pre- and posttest. The following assessments, administered at the beginning of Phase 2 and at case closure, were used by the evaluator to measure the results of project activities and services on participants³:

- Social Support Questionnaire
- Parenting Stress Index
- Family Needs Scale (adapted for the KCP project)
- Child Well-Being Scale

In addition, comparison data from the State child welfare agency were reviewed to determine if project participants had child welfare involvement within months of project participation. Finally, a client satisfaction survey was completed by participants, and a follow-up telephone interview was conducted when families completed the program.

According to Leonard Feldman, the project evaluator, based on pre- and posttest data available at the time of the site visit, families who participated in Phase 2 experienced improvements and showed an increase in family functioning and a decrease in the parent stressors revealed in the parenting stress index; however, improvements in all areas increased more for families who also participated in Phase 3. In addition, families who participated and completed Phase 3 of the project satisfactorily met 70 percent of the goals on their Family Service Plan, and this dropped significantly, according to Mr. Feldman, for families who did not participate in Phase 3.

In reference to the Family Success Conferences, surveys completed by the facilitators and participants indicated that the conferences were well received, had high fidelity to the FGDM model, and appeared to be successful in focusing the family on ways to help the caregiver and the children. Participants asked to list the best things about the Family Success conferences replied with the following⁴:

- Being able to openly discuss family issues/problems and solutions in a safe environment
- Coming up with a family plan with positive ideas and methods
- Putting everything on the table in an effort to clear the air and improve the relationships between the individuals involved

Participants were also provided the opportunity to list what could be improved with the Family Success Conference. The following are some of the comments made by participants⁵:

- All family members involved need to attend the meeting

³ These tools are described in the previous section.

^{4 5} This is a summary of the lists provided in the semiannual evaluation report for the reporting period ending March 31, 2014.

- Meeting was too long
- Need to be more upfront about the topics that will be covered in the meeting
- A mediator needs to be available throughout the entire meeting
- Materials need to be provided in advance to ensure the family is prepared for the meeting
- There was too much arguing
- Use video conferencing for those unable to attend in person
- Children need to participate more
- Need to show a video about family values

Results of the client satisfaction surveys and the post-project telephone interviews available at the time of the site visit indicate that caregivers are very satisfied with the program and believe that the KCP project and the Family Success Conferences are beneficial in resolving issues within their families. Caregivers are generally very enthusiastic about the program and desire for other families to have the experience and services provided by KCP.

Most caregivers participated in the education/support groups and were asked to complete a session evaluation form after each group. Based on the information provided, the feedback was very positive. For example:

- More than 97 percent of the participants felt welcome in the groups and reported that they found the sessions interesting.
- Ninety-five percent of the participants indicated that they found the sessions useful.
- Ninety-three percent felt comfortable sharing within the group.
- Ninety-six percent rated their interaction with CHSofNJ staff as good or excellent.

The final report for this grant project is available from the library of Child Welfare Information Gateway at https://library.childwelfare.gov/cbgrants/ws/library/docs/cb_grants/Blob/97084.pdf?w=NATIVE%28%27grant_state+%3D+%27%27NJ%27%27%27%29&upp=0&rpp=25&m=30.



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