

Site Visit Report: New York State Kinship Navigator County Collaboration Project

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

Award #: 90CF0044

Cluster: Family Connection Grants: Child Welfare/TANF Collaboration in Kinship Navigation Programs

Grantee: Catholic Family Center (<http://www.nysnavigator.org/pg/about/county.php>)

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Project Description

In 2012, the Children's Bureau awarded seven 3-year grants for the Family Connections Grants: Child Welfare/TANF Collaboration in Kinship Navigation Programs cluster. Kinship navigator programs support the connection between family members and children or youth who are in, or at risk of entering, foster care by helping kin caregivers identify and access appropriate and meaningful services. One of these grants was awarded to the Catholic Family Center to establish the New York State (NYS) Kinship Navigator County Collaboration Project (hereafter referred to as the County Collaboration Project). The project is working to facilitate linkages to services, strengthen protective factors within families, and assist kin caregivers in achieving and sustaining permanency for the children in their care. It includes a sustainable, unified system of kinship services for families with children eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and/or at risk of entering foster care.

To implement this project, the Catholic Family Center partnered with five public agencies (Orange, Dutchess, Ulster, Broome, and Tioga counties) that administer child welfare and TANF and subcontracted with organizations that had extensive expertise in kinship care. The Catholic Family Center also operates the statewide NYS Kinship Navigator, which began in 2006 and has staff that participate on the grant project. Other County Collaboration Project partners include the Cornell Cooperative Extension; the Family Enrichment Network; the National Kinship Alliance for Children (NKC), which was formerly known as the National Committee of Grandparents for Children's Rights; Legal Services of the Hudson Valley; and the Legal Aid Society of Mid-New York. The evaluator is the Center for Human Services Research (CHSR) within the School of Social Welfare at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

The County Collaboration Project has six goals:

1. Develop sustainable collaborations with child welfare and TANF agencies
2. Enhance outreach to kin caregivers and community resources
3. Improve the identification and engagement of kinship families
4. Improve kinship families' service utilization
5. Initiate policy and system changes at the State and local levels
6. Conduct a rigorous evaluation

Need for the Service

The Catholic Family Center sought funding for the County Collaboration Project to increase collaboration between the local child welfare and TANF agencies to increase support for kinship families and improve outcomes for their children. Data from the existing NYS Kinship Navigator program indicated the most frequent requests from informal kin caregivers were for financial and legal assistance. These kin caregivers were usually not licensed foster parents and did not receive foster care payments for taking care of the children. Caregivers may be on a fixed income due to reliance on retirement income or Social Security benefits, or they may be underemployed. They also may not be aware of how to access TANF child-only grants, which the project refers to as non-parent grants. Since child welfare workers are not integrated with TANF workers in the localities targeted by the grant, child welfare staff do not refer kin caregivers to public assistance. Additionally, many informal kin caregivers have very little understanding of their legal rights regarding the care and custody of their children. This issue is further complicated by the fact that kin caregivers have fewer legal rights than parents, thereby limiting their ability to act in the best interests of their children.

Aside from the need for financial and legal assistance, these informal kin caregivers often receive little or no assistance from the child welfare agency regarding health care, respite care, child care, or educational support. Although New York's Medicaid program provides for treatment and preventive medical services,

as well as mental health for persons under the age of 21 or those 65 and older, access to these services is often difficult. Kin caregivers also need to know how to advocate for their right to better services in order to raise their kin children.

Project Services

The County Collaboration Project provides information and referral services along with some advocacy assistance. It includes a helpline staffed by a kinship specialist who provides information on legal rights, financial assistance, respite, educational issues, and other common kinship issues. The NYS Kinship Navigator program's website (www.nysnavigator.org) contains more than 70 legal factsheets that can empower kin caregivers to advocate for themselves. It also provides an interactive State map that includes county resources, an events calendar, information on kinship in the news, policy briefs, and advice columns.

Project partners provide educational trainings to enhance kin caregivers' ability to care for their kin children. The NYS Kinship Navigator program maintains an office in the State capital to educate policymakers about the needs of kinship families and subcontracts with legal service organizations to provide consultations and limited representation for individual callers, including kin caregivers involved with the project. The project also developed the Kinship Corps, a group of kin caregivers in each county who assist with outreach; encourage the exchange of information about benefits, supports, and other resources; and act as mentors and advocates.

Collaboration between the child welfare and TANF agencies is central to the County Collaboration Project. The kin caregivers complete the permission to contact (PTC) form to allow the kinship navigators to contact them and teach them about how to obtain TANF child-only grants.

Target Population

The County Collaboration Project targets five counties in upstate New York: Orange, Dutchess, Ulster, Broome, and Tioga. Within those counties, the project targeted children who are TANF eligible and involved with the county child welfare agency. This may include children whose relatives are contacted by child protective services and then assume care of the children without initiation of dependency proceedings, voluntary placements, or kinship guardianships.

Project Staff

The project staff from NYS Kinship Navigator, which is run by the primary grantee, include Gerard Wallace, project director; Rae Glaser, program administrator; Pam Rockcastle, project intake specialist; and Emi Disciullo, project coordinator. The following are project staff from the project partners:

- Family Enrichment Network (Broome and Tioga Counties)
 - Deborah Faulks, director, family support services
 - Diane Latorrey, case manager
- Cornell Cooperative Extension (Orange County)
 - Denyse Variano, family and consumer sciences issue leader
 - Brenda Reynolds, Relatives as Parents program coordinator/community educator
- Cornell Cooperative Extension (Dutchess County)
 - Christine Sargent, project director
 - Nina Doyle, case manager
- Cornell Cooperative Extension (Ulster County)
 - Melinda Herzog, project director
 - Jennifer Patterson, case manager
- National Kinship Alliance for Children
 - Cate Newbanks, director

Dissemination

The project uses a variety of methods to disseminate information about its work. Examples include presenting at the Child Welfare League of America's National Kinship Care Conference and National Conference; writing an article about diversion for the *Journal of Family Social Work*; producing a film about Ulster County's work; and developing an array of tools regarding engagement, assessment, evaluation, training, and policies.

Sustainability Plan

As a statewide model program, the project's work was sustained in the Governor's budget proposal. The project director assisted in obtaining an additional \$1 million in the budget to bring the total budget to \$1,338,750 for local kinship services. NYS will now have programs in 13 counties, two of which (Orange and Dutchess) are part of the current project.

Any new kinship programs starting after September 2015 through the NYS Office of Children and Family Services must collaborate with NYS Kinship Navigator, use the PTC form, and implement recommendations that were prepared by the project evaluator. Additionally, the NYS Office of Court Administration agreed to work on the recommendations that came out of the NYS KinCare Summit 2014. Also, the NYS court administration office will include legal assistance for kin caregivers as an allowable activity in the funding announcements it releases for its Access to Justice Initiative grants.

The NYS Office for the Aging has been supportive of the project and has encouraged local aging offices to provide services to caregivers over the age of 55. The office has limited funding, but it is looking for funds to help continue supporting what the project is doing. The project will request that the Office for Aging use the PTC form.

Site Visit Details

The virtual site visit occurred on April 17 and April 22, 2015. On April 17, a 2-hour conference call was held with staff from NYS Kinship Navigator (Gerard Wallace, project director, and Rae Glaser, program administrator) and CHSR (Ryan Johnson and Michael Clarkson-Hendrix).

On April 22, a second conference call, which lasted 1.5 hours, was held with the following individuals:

- Gerard Wallace, project director, NYS Kinship Navigator
- Rae Glaser, program administrator, NYS Kinship Navigator
- Denise Variano, family and consumer sciences issue leader, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Orange County
- Brenda Reynolds, Relatives as Parents program coordinator/community educator, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Orange County
- Deborah Faulks, director, family support services, Family Enrichment Network (Broome and Tioga Counties)
- Lisa Czekala, kin caregiver

The kin caregiver shared how the project has helped her and her family. She described how she was grateful to have the program to help her through some difficult times, and she stated, "Without the kinship program, I would not have made it." When asked if she attended any of the training or activities, the kin caregiver stated "With three small children, it is hard to attend any trainings or activities." She also noted that "caregivers need respite to get a break."

Lessons Learned

Unique and Innovative Features

A unique feature of the County Collaboration Project is the project director's strong interest in educating policymakers about the needs of kin caregivers and how to improve services. As a result, the project hosted a summit in October 2013 with the assistance from AARP New York, the NYS KinCare Coalition, and the NYS Council on Children and Families. The purpose of the summit, NYS KinCare Summit 2014, was to craft a plan to improve State and local coordination so the needs of children and their caregivers could be more effectively addressed. The summit was attended by approximately 150 individuals, including policymakers, agency leaders, legal staff, service providers, caregivers, and youth. Project staff developed a summary report, including recommendations, to give to policymakers. The following are a few of the summit recommendations that were later adopted by the State:

- Recognition of September as Kinship Care Month (see Attachment 1 to view the 2014 proclamation)
- Inclusion of information on mybenefits.ny.gov about how kin caregivers could be eligible for TANF child-only benefits
- Meetings with the NYS chief administrative judge to discuss legal assistance recommendations for kin caregivers
- NYS DSS counting the number of kin caregivers that are certified foster care providers (rather than just counting kin caregivers that are *approved* foster care providers)

To view the full summit report and recommendations, see Attachment 2.

Another unique feature is the project's partnership with five county DSSs regarding TANF child-only grants. The County Collaboration Project partners with the State Office of Family and Children Services, which administers the child welfare and TANF programs, to provide CW and TANF staff with cross-training opportunities on TANF child-only grant eligibility. Project staff train kinship navigators about how to complete the TANF applications so they can assist caregivers with that process. The project also offers kin caregivers a consultation with a lawyer who specializes in public assistance to assist them if they have difficulties getting approved for TANF funds. Table 1 presents the dollar amount the monthly TANF child-only grants by the number of children per household in the five participating counties.

Table 1
Dollar Amount of Monthly Child-Only Grants by County and Number of Children

County	1 Child	2 Children	3 Children	4 Children	5 Children
Broome	\$393	\$530	\$660	\$795	\$943
Orange	\$467	\$576	\$791	\$950	\$1,117
Dutchess	\$461	\$571	\$782	\$942	\$1,106
Tioga	\$376	\$512	\$655	\$799	\$947
Ulster	\$438	\$584	\$720	\$860	\$1,003

NYS Kinship Navigator uses a Microsoft Access database to collect intake and demographic information on its caregivers and the children in their care. The database includes date of birth, address, race/ethnicity, marital status, income, and information on mental health, dental and medical health, school and education issues, and the causes for the children staying with kin. It also includes a narrative of the family history and current needs. The intake data are available to county service providers. Staff can send referrals to the caregiver as well as information about legal issues and services in their county.

The project also offers a teen leadership program. Project staff decided to assist kin children who are moving into the adolescent years by educating them and their caregivers about how to have healthy relationships, how to enhance communication skills, how to use technology, and how kin caregivers can deal with their teens. This feature became so popular that the kin caregivers have asked that Cornell Cooperative Extension in Orange County to start a third teen leadership and intergenerational program.

Successful Strategies

- The PTC form (see Attachment 3) has been critical for TANF and child welfare workers in bringing kin caregivers into the project. When kin caregivers sign the PTC, they give the project's kinship navigators permission to contact them via phone, email, or mail. The TANF and child welfare workers send the completed forms to the kinship navigators. Project leaders did not want any kin caregivers to "fall through the cracks," so they determined it was imperative to have eligible families complete PTC forms. All five county DSSs agreed that their TANF and child welfare workers would work with their eligible clients to obtain completed and signed PTC forms. Project leaders stated, "This process takes the onus or burden off of the caregiver." As a result of this procedure, the project was able to contact more than 90 percent of caregivers who completed the PTC forms. The project also has worked with the courts to have the family court judges use the PTC forms during their proceedings.
- The Cornell Cooperative Extension has had success training TANF and child welfare workers on the basics of kinship care, what services are needed and available to them through the project, the TANF child-only grant, and the PTC procedures. They provided this training to 60 TANF and child welfare professionals in Orange County. Due to its success, Broome County DSS asked the Cornell Cooperative Extension to replicate the training for DSS staff. The Cornell Cooperative Extension plans to continue collaborating with the county DSSs to provide these trainings.
- The project uses the Parenting a Second Time Around (PASTA) training, which was developed by the Cornell Cooperative Extension and addresses issues relevant to kin caregivers. The county DSSs were having difficulty recruiting kin caregivers to attend the DSS trainings required to become a licensed foster parent, and so the DSS administrators asked the Cornell Cooperative Extension if their clients, as well as one child welfare worker, could attend the PASTA training. PASTA training topics include caring for yourself, rebuilding your family, legal issues, communication skills, managing conflict, how to communicate with the children and biological parents, basic discipline, where to go for help in the community, child development, living with teens, safe use of technology, drug and alcohol risk and prevention, financial management, and nutrition. (See Attachment 4 for additional information on the PASTA training.)
- The County Collaboration Project developed partnerships with the legal service community. They have reached out to legal projects and to the county court administration offices to take on pro bono cases for kin caregivers. Legal Services of the Hudson Valley and Legal Aid Society of Mid-New York provide free legal services for project clients, and the project also has enlisted some private attorneys to provide pro bono and discounted legal services. The Volunteer Legal Services Project has assisted by providing continuing legal education credits to attorneys volunteering on kinship care-related matters as well as providing a listing of attorneys for kin caregivers.

Challenges

- The project purchased a billboard on Main Street in Newburg, NY, but the billboard did not assist in the recruitment of kin caregivers. To improve outreach efforts, the project hired a local community activist, who is also a kin caregiver, to conduct door-to-door outreach.
- Project partner NKC was originally supposed to conduct trainings for kin caregivers and mentor caregivers across the State. It also provided webinars and online chat rooms to support kin caregivers as mentors and advocates. During the project, NKC moved out of NYS and designated its role to a subcontractor. Project leadership realized that this arrangement was not sufficient and ended the training contract with NKC in the second year of the project.

- The Cornell Cooperative Extension in Orange County offered a pilot training with mental health professionals about the needs of kinship care families and the County Collaboration Project. Only four mental health providers attended the training. To improve this collaboration, staff from the Cornell Cooperative Extension will meet with the new commissioner of the Orange County Department of Mental Health to review the training and brainstorm how to get mental health professionals to attend. The Cornell Cooperative Extension is also considering offering continuing education units for attendees in order to improve the turnout.
- The Family Enrichment Network found it challenging to work with the county DSSs. The DSS administrators were supportive, but the frontline staff were not always aware of the collaboration. The Family Enrichment Network will continue to work on improving collaboration.
- The project has had a problem with diversion, which is when child welfare workers engage kin caregivers so that the kin children can be placed in their homes in order to divert placement into foster care. The kin caregivers, however, may be left with no support and no legal status with regards to the child. The County Collaboration Project is trying to develop a statewide procedure for ensuring that kinship families in diversion situations are connected to kinship navigators and direct services. Project staff wrote an article about this issue in the *Journal of Family Social Work* titled "Diversion and Kinship Care: A Collaborative Approach Between Child Welfare Services and NYS's Kinship Navigator." The abstract is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2013.834281>.

Recommendations

- Implement the PTC form process with all county DSSs, offices on aging, and other State and local agencies
- Seek assistance from State court administration offices and local court assistance organizations
- Implement an online intake and referrals system
- Focus on changing policies to help kin families receive the services they need

Other Lessons Learned

- Referrals are not enough. The project feels it's important to do more virtual outreach and advocacy as well as connect with communities on the local level.
- The implementation of the PTC form process is dependent on buy-in from mid-level management.
- Engagement with all systems must be ongoing to spur action.
- The kinship care summit and the recognition of Kinship Care Month are great ways to inform legislators about the relevant issues and promote change.

Evaluation

The County Collaboration Project included both a process and an outcome evaluation. The outcome evaluation utilized a quasi-experimental design. Broome, Tioga, and Orange Counties were part of the demonstration group and had a total of 200 families that received enhanced services. The control group, which also included 200 families, included waitlisted families in Dutchess and Ulster Counties. The waitlisted control group received services as usual for 1 year and then received enhanced services after that period.

The project used the Family Needs Scale, the Parent Stress Inventory, and the Pediatric Quality of Life surveys to gather data. The project also conducted focus groups with child welfare and TANF workers and kin caregivers.

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The following are sample preliminary findings from the evaluation:

- Child welfare and TANF workers reported a lack of consistent policies or procedures about how to connect caregivers with TANF staff.
- TANF staff tended to have more sympathy and respect toward kin caregivers than child welfare workers.
- Caregivers reported that support from the kinship service agency greatly helped them navigate the DSS system.
- Caregivers felt that family court involvement was troubling due to their lack of legal knowledge and court-related scrutiny.
- Younger kin caregivers reported having greater family needs, while older kin caregivers reported having more parenting stress.

To view a PowerPoint presentation regarding the evaluation design, findings, and recommendations, refer to attachment 5.

Attachments

1. [NYS Kinship Care Month Proclamation](#)
2. [NYS KinCare Summit 2014 Recommendations](#)
3. [Caregiver Permission to Contact Form](#)
4. [PASTA Training Materials](#)
5. [Evaluation Design and Implementation Presentation](#)



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