



# Supporting Kin Caregivers:

## Why government engagement beyond the foster care system matters

By Emma Cregg and Sara Israelsen-Hartley

***“Children who can’t live with their parents absolutely need to stay with their family members. And whether they live with grandma or in the foster home, the kids’ needs are the same, and the needs of the caregivers are very similar. Caregivers need to understand their legal options. They need to have financial support and know how to access things in the community. They need to feel emotionally supported because kinship caregiving is hard.” —Dr. Ali Caliendo***

Family members and friends have long stepped in to care for children when parents are having a tough time. This support exists outside the foster care system, often referred to as kin caregivers, informal caregivers or independent kin families.

For every child who lives with a kin caregiver and receives formal foster-care support, [18 children](#) live with informal caregivers outside of the foster care system.

Yet government support has historically focused on traditional foster care, leaving kin caregivers to navigate similar challenges alone. In response, community-based organizations have tried to take a leading role in identifying the needs of informal caregivers and offering supports.

On March 2, 2023, The Government Performance Lab (GPL) led a [discussion](#) with three leaders of kinship navigator community programs, who shared insights from their on-the-ground innovations across three topics:

### KEY TOPICS:

1. The importance of tailored information and services
2. Creative outreach efforts to meet kin caregivers where they are
3. The role that government can play in supporting informal caregivers

### Panelists



**Dr. Ali Caliendo**  
Founder and Executive  
Director of Foster  
Kinship, Nevada



**Kim Clifton**  
Program Founder  
& Former Executive  
Director of HALOS,  
South Carolina



**Beth Lindley**  
Director of the Kinship  
Resource Center at  
Michigan State  
University, Michigan

# 1 The importance of tailored information and services

Informal caregivers are less likely to receive government support than families in the foster care system, despite facing similar financial, legal, and emotional needs. Services to informal caregivers can include:

**Access to information on existing services:** South Carolina’s family advocates use a lengthy intake process to assess kinship caregivers’ needs and help in making appropriate referrals. Family advocates seek to provide information on a wide range of resources in the community and also offer benefit counseling and mentoring and support groups.

*“The biggest needs we’ve seen were knowledge about services that exist because if you haven’t had to look for services before, whether it’s enrolling a child in school or for financial help, you don’t know where to turn.”*  
—Kim Clifton

**Navigation resources:** Michigan has added a part-time legal advocate and a part-time support to help with benefits applications. South Carolina has started an intensive case management program where caregivers can work with a case manager for six months to over a year.

*“If they did happen to know that food assistance or other grants were available to them, they had no idea how to go about applying.”*  
—Beth Lindley



**Intentionally-designed services:**

Nevada has developed a resource locator tool to provide information at important times to connect families with financial, legal, and emotional support, and emphasizes building out systems for informal caregivers within the community.

*“It’s not even an access to services issue. There were no services on the informal side. So, instead of providing a pathway to access services, informal caregivers needed services built and designed for them, to support their families.”*  
—Dr. Ali Caliendo

## 2

### Creative outreach efforts to meet kin caregivers where they are

It can often be challenging to reach and engage caregivers outside the child welfare system because they are not part of the established and institutionalized network. Panelists shared the following outreach strategies:

**Be in the community and expand word of mouth:** *“Sometimes it was going door to door, talking to school counselors and parent advocates, sending out press releases, advertising on local gospel stations. It was a little bit of everything — just being out in the community. We now have a full-time outreach person who attends every community event that attracts families, anywhere you can set up a table and talk. I have to say, word of mouth has been huge for us.”*

—Kim Clifton

**Partner with key stakeholders to reach untapped pockets in the community:** *“We had the support of our state to fund a Kinship Advisory Council, composed of representatives from aging, child protective services, foster care, licensing, adoption, community mental health, board of education, cash assistance at MDHHS and caregivers with lived experience. They are connected to communities across the state, and they help reach places that are beyond our reach.”*

—Beth Lindley

*“We want to be wherever an informal family is falling into trouble. We have a good relationship with welfare officers, school districts, and medical care. We’ve built partnerships all over town, so that where families are struggling, they find us as a help.”*

—Dr. Ali Caliendo

**Use language familiar to kin caregivers:** *“Informal families don’t talk about themselves as kinship caregivers. We listen to how kinship families describe themselves and their needs and use that in our social media and search engine optimization.”*

—Dr. Ali Caliendo



## 3

## The role that government can play in supporting informal caregivers

Governments have access to existing funding sources and partnerships that can be helpful to groups trying to support kin-based caregivers. Panelists highlighted several possibilities:

**Using funds strategically to invest in kin caregivers:** State and federal child welfare prevention funds can be used to support these families, along with federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, which are used to create strong communities by providing decent housing and expanding economic opportunities, especially for those with low or moderate income.

*“Very quickly, we realized we needed to build some funding streams for informal families. We’ve used CDBG funding, we’ve asked different cities and jurisdictions to think about how we use these government dollars to support families and keep kids out of the foster care system. We make the case for prevention services with our county child-welfare partners that there should be a little bit of funding for the informal side, and we rely on IV-E navigator dollars — navigator programs to serve formal and informal caregivers. Find different areas where governments can be more flexible. It’s a win for everybody.”*

—Dr. Ali Caliendo

**Develop effective advocacy partnerships:** The Michigan Kinship Care Coalition directly advocates to government officials, as well as community organizations and professional providers, sharing a message that all stakeholders have a critical role to play in supporting caregiver families, formal and informal.

*“The Kinship Care Coalition is a group of really committed stakeholders that is focused on the message of kinship care. And so when Family First funding came about, they were the ones that advocated for a navigator program in the state of Michigan, as well as an advisory council. Their advocacy definitely had a hand in making sure that the funding was made possible to grow a navigator program. They have also intentionally taught caregivers how to hone a story they can take to their elected officials. They can do direct advocacy that sometimes nonprofits and our organization receiving funding from our state government can’t go out and do.”*

—Beth Lindley




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The [Government Performance Lab](#), housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are also able to provide experiential learning.

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