



How to Build a System that Never Stops Looking for Kin

Challenges and opportunities in keeping family the focus

By Emma Cregg and Sara Israelsen-Hartley

“Kin search is not something that’s optional. We have to be doing it. We owe it to the children and families we are working with.” –Jennifer Ulmer, MSW

In 2021, more than [200,000 children](#) were removed from their parents and placed in foster care. Finding ways for these children to live safely with and remain connected to kin and other trusted adults offers children a sense of stability and belonging, maintains family connections, and preserves cultural identity. Yet kin placements do not always happen immediately, and without proper follow-up, may not happen at all.

On November 3, 2023, the Government Performance Lab led a discussion with kin-focused child welfare leaders in Michigan and Florida. Panelists shared ways their agencies are building a kin-first culture and elevated three strategies for building systems that never stop looking for kin.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES:

1. Build and document connections from the beginning
2. Engage in ongoing conversations with parents, kin, youth
3. Review placements and processes to keep kin in focus

What follows are several examples of how leaders and staff in Michigan and Florida have tried to implement these strategies and what they have learned along the way.

1 Build and Document Connections from the Beginning

Pursue Multiple Placement Options

When a child needs a place to live after being removed from their home, panelists emphasized that their goal is to place them with extended family or friends. But in practice, this can be challenging. Family members are often asked to step in with very little advanced notice and may not always be ready to say yes. Because of this, panelists said they try to identify a network of

Panelists



Ivana Maplanka
*Regional Deputy Director
for BSC5, Michigan
Department of Health &
Human Services*



Jennifer Ulmer, MSW
*Program Section
Manager in Wayne
County, Michigan
Department of Health &
Human Services*



Sheryl Williams, MSW
*Program Officer of Case
Management & Adoptions
at ChildNet, Broward
County, Florida*

support for each child, moving beyond a “single placement” mindset to pursuing multiple placements simultaneously. This builds a layered support team around a child. These layers can offer greater flexibility and support if a potential caregiver says no, or if a placement breaks down later. A larger support network could also allow family members needed time and space to make these life-altering placement decisions.

In Michigan, one grandmother was asked to care for her grandchildren. She did not want them living with strangers but was not able to care for them full-time. Instead of seeing her hesitation as a placement dead-end, Michigan CPS staff saw it as a starting point. They focused on what role she could play and connected her with the eventual foster parents, which allowed her to support the children and their placement, even though it was not with her.

“Kin may say no to placement, but it doesn’t mean they aren’t wanting to be involved in the child’s life in other meaningful ways, like respite care, transportation, or emotional support. They can still play a really important role in providing placement stability for the child.” –Jennifer Ulmer, MSW



Document the Network

Broward County child welfare leaders found that while many staff members asked families about kin placement options, it was inconsistent and easy to lose that information during case hand offs. Today, the Broward ChildNet team uses a [Family Finding Connections Log](#) to gather and share information right from the beginning of the case. They use it to keep a record of maternal and paternal relatives, including adult siblings and even siblings’ parents, as well as non-relative options like teachers and neighbors.

This information is stored digitally—not on a clipboard on one person’s desk—so it can be more easily updated and passed-along throughout the case. Another benefit is that it helps staff avoid asking families multiple times for the same information. Even in situations where children are placed with kin caregivers quickly, this list can still facilitate connections that can support the placement’s long-term success.

“With our fictive kin, they’re not familiar with the dependency process, and they may be unsure at the time. We have a section in the log where investigators or case managers can enter notes, so if the case is transferred to a different unit, they can revisit the question and see how we can best support those kin who may have been unsure when we first visited them for placement options.” –Sheryl Williams, MSW

While the log has generally been well-received, Williams noted that staff are still adjusting to the process change. She said offering trainings and frequent reminders have helped staff transition to using the log.

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Engage in ongoing conversations with parents, kin, youth

Practice starting—and coming back to—difficult conversations

Panelists reflected that removing a child from their parents is often an emotional, highly contentious situation. In that moment, many parents may be angry at CPS workers and unwilling to share names for potential placement options. Other parents may feel embarrassed about the situation and do not want family members to know about the child's removal.

In Wayne County, Michigan, designated kinship staff—in addition to foster care staff—follow up with parents after a removal, when emotions are more likely to have cooled, to keep asking about kin options for placement or placement support.

“Just because we’ve had that conversation once and it wasn’t a good time, does that mean the conversation ends? It does not. This is something that we have to revisit. Our children are worth that conversation.” –Ivana Maplanka

In Broward County, ChildNet staff also use a [Kin Caregiver Engagement Guide](#). The guide was created after talking to front-line staff who wanted resources to help them prepare for difficult conversations. The guide contains conversation prompts, tips for answering common questions, ideas on how to talk to older children versus younger children, and examples of how to ask about kin in different ways. Broward County now offers trainings where staff can role play these conversations, brainstorm together and share best practices.

Use every point of contact to keep the conversation going

Once a child is safely placed in foster care, it can be easy for a continued kin search to become deprioritized, especially in relation to other competing case management duties. But panelists emphasized that situations often change over time. A family member or friend who might not have been ready to take a child at the time of removal might be ready to do so six months later. Continuing to ask means there is always a chance to adjust a placement to get a child closer to family.



In Michigan and Florida, managers try to use existing points-of-contact and check-ins with staff and families to follow up about potential kin caregivers. Approaches like asking children whose birthday parties they attend or with whom they trick-or-treat could reveal new connections and potential placement options.

“Our managers make sure their supervision is family-focused. I’ll ask my staff, ‘Tell me about their family; tell me about their relatives.’ We should be asking those questions for as long as the child is in out-of-home care. If we keep asking, staff know that is the expectation. We really have to approach all the work that we do as part of an ongoing conversation.” –Ivana Maplanka

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Review placements and processes to keep kin in focus

Facilitate dedicated kin search meetings

In Michigan, monthly kinship care meetings focus on cases where children were not initially placed with kin. Data analysts select cases to discuss and lead the meeting. District and section managers, foster care supervisors and workers, and CPS supervisors and workers share information to continue the kin search and address placement barriers. Panelists describe this meeting as teamwork focused, with clear individual assignments and follow-up deadlines.

“Monthly kinship meetings forced everyone to step back, reevaluate, and prioritize what we need to do to keep looking at kin placements.” –Jennifer Ulmer, MSW

Yet starting this new monthly meeting was challenging. Despite a set time and [agenda](#), agency leaders said they noticed some overlooked emails, as well as confusion about the meeting’s purpose. Staff were initially defensive, worried they were there to explain their earlier decision not to place with kin.

“The key was getting everyone to understand the value of collaboration. Initially with CPS, when you’re getting to that case in the middle of the night, there’s limited placement options, and we all understand that, but it doesn’t mean that the work ends. We have to continue having those conversations and we want to do it as a team.” –Ivana Maplanka

Managers contacted staff members ahead of time to ensure they were prepared to discuss their case families. Over time, staff came to meetings less worried about being judged and more grateful for support and collaboration.

Build kin-focused management practices

Panelists shared that when agency leaders regularly emphasize the importance of kin placements, they can create a culture where placements with family become more likely. At ChildNet, the data team now provides a daily report that helps case management directors follow up with staff on non-kin placements. Williams noted that asking action-oriented questions about kin placement has been effective in pushing the kin search forward. These include questions such as “What do you plan to ask about at the next parent visitation?” and “Have you scheduled the home study?” Sharing success stories and best practices can also remind staff why kinship placement is a priority.

ChildNet also has a kinship work group, a cross-cutting team that touches all parts of case management. They meet bi-weekly to review procedures and discuss how their agency can keep kin placements front and center. Kinship focus is also written into the organization’s strategic plan, and tied to performance goals.

“We take every opportunity to discuss our cases. It’s an ongoing conversation. We believe that we can’t stop talking about kinship placement. We can’t remove this from our focus right now; it can only get better.” –Sheryl Williams, MSW

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.