HARVARD Kennedy School
Government Performance Lab

Kin Caregiver Check-in Calls: A Strategy to Support Placement Stability

By: Emma Cregg, Lynda Blancato, Megan Toohey, Nada Shalash

Across the country, agencies across several states are prioritizing placing children in out-of-home care with kin rather than strangers. Many states are prioritizing placing children with kin because they think it can promote a sense of stability and belonging, stronger family connections, and preservation of cultural identity. But placement is only the first step. When children are placed with kin caregivers, it is important to support the needs of the caregivers in addition to the needs of children.

Kin caregivers, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other relatives, often step into caregiver roles with little notice. They may also receive less support compared to traditional foster parents. They must manage a significant personal life disruption while also navigating the bureaucracy of complex child welfare systems.

This publication outlines how implementing brief, structured kin caregiver check-in calls is one promising, low-lift strategy to proactively support kinship placements.

Although many case managers are interested in supporting kin caregivers, they may not know how to effectively do so. Current case management processes primarily focus on supporting children, and caregiver needs are rarely a priority for staff who must juggle many competing responsibilities. Support for these caregivers often comes too late, sometimes only at the point of a significant disruption that requires an imminent placement change.

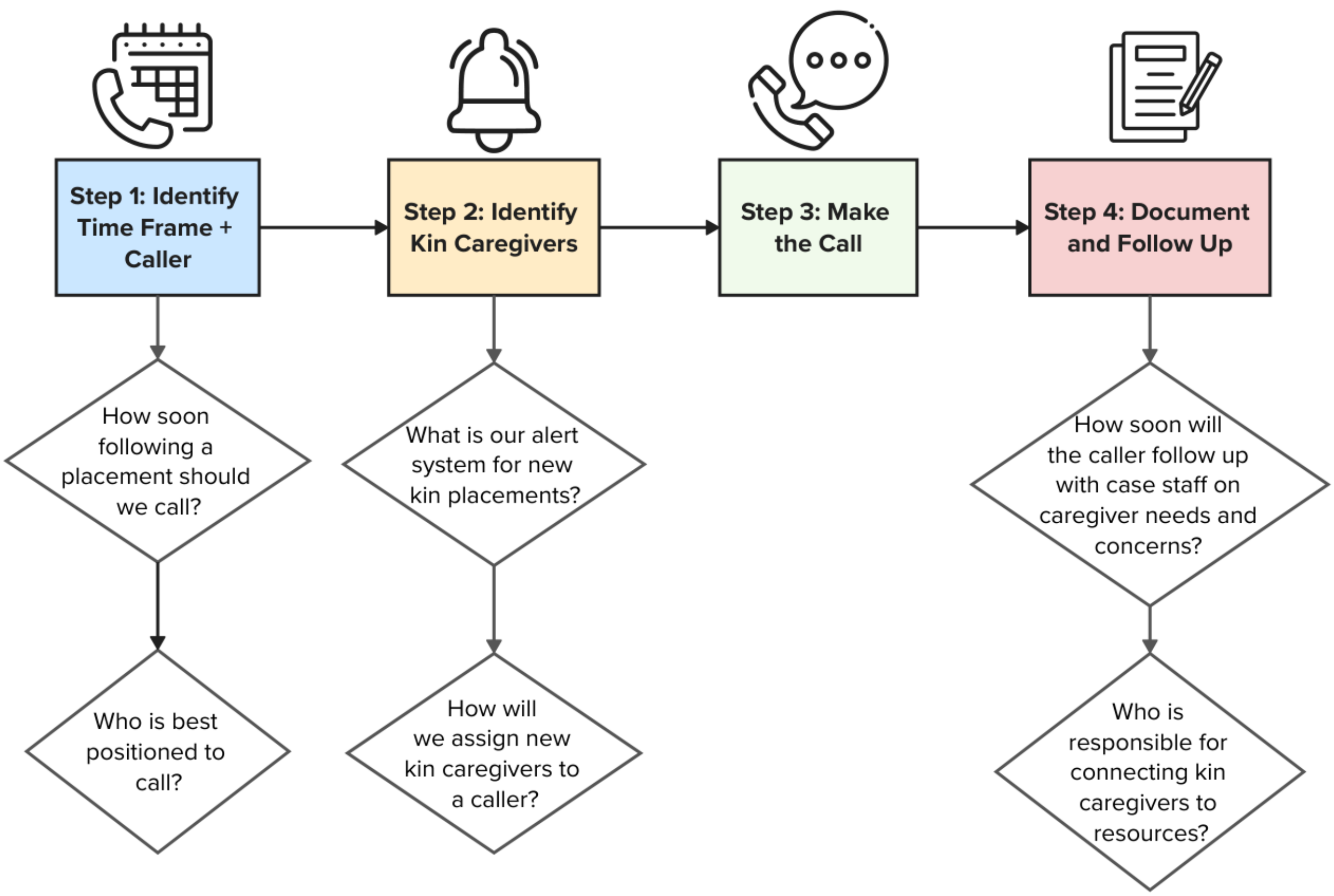
To reduce caregiver overwhelm and increase placement stability, agencies across several states are testing proactively reaching out to these caregivers in the early weeks of a placement to offer support. Even without significant new funding or new programs, small practice changes can provide additional support to kin caregivers. Case managers can use this **guide and four-step implementation toolkit** — drawn from the Government Performance Lab's work with leaders in Michigan and Los Angeles County — to easily incorporate this type of call into their case management processes.

> **"We are so focused on the child's needs that sometimes we forget kin caregivers have needs too. Theirs is a really hard job; suddenly people are in and out of their home, making so many demands. A helpful conversation that focuses on them can go a long way."**
>
> *— Kim Sainten, Coach Developer Supervising MSW, Los Angeles County*

Kin Caregiver Check-in Calls: What and How

Start strategically: How can kin caregiver check-in calls enhance existing case management processes?

Before incorporating kin caregiver check-in calls, it is important for your agency to consider how this practice will fit into existing case management and handoff processes. **Consider the following steps and related decisions, shown in the diamonds.** Record the answers to these decisions and keep this information accessible in a single location that all staff supporting kin placements can access. This keeps the process simple and ensures that staff efforts are not duplicated.



Proactive kin caregiver support can increase placement stability by:

- Addressing caregiver concerns more proactively and building trust sooner.
- Connecting child(ren) and kin caregiver to their larger network sooner.
- Coordinating earlier with biological parents and others for visitation.
- Documenting information and sharing leads to improve Child and Family Team Meeting (CFTM) prep and case coordination over time, including ongoing caregiver supports.

Step 1 – Identify an Appropriate Time Frame and Select a Caller

Articulating your agency's goals in conducting kin caregiver calls will help with deciding on the most suitable timing for conducting check-in calls.

- In Michigan, agencies conduct calls 30 days after placement, wanting to check on the caregiver's developing relationship with their case manager in addition to offering support.
- In Los Angeles County, agencies reach out within the first week of placement to provide more immediate support.

Your agency should decide which timeline best serves your population, resources, and goals for the calls.

The next decision is determining who will conduct the check-in calls. This choice should be based on your agency's existing capacity, structure, and the specific feedback you want to gather. Different approaches work for different contexts.

- **Option 1: The assigned case manager or social worker.** This approach leverages the existing relationship and can be efficient. However, agencies should consider whether case managers have capacity to add this responsibility to their workload.
- **Option 2: A neutral staff member not directly involved in the case.** In Michigan, agencies deliberately select callers from outside the case team. This approach allows kin caregivers to provide candid feedback about the support (or lack thereof) they have received from their assigned caseworker and may help caregivers feel more comfortable raising concerns they would hesitate to share with their primary caseworker. Managing supervisors could be another option to serve this same purpose.
- **Option 3: Staff supporting the Child and Family Team Meeting (CFTM).** Los Angeles County integrated kin caregiver check-in calls into the job responsibilities of neutral facilitators already engaged in supporting the CFTM process. This distributed the workload, brought a collaborative perspective to the calls, and laid a foundation for incorporating kin caregiver voice throughout the CFTM process.

No matter who calls, caller responsibilities should include:

- Checking in on caregiver needs and previewing next steps (e.g., visit from new case manager)
- Providing caregiver with directions on how to reach out with future needs/concerns
- Offering the caregiver information about concrete next steps & support referrals, in writing
- Following up with case staff on caregiver needs and concerns

> **"As a case worker, I often checked in with the child where the kin caregiver wasn't around — you know, [to ask about] school, visitation. This process makes me realize how important it is that we are asking how [the caregiver is] doing, too."**
>
> *— Tebria Hawkins, MSW, Los Angeles County*

Step 2 – Identify Kin Caregivers and Establish an Alert System for New Placements

After you align on call goals and timelines, your agency should leverage your placement tracking system to identify and track kinship placements in a cadence that matches the timeframe in which you plan to conduct the check-in call.

- For example, if you decide that you will make the call within 30 days of a placement, create a process for identifying all kinship placements made within the past 30 days to conduct calls.

Agencies can use their preexisting placement tracking system as a central place used by the case management team to identify the contact details for all kinship placements made within the specified timeline.

"This was the first time someone asked about me — how I'm doing."
— Kin caregiver in Los Angeles County

"We realized we needed to build trust with kin caregivers sooner and find ways to support caregiver needs apart from the children, and that might feel new to a lot of our staff. The kin caregiver comfort call process should make that an expectation."
— Charisse Pilar, Assistant Regional Administrator, Los Angeles County

Step 3 – Conduct Caregiver Call

The **phone call script** was designed to address top areas of need often expressed by new kin caregivers and to provide positive language affirming their experience. Providing the script in advance and roleplaying with callers is also a great training method.

Download the full phone call script HERE.

The caller should go through the full script with the caregiver and allow time for the caregiver to raise additional questions and concerns. Set the expectation that callers should attempt to reach the caregiver multiple times until successful, leaving voicemails or texts if needed. Callers should also document their contact attempts and take notes during the conversation to use in Step 4.

Here is an example of part of a kin caregiver check-in call:

Caseworker | **Kin Caregiver**

How are things going so far? How are you adjusting?

We're managing, but the money part has been stressful. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be getting or when?

Thanks for sharing that. Are you set up to receive your stipend, or has anything about the payments been confusing?

<<Case worker writes down in their notes: "Question about stipend amount and payment schedule.">>

I got one payment, but I don't know if it's the right amount, and I'm not sure when the next one will come?

You should receive a short-term temporary stipend while you start the home approval process. Let me walk you through the payment timeline and who to call if something doesn't look right. I'll also flag this for your caseworker to follow up.

<<Case worker adds a flag to follow up in the kinship tracking spreadsheet.>>

Step 4 – Document and Follow Up

Following the conversation, the caller should fill in the tracking spreadsheet with the survey responses and flag any unmet needs, additional steps to take, and who will take them.

Any relevant feedback and information on unmet needs should be shared back with the caseworker in a warm handoff (if they are not the ones conducting the call). All issues raised during the call should remain on the spreadsheet until they are resolved. Agencies should establish a clear process and timeline for the caller to follow up with caseworkers to foster case collaboration and ensure that all necessary actions have been taken.

The **call tracking spreadsheet** — based on a tool that the GPL helped Michigan develop — includes two main tabs. The first tab is for documenting responses to each question asked during a check-in call, and the second is for reviewing trends across time.

- If the **caller is not the assigned case manager**, their responsibilities should include coordination of documentation and follow-up with the case manager to ensure caregiver needs are addressed.
  - **For example:** Immediately following the kin caregiver call, Los Angeles staff makes notes in the case file, email them directly to the case manager, and schedule a phone conversation to coordinate next steps together.
- If the **assigned case manager or social worker makes the call**, case management supervisors can reinforce this process by building questions about kin caregiver supports during case check-ins and staffing meetings.
- Regardless of who makes the call, agencies can use existing ongoing case checkpoints as intentional moments to follow-up on kin caregiver needs identified on the call (e.g., monthly home visits, Child and Family Team Meetings, etc.)

Download the call tracking spreadsheet HERE.

To learn about additional ways that case managers can support kin caregivers, please see the GPL's **Supporting Kin-First Care initiative**.

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.

Designed by Sara Israelsen-Hartley