



States Increasingly Promote Kinship Care, though Significant Opportunity Remains for Improving Licensing, Definitions, and Reach:

Nearly Two-Thirds of Jurisdictions Have Not Yet Amended Title IV-E Plans to Adopt Separate Licensing Standards

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KEY POINTS

- Kinship care – care by a relative or another adult with a close relationship with the child – is associated with many positive outcomes for children who cannot safely remain in their homes, making it often the recommended option for such children.
- Across states, there is variation in the degree of specificity in how kinship caregivers are defined, with some states having more narrow definitions of a “relative.” All states (except Alabama) and DC include fictive kin – those with an emotionally significant relationship with the child or child’s parent – as eligible kinship caregivers.
- In Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24), most children in foster care lived in non-kinship settings. 39% lived with relatives or kin (126,944 children).
- Among children in foster care in FY24, the percentage living with relatives or kin varied widely by state – with a range from 11% to 57%.
- 44% of children in foster care living with relatives or kin were living in an unlicensed home (55,436 children). Kinship care does not require licensure, but without a license it is difficult for kin to access funding and support intended to help families provide care.
- Over the past few years, more states and Tribes have submitted amendments to their Title IV-E plans to adopt separate licensing standards for kinship homes, and a few have signaled that they are taking steps to do so – but as of February 2026, only 24 eligible jurisdictions (19 states and five Tribes) have submitted amendments to the Children’s Bureau, meaning nearly two-thirds of eligible jurisdictions have not yet adopted separate standards.
- Navigator programs help kinship caregivers connect to resources. As of January 2026, less than 20% of jurisdictions (11 states and one territory) have formally approved plans to operate a kinship navigator program(s) – this is less than half of the number of jurisdictions (42%) that had approved plans in FY20 (28 jurisdictions) under temporary flexibilities available during the COVID-19 public health emergency that have since expired.

BACKGROUND

When children cannot safely remain within their homes and out-of-home care is necessary, children are often recommended to be placed into kinship care, frequently defined as “the full-time care and nurturing of a child by a relative or someone with a significant emotional connection or longstanding relationship with the child.”¹ Kinship care is associated with many positive benefits for children compared to non-kinship care living arrangements. For example, it promotes the retention of familial ties and is associated with improved mental health and behavioral, social, and educational outcomes. Children experience increased levels of stability and permanency, stronger connections to their communities of origin and biological families, and greater satisfaction with their placement (including feelings of love and belonging).²

Given these positive findings, in recent years, there have been efforts to promote kinship care. For example:

- The passage of the *Family First Prevention Services Act* (2018) required states to report to HHS whether and how the state waives non-safety licensing standards for relative foster family homes,³ and it permitted federal funding to be used for evidence-based kinship navigator programs⁴ – which connect caregivers to programs and services that help meet their needs and the needs of the children are raising.⁵
- In June 2020, President Donald J. Trump signed an *Executive Order on Strengthening the Child Welfare System for America’s Children*. Among its provisions, President Trump tasked HHS with “enhancing support for kinship care...[and] establish[ing] a plan to address barriers to accessing existing Federal assistance and benefits”.⁶
- The Children’s Bureau awarded *Title IV-B, subpart 2 Kinship Navigator* funding to states and Tribes from FY18 to FY25 to develop, enhance, or evaluate Kinship Navigator Programs.⁷ According to the Children’s Bureau, for FY25, states received an average award of \$190,000 and Title IV-E Tribes received awards of about \$23,000 each.
- The final rule, *Separate Licensing or Approval Standards for Relative or Kinship Foster Family Homes* (2023), then authorized child welfare agencies to claim Title IV-E foster care maintenance payments for an otherwise eligible child placed in a relative or kinship foster family home when the agency uses separate licensing or approval standards for kinship placements compared to non-relative placements. The rule also required agencies to ensure that kinship foster family homes received equal Title IV-E foster care maintenance payments to those of non-related foster family homes.⁸
- In December 2025, the *Child and Family Services Review Technical Bulletin #14* highlighted the prioritization of kin as a part of the effort to increase the number of homes available for children who must enter out-of-home care.⁹

This brief will explore how states have responded to some of these policy changes and how they are approaching kinship care by examining states’ definitions of kinship caregivers, the prevalence of children in foster care living with relatives or kin, states’ adoption of separate licensing standards for kinship homes, and states’ participation in kinship navigator programs through the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse.

DEFINITIONS OF KINSHIP CAREGIVERS VARY BY STATE, THOUGH NEARLY ALL STATES INCLUDE FICTIVE KIN AND DEFINE RELATIVES BROADLY ENOUGH TO INCLUDE AT LEAST SOME THIRD-DEGREE RELATIVES

Across states, definitions of kinship caregivers – or who is considered eligible to be a kinship caregiver – can be found in statute, regulation, or policy guidance documents. There is variation in the degree of specificity in how states define “relatives” in the context of kinship caregivers.

Some states define a broad category of “relative” to mean any person related by blood, marriage, or adoption (e.g., Kansas,¹⁰ Vermont¹¹). Other states include more specificity in their definitions by naming a degree of kinship. For example, Pennsylvania defines a relative as “an individual who is related within the fifth degree of consanguinity or affinity to the parent or stepparent of a child,”¹² while West Virginia defines a “relative of the child” to be “an adult of at least 21 years of age who is related to the child, by blood or marriage, within at least three degrees.”¹³ Some states further specify particular relationships that are included in the definition of relative. For example, in Arizona, “relative” means “a grandparent, great-grandparent, brother or sister of whole or half blood, aunt, uncle, or first cousin.”¹⁴ ⁱ

Effectively, all states and the District of Columbia (DC) have either a broad definition that could include any relative *or* a definition that specifically names relatives up to the second degree (e.g., grandparent, aunt, uncle). All states but two – Alaska and Louisiana – have either a broad definition that includes any relative *or* a definition that notes affinity within the third degree *or* specifically names at least some third-degree relatives (e.g., great grandparent, first cousin).

Almost all states and DC also include fictive kin as eligible kinship caregivers. Fictive kin, or non-related kinship, typically refers to a person who is unrelated by birth, marriage, or adoption but who has an emotionally significant relationship with the child or child’s parent. Only one state – Alabama – does not include fictive kin in their definition of kinship caregivers. States largely consider emotionally significant relationships to be those that have the characteristics of a familial relationship. Seven states provide examples of those pre-existing relationships, such as godparents, close family friends, neighbors, teachers, scout masters, clergy, or parents of the child’s friends.

MOST (61%) CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE LIVE IN NON-KINSHIP CARE SETTINGS, BUT THE PREVALENCE OF CHILDREN LIVING WITH RELATIVES OR KIN VARIES BY STATE

Across all states, about two-fifths of children in foster care live with relatives or kin.

In FY24, most children lived in non-kinship settings according to current data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).¹⁵

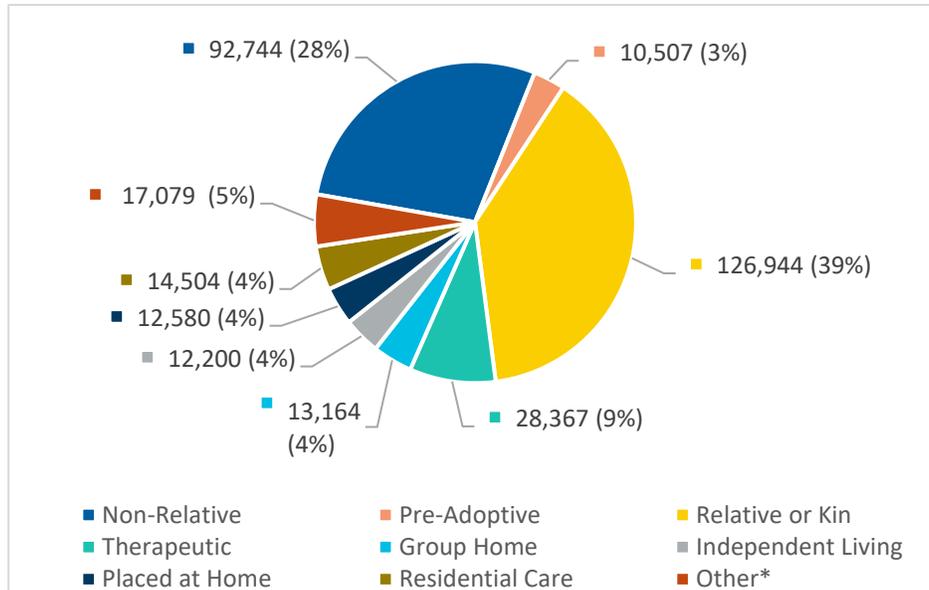
Among children in **foster care**ⁱⁱ in FY24, 39% (126,944) were living with relatives or kin; 28% (92,744) were living with a non-relative, 9% (28,367) were living in a therapeutic setting, and others were living in other care settings such group homes, independent living, and residential care (see Figure 1).¹⁶ Those in congregate care (group homes and residential care) represented around 8% of children in foster care across all states. Some children in congregate care settings may be placed there for therapeutic reasons and thus kinship care may not be an appropriate placement. Even if those in congregate care were excluded from the total number of children in foster care in FY24, over 57% of children still lived in non-kinship care settings across all states.

ⁱ As additional context, for the purposes of Item 10 (determining whether a child’s current or most recent placement is with a relative) in the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), the *Child and Family Services Review Onsite Review Instrument* (OSRI) defines relative as “a person related to the child by blood, marriage, or adoption.” While the Children’s Bureau generally defers to jurisdictions definitions of “relative,” it is specified here to give clarity for agencies and reviewers for the expectations on conformity with Item 10 and the underlying plan requirement.

ⁱⁱ For the purposes of this brief, *children in foster care in FY24* refers to those listed as being “in care” on 9/30/2024 in the AFCARS dashboard. It does not include children who are listed as entering or exiting care, as AFCARS separately accounts for those numbers, and thus, they are described separately in this brief.

Among children **entering foster care**, 43% were living with relatives or kin as their first placement, and among children **exiting care**, 38% were living with relatives or kin as their last placement across all states (see Table 2 on page 6).

Figure 1. Across all states, nearly 40% of children in foster care live with relatives or kin, but most children live in other foster care settings, FY24

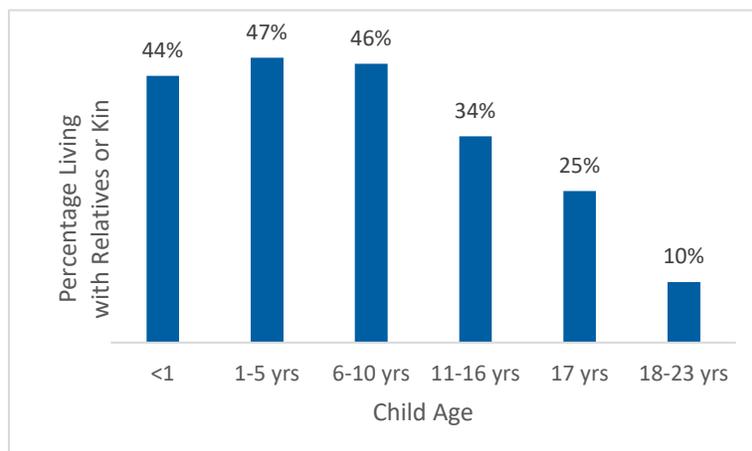


**Other includes shelter care, institution, juvenile justice, runaway, whereabouts unknown, and missing data.*

Younger children are more likely to live with relatives or kin than older children.

Older children in foster care are less likely to live with relatives or kin compared to younger children. For example, across states in FY24, 47% of children between the ages one and five in foster care lived with relatives or kin, compared to only 34% of children between the ages of 11 and 16, and 25% of 17-year-olds (see Figure 2).¹⁷ The percentage of children with living arrangements in residential care, group homes, institutions, and juvenile justice facilities – and the percentage of children who run away – increases as age ranges increase. For example, 2% of six-to-ten-year-olds lived in group homes in FY24, whereas 10% of 11-to-16-year-olds and 12% of 17-year-olds did.¹⁸

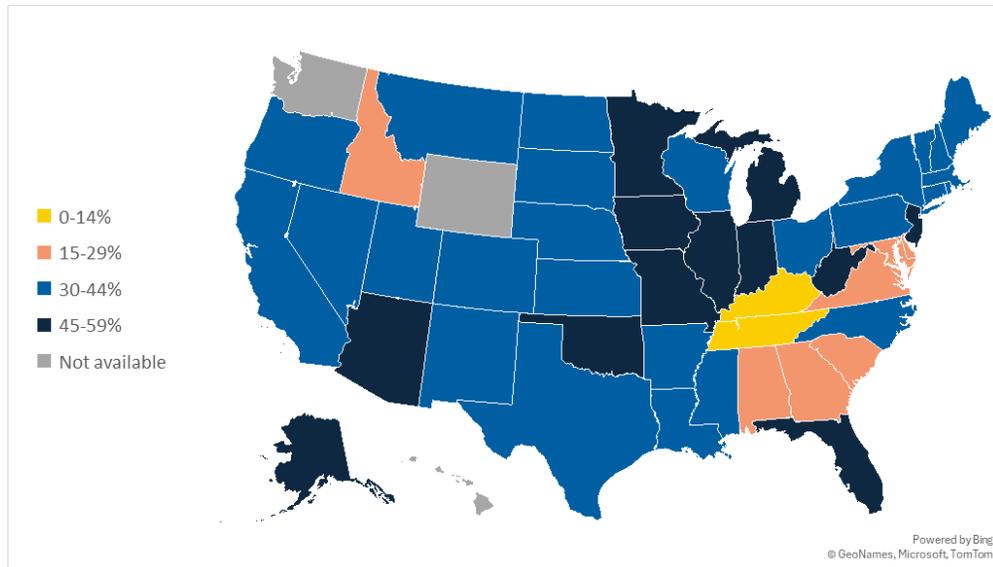
Figure 2. Older children in foster care are less likely to live with relatives or kin, FY24



There is a wide range across states in the percentage of children in foster care living with relatives or kin.

Figure 3 depicts the percentage of children living in foster care with relatives or kin, by state. For example, in FY24, Illinois had the highest percentages of children living with relatives or kin while **entering care** and **in foster care** (76% and 57% respectively) compared to all other states, and Arizona had the highest percentage of children living with relatives or kin while **exiting care** (62%). Tennessee reported the lowest percentages of children living with relatives or kin while **entering, exiting, and in foster care** (12%, 11%, and 11% respectively) compared to all other states.ⁱⁱⁱ¹⁹ Table 1 presents the 10 states with highest and lowest percentages of children in foster care living with relatives or kin.

Figure 3. The percentage of children in foster care living with relatives or kin varies widely by state, FY24



Note: Washington and Wyoming did not submit AFCARS data for FY24, and Hawaii reported data inaccuracies, so they are labeled as not available.

Table 1. The percentage of children in foster care living with relatives or kin varies widely by state, FY24

Children Living in Foster Care with Relatives/Kin			
National (Range)	39% (11% - 57%)		
Lowest Percentage (Number of Children)		Highest Percentage (Number of Children)	
Tennessee	11% (1,035)	Illinois	57% (10,534)
Kentucky	13% (1,093)	Indiana	56% (6,638)
Alabama	16% (945)	Iowa	51% (1,878)
Virginia	17% (885)	New Jersey	50% (1,395)
Delaware	19% (100)	Florida	50% (8,860)
District of Columbia	22% (118)	Missouri	49% (5,722)
Georgia	22% (2,362)	Michigan	49% (4,753)
Maryland	23% (836)	Arizona	49% (4,438)
South Carolina	27% (907)	West Virginia	48% (3,150)
Idaho	28% (356)	Oklahoma	46% (2,809)

ⁱⁱⁱ Current AFCARS data shows that Hawaii had the lowest percentage of children living with relatives or kin among children entering care and in foster care in FY24, but this is due to a data reporting error that is being resolved. After Hawaii, Tennessee had the lowest percentages.

64% OF JURISDICTIONS HAVE NOT AMENDED THEIR TITLE IV-E PLANS TO ADOPT SEPARATE KINSHIP LICENSING STANDARDS AS OF JANUARY 2026

While some states have begun adopting separate kinship licensing standards that allow agencies to claim funding under Title IV-E and provide foster care maintenance payment to kin caregivers, many states have yet to do so.

Across all states in FY24, approximately 132,478 of the children entering, exiting, or in foster care were living with relatives or kin in an unlicensed home.²⁰ Of the 43% of children **entering care** and living with relatives or kin, nearly three-fifths (59%) of them (43,583 children) were living in unlicensed homes. Of the 39% of children **in foster care** living with relatives or kin, 44% of them (55,436) were living in an unlicensed home. And, of the 38% of children who were living with relatives or kin upon **exiting care**, nearly half (49%) of them (33,458) were living in an unlicensed home (see Table 2).²¹

Table 2. Many children in foster care are living with relatives or kin in unlicensed homes, FY24

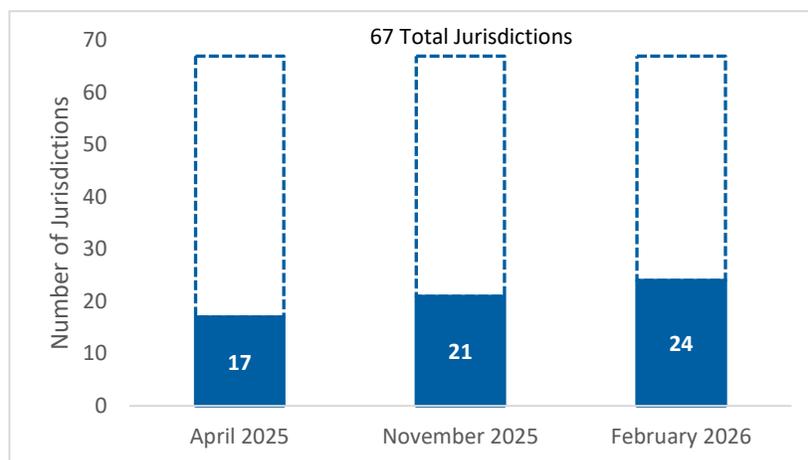
	Upon Entering Care		In Foster Care		Upon Exiting Care	
	Percentage of all Children Entering Care	Number of Children	Percentage of all Children In Care on 9/30/2024	Number of Children	Percentage of all Children Exiting Care	Number of Children
Living with Relatives or Kin	43%	73,329	39%	126,944	38%	67,630
<i>Licensed</i>	41%	29,746	56%	71,508	51%	34,172
<i>Unlicensed</i>	59%	43,583	44%	55,436	49%	33,458

Before the *Separate Licensing Standards for Relative or Kinship Foster Family Homes* rule was finalized in September 2023, the traditional licensing process often posed a barrier for kinship homes. Unlike other foster families who can prepare in advance, relatives and kin are typically asked to care for a child unexpectedly, often leaving them with a very short amount of time to pursue licensure. Licensure is a requirement for foster care homes to be eligible for foster care maintenance payments funded under Title IV-E, so without this, kinship homes are not as well-equipped to care for a child’s basic needs as they could be, and relatives or kin could be deterred from providing kinship care. With the 2023 rule, state and Tribal Title IV-E agencies are 1) permitted to claim Title IV-E funding when using separate licensing or approval standards for kinship homes and 2) required to provide the same foster care maintenance payment amounts to licensed or approved kinship homes in order to reduce the burdens on these relatives or kin while also ensuring the safety and well-being of children in care.²²

Gradually over the past couple of years, more states and Tribes have submitted amendments to their Title IV-E plans to adopt separate licensing standards for kinship homes. As depicted in Figure 4, in April 2025, approximately 17 jurisdictions (or one quarter of states and Tribes) had already revised their plan; in November 2025, this increased to 21 jurisdictions,²³ and **as of February 2026, 24 jurisdictions** (19 states, five Tribes, and zero territories) have revised plans: Colorado, Delaware, Kansas, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin, Washington, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (NC), Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, Pascua Yaqui Tribe (AZ), Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (AZ), and Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe (WA).²⁴

This means there are 43 jurisdictions (about 64%) that have not yet amended their Title IV-E plans to create separate licensing standards for kinship homes.

Figure 4. Most states, Tribes, and territories have not amended their Title IV-E plans to adopt separate licensure standards for kinship foster family homes



A few states have begun working toward adopting separate licensure standards for kinship homes but have yet to formally update their Title IV-E plans with the Children’s Bureau. For example, Maryland recently updated their state regulations to identify separate requirements for kinship homes;²⁵ Idaho recently passed a new rule to create a separate path for kinship licensure;²⁶ and Florida has a separate Level I: Child Specific Foster Home License for kinship caregivers.²⁷

LESS THAN 20% OF JURISDICTIONS ARE PARTICIPATING IN TITLE IV-E KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAMS, DOWN FROM OVER 40% OF JURISDICTIONS UNDER TEMPORARY FLEXIBILITIES AVAILABLE IN FY20

Title IV-E agencies have the option to receive funding for evidence-based kinship navigator programs that have been reviewed and rated by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse as meeting promising, supported, or well-supported practice standards. Kinship navigator programs help relative or kin caregivers learn about and access a range of programs and services that strengthen caregivers’ ability to care for the child they are raising.²⁸

As the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse began reviewing and rating kinship navigator programs, Public Law (P.L.) 116-260 enacted **temporary flexibilities in FY20**, during the COVID-19 public health emergency period, to allow Title IV-E agencies to claim funds for kinship navigator programs that would be, or were in the process of being, evaluated for the purpose of building an evidence base to later determine whether the program meets the Title IV-E evidence based standard requirements.²⁹ During this period, the federal match requirements were temporarily modified to provide federal reimbursements for 100% of kinship navigator program costs. Based on claims data, 27 states and one Tribe had approved kinship navigator program plans during this temporary period.³⁰

As of February 2026, the **Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse has approved seven kinship navigator programs** – two are rated as promising practices, four are rated as supported practices, and one is rated as a well-supported practice.³¹ One additional program, the Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator Program, is currently being reviewed by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse as well.³² As of January 2026, there are **11 states and one territory** that have been approved to operate an evidence-based kinship navigator

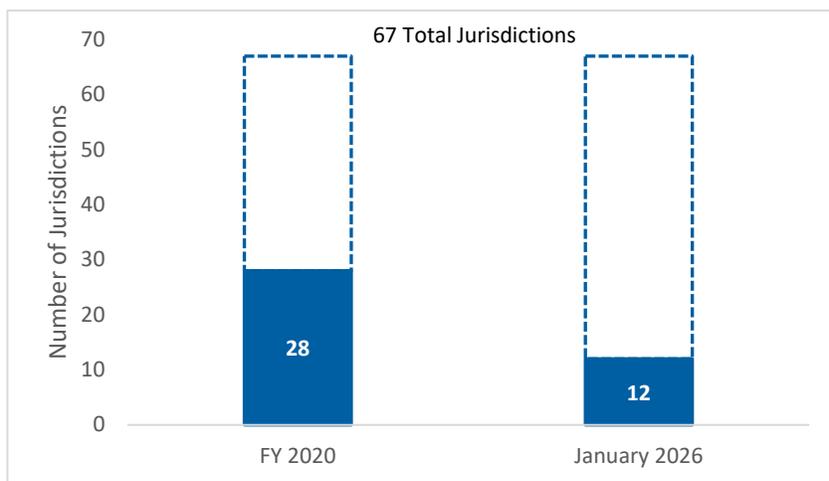
program(s): Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, Washington.³³ Table 3 highlights which of the seven approved kinship navigator programs are used by each of these jurisdictions. The Foster Kinship Navigator Program is the most popularly used kinship navigator program, with four states using it. Ohio is the only state implementing two kinship navigator programs.^{iv}

Table 3. Twelve jurisdictions have implemented at least one of the seven available Title IV-E Kinship Navigator Programs, January 2026

Title IV-E Agency	Title IV-E Kinship Navigator Program Implemented
Colorado	Colorado Kinnected Kinship Navigator Program
Delaware	Kinship Interdisciplinary Navigation Technologically Advanced Model (KIN-TECH™)
Iowa	Ohio’s Kinship Supports Intervention/ProtectOHIO
Minnesota	Foster Kinship Navigator Program
Nebraska	Arizona Kinship Support Services
Nevada	Foster Kinship Navigator Program
Ohio	Ohio’s Kinship Supports Intervention/ProtectOHIO, 30 Days to Family
Puerto Rico	Ohio’s Kinship Supports Intervention/ProtectOHIO
South Carolina	Foster Kinship Navigator Program
Utah	Foster Kinship Navigator Program
Virginia	Washington State Kinship Navigator
Washington	Washington State Kinship Navigator

As depicted in Figure 5, the number of jurisdictions approved to operate an evidence-based kinship navigator program has **declined from FY20 (28 jurisdictions) to January 2026 (12 jurisdictions) with the temporary flexibilities ending**. As of January 2026, 55 jurisdictions have the opportunity to participate in operating kinship navigator programs but were not doing so.

Figure 5. Fewer jurisdictions have implemented an evidence-based kinship navigator program as of January 2026 compared to those that did so under temporary flexibilities in FY20



^{iv} For more information on the Title IV-E Kinship Navigator Program, see: <https://acf.gov/cb/grant-funding/kinship-navigator-program>

CONCLUSION

Kinship care is often the recommended option for children who cannot safely remain in their homes.

Between 38% and 43% of children live with relatives or kin upon entering care, while in foster care, or upon exiting care. Thus, most children in foster care still live in non-kinship settings. Older children are less likely to live with relatives or kin compared to younger children; specifically, nearly half of children birth to age 10 live with relatives, while only a quarter of 17-year-olds live with relatives.

To increase the number of children in kinship care, **states could look to broaden the definition** of relative or kin. There is variation in how states define “relative” in the context of kinship caregivers. Some states have broad definitions that include a wide range of potential relatives, while others have narrow or specific definitions that limit the family members who would be eligible to serve as a kinship caregiver. Almost every state includes fictive kin in their definition. In some states, broadening the definition of relative or kin would require changes to states’ statutes. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) could consider providing policy guidance, similar to other policy guidance put out by ACF on various foster care standards (e.g., [National Model Foster Family Home Licensing Standards](#)), differentiating expectations for kin versus non-kin.^v

The traditional licensing process may deter relatives or kin from providing kinship care, so ACF finalized a rule that 1) **allows states and Tribal Title IV-E agencies to submit claims for Title IV-E foster care maintenance payments when a child is placed in a relative or kinship home licensed under separate licensing and approval standards** for kinship homes and 2) requires agencies to ensure that kinship foster family homes receive equal Title IV-E foster care maintenance payments to those of licensed or approved non-relative foster family homes.³⁴

ACF has seen a 41% increase in jurisdictions that amended their Title IV-E plans to adopt separate licensure standards, from 17 in April 2025 to 24 in February 2026 – though this still represents less than 40% of total jurisdictions. Thus, despite increased flexibility, many jurisdictions have yet to adopt specific kinship licensing standards that would allow them to claim Title IV-E foster care maintenance payments funds for such placements.

Some states have begun working toward adopting separate licensure standards but have yet to formally update their Title IV-E plans, so more progress could be made in the coming months and years. ACF could consider providing state-specific technical assistance to facilitate the transition to kinship licensure.

Only a few states are participating in the Title IV-E Kinship Navigator Programs. During the COVID-19 public health emergency, P.L. 116-260 temporarily modified the kinship navigator program to allow Title IV-E agencies to claim federal reimbursements for 100% of the program costs. It also temporarily waived Title IV-E evidence based standards, allowing Title IV-E agencies to claim funds for kinship navigator programs that would be, or were in the process of being, evaluated for the purpose of building an evidence base to later determine whether the program meets the Title IV-E evidence based standard requirements. During this period, around 42% of jurisdictions had approved kinship navigator program plans.

^v This could build on the final ‘Separate Licensing or Approval Standards for Relative or Kinship Foster Family Homes’ rule, which states, “We encourage agencies to define relative and kin in a way that is inclusive of Tribal custom and adopt a broad definition of relative and kin for purposes of licensing and approval standards.”

Since that time-limited period of temporary flexibility, the Prevention Services Clearinghouse has approved seven programs, but fewer jurisdictions (less than 20%) are approved to operate evidence-based programs. This represents an untapped opportunity to help relative or kin caregivers learn about and access a range of evidence-based programs and services that strengthen their ability to provide care. Beginning in FY26 and through FY29, Congress authorized \$10 million annually for ACF to implement discretionary Kinship Navigator grants. States could leverage these grants to further strengthen their kinship navigation efforts.

Overall, while states, Tribes, and territories are making progress toward increasing kinship caregiving, the potential is not fully realized.

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