



## OhioKAN

### New Jersey: Kinship Navigator Program

#### Research Summary

**Title of Program:** *Kinship Cares* Enhanced Kinship Navigator Program (New Jersey)

**Years of Operation:** The initial implementation and evaluation period for the *Kinship Cares* program was 2009 to 2012. The program has operated continuously since 2012.

**Number of Families Served:** During the initial implementation and evaluation period, 437 kinship caregivers and 607 children in two counties utilized *Kinship Cares*. Since 2012, the Kinship Navigator Program has expanded services to seven counties in New Jersey, serving families who are outside the public child welfare system.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, 1,050 families sought wraparound navigation services.<sup>6</sup> About 300 more children are served annually, but those families only seek help with applying for legal guardianship and do not utilize wraparound navigation services.<sup>6</sup>

**Cost of Program:** The *Kinship Cares* program was initially awarded a federal Fostering Connections grant and an additional \$500,000 from The Children's Bureau to pilot the enhanced navigator program.<sup>6</sup> Current annual funding for *Kinship Cares* is \$900,000.<sup>6</sup>

**Funding Source:** Federal funding to implement the Kinship Navigator program was initially provided by the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. In 2019, funding is provided by the State of New Jersey.<sup>6</sup>

**Description of the Program:** The Children's Home Society of New Jersey (CHSofNJ) received federal funding to design, implement, and evaluate an enhanced kinship navigator program entitled *Kinship Cares* from 2009-2012.<sup>1</sup> CHSofNJ is a non-profit social services agency based in Trenton, New Jersey. The enhanced navigator program built upon an already existing 13-year-old, state-funded, traditional kinship navigator program in New Jersey.<sup>1</sup> Key to expanding the Kinship Navigator program was the addition of six professional ombudsmen who are able to work with kinship families for up to six months as opposed to one month in the traditional state navigation program.<sup>7</sup> Eligibility criteria remained the same across both programs: biological parents could not reside in the caregiver home, the kinship caregiver could not have an open public child welfare case, the caregiver would have to show proof of relationship to the child and/or custody status of the child, and the caregiver income would have to meet income requirements for the *Kinship Wraparound* annual \$500.<sup>7</sup>

All navigator services are accessible through the 211 toll free hotline.<sup>3</sup> *Kinship Cares* was initially implemented and evaluated in Ocean and Mercer counties, two demographically diverse counties in New Jersey (urban vs. suburban/rural). It now operates in seven counties.

Eight major components comprise the *Kinship Cares* program in New Jersey.

1. Six professional ombudsmen (male and female) staff the *Kinship Cares* program. Their mission is to “advocate for kin caregivers” and children in kinship care to get the services and supports they need.<sup>5</sup>
2. When assigned a case, an ombudsman makes an initial home visit to establish program eligibility for kinship families.<sup>5</sup> If families are eligible for services, the ombudsman conducts a comprehensive needs assessment with the caregiver that helps to develop the Family Service Plan<sup>5</sup>. During the program evaluation, the ombudsman also gave families pre and post-intervention questionnaires<sup>5</sup>.
3. After the initial home visit, the ombudsman provides intensive ongoing support to kinship families, including follow-up home visits and direct assistance with linkage to services.<sup>5</sup> Among other actions, the ombudsman can accompany kinship families to school meetings, social services offices, and healthcare appointments. The ombudsman would model self-advocacy skills for the families to help the families learn to navigate complex systems<sup>5</sup>. In *Kinship Cares*, the ombudsman works with families for up to six months (in contrast to the traditional kinship navigation program in New Jersey where services ended after one month)<sup>5</sup>.
4. Ombudsmen facilitate kinship caregiver support groups, children/youth support groups, educational trainings for caregivers, and provide current information about local resources.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the six ombudsmen provide community education sessions on the distinct needs of kinship families for both human service professionals and the kinship families themselves.<sup>5</sup>
5. Ombudsmen work with families in gaining Kinship Legal Guardian status and in applying for the Kinship Legal Guardian annual subsidy.<sup>5</sup>
6. The program works towards developing evaluation methodology to profile and document kinship families’ needs and to strengthen program outcomes during the initial evaluation period, 2009-2012.<sup>2</sup>
7. Initially in both evaluation counties, a Kinship Advisory Council was created and comprised of kinship caregivers who identified specific areas where they needed support. Kinship caregivers are encouraged to attend advisory meetings and to take a leadership role on the Advisory Council.
8. In all seven counties, the *Kinship Cares* program holds social gatherings for kinship caregivers and their children that build community and support the formation of informal support networks amongst program participants.

**Who benefits from the program?** Kinship Caregivers and their families in seven New Jersey counties are eligible for the *Kinship Cares* program.<sup>2</sup> The kinship caregivers have to demonstrate eligibility through income, proof of legal custody, and/or other proof of relationship to the child.<sup>5</sup> Most significantly, the kinship caregiver and child cannot have an open case with the public child welfare system in New Jersey and take part in the program.

**What services/benefits do they receive?** Kinship caregivers receive intensive case management, which is completed within 4 to 6 months of opening a case.<sup>5</sup> With the assistance of an ombudsman, the families complete a Needs Assessment and Family Service Plan.<sup>5</sup> After the initial home visit, the ombudsman provides ongoing visits, I&R with direct support in service linkage, support groups, and informal social gatherings with other kinship parents.<sup>5</sup> Ombudsmen

link eligible caregivers with \$500 in financial support and help them apply for legal guardianship in New Jersey.<sup>5</sup>

**How do they receive the benefits/services?** Families receive the services through ongoing case management, “hands-on” I&R, home visits, social events, and support groups<sup>5</sup>.

**Where are the services provided?** Homes, CHSofNJ, schools, medical offices, social services administration buildings, and other community locations.

### **Sources:**

1. Feldman, L. H., & Fertig, A. (2013). Measuring the impact of enhanced kinship navigator services for informal kinship caregivers using an experimental design. *Child welfare*, 92(6).
2. Children’s Home Society of New Jersey Organizational Website, 2019: <https://www.chsofnj.org/kinship-and-kinship-navigator-services/#.XM9ehKjIV>
3. Kinship Cares Program Manual (CHSofNJ, 2019): <https://www.chsofnj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/KINSHIP-CARES-Program-Manual-v.1-FINAL.pdf>
4. Understanding and Implementing CHSofNJ’s *Kinship Cares* Navigator Model (CHSofNJ, 2019): [https://www.chsofnj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Program-Overview\\_CHSofNJ-Kinship-Cares\\_3.1.19.pdf](https://www.chsofnj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Program-Overview_CHSofNJ-Kinship-Cares_3.1.19.pdf)
5. Final Evaluation Report submitted to Children’s Bureau (CHSofNJ, 2012): [https://www.chsofnj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Final-Evaluation-Report\\_CHSofNJ-Kinship-Cares\\_12.28.2012.pdf](https://www.chsofnj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Final-Evaluation-Report_CHSofNJ-Kinship-Cares_12.28.2012.pdf)
6. Delores Bryant, Children’s Home Society of NJ representative, personal communication, May 2019
7. CHSofNJ Kinship Cares Enhanced Navigator Program Brief, 4 pages, 2019