



INTRODUCTION

Public child welfare agencies nationwide are seeking effective strategies to identify and engage extended family networks to care for and protect children who cannot safely live with their parents. An adaptation of traditional business process mapping, kinship process mapping (KPM) offers a standardized method public child welfare agencies can use to better understand how to make the most of a valuable resource: kinship care.

Using KPM, child welfare leaders can gain insight into barriers to kinship placements and potential strategies for improvement. This overview explains why child welfare leaders should consider using KPM to assess their existing kinship care practices, what kinship process mapping involves, and how to make KPM a valuable experience for the entire agency.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO KINSHIP CARE

Studies have shown that kinship care for children involved in the child welfare system can be a ‘win-win’ for all concerned. Kinship care offers greater stability than non-kin foster care, reduces the emotional trauma often associated with separation from one’s parents, and helps keep siblings together.¹ Kinship care can prevent the need for more restrictive placements, such as shelters and group homes that become necessary when family-based placements are not available. Kinship care also honors longstanding cultural norms of relatives stepping in to care for children during times of family crisis.

Despite general agreement that kinship care often benefits children, child welfare agencies continue to struggle with basic questions about how to connect children with kin whenever possible. These struggles are natural given that child welfare systems were structured to place children with strangers, not with kin. In trying to shift toward systems that value a child’s extended family network, child welfare agencies are finding that current rules, regulations and practices create barriers to kinship care. KPM facilitates child welfare agencies’ assessment of significant barriers to kinship care and lays the foundation for removing those barriers to achieve better results for children and families.

State definitions of kinship care differ significantly, but increasingly trend toward an expansive definition that includes adults who are related to a family by blood, marriage or adoption, as well as people who have a “family-like” relationship, even if not blood related. This publication uses this broader definition of kinship care.

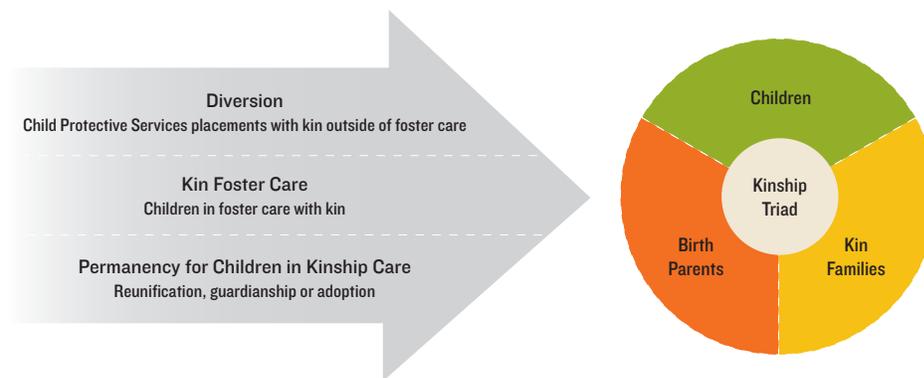
According to data from the federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), 400,540 children were in foster care in the United States as of September 30, 2011. Over a quarter of the children—107,995—were in the custody of the state public child welfare system and placed in kinship care.

¹ Conway, T., & Hutson, R. (2007). Is kinship care good for kids? *Center for Law and Social Policy*. http://www.clasp.org/publications/is_kinship_care_good.pdf.

A NEW APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING KINSHIP CARE

In 2010, the Annie E. Casey Foundation began to examine policies and practices public child welfare agencies use when considering whether to place children with kin. This work provides insight into the variety of circumstances under which children come to live with kin, and the range of supports available to kinship families to promote children's safety, well-being and permanence. Figure 1 depicts the core elements of kinship systems.

Figure 1: An Approach for Kinship Care



Casey's assessment of state and local policies and practices that comprise kinship systems has revealed that many well-intentioned policies and practices strive to place children with people they know. However, many barriers impede the application of these policies and practices, often with negative repercussions for families. These include:

- missed opportunities for children to be connected to and/or placed with people they already know;
- limited support for kin families to nurture the children in their care;
- insufficient attention to securing a permanent home for the child through reunification, adoption or guardianship; or
- compromise in the well-being and safety of children placed with kin.

To help agencies better understand their kinship care systems, Casey worked with public agencies in Tennessee and Connecticut to apply some of the principles of business process mapping to child welfare. This experience led to the development of a kinship process mapping method that agencies can use to identify and remedy barriers and inconsistencies in their policies and practices.

KINSHIP PROCESS MAPPING

Kinship process mapping is a standardized approach to defining and analyzing an agency's processes for engaging kin in caring for children. Like business process mapping, KPM is often used to identify barriers to optimal performance and develop strategies for improvement.ⁱⁱ Ultimately, KPM enables organizations to move from their "as is" (undesirable) environment to a planned "to be" (desirable) state.

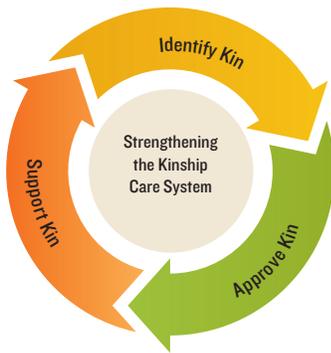
In KPM, teams review and analyze how kinship processes are supposed to work, and use an innovative visualization approach to quickly gather information from frontline staff. The team then develops a

ⁱⁱ Ross, C. F., & Moore, C. (2006). Business process definition, improvement and management.

detailed diagram of each process and shares it with frontline workers. A facilitator helps workers to enrich the diagram, adding new levels of information to provide insight into barriers to success and possible solutions. The participation of caseworkers who perform the work is crucial to identifying formal and informal policies and practices that limit success.

KPM uses facilitated dialogue with frontline staff to understand three key functions of the kinship care system (Figure 2):

Figure 2: The KPM Method



- *Identifying kin* includes the steps involved in finding and engaging natural networks that can support families involved in the child welfare system. Strategies to identify kin may include talking to parents and youth about their family support system, mining case records, convening a family meeting and using search technology.
- *Approving kin* as placement resources includes the regulatory and other steps involved in ensuring that kin can provide safe care and protection for children, and includes criminal background checks, fingerprinting, CPS history, training, home studies and waivers for non-safety licensing standards. This includes placing children with kin in custody as licensed foster parents, as unlicensed but approved foster care placements, or in non-custody placements with or without court involvement.
- *Supporting kin* addresses how the agency works with children, caregivers and parents throughout the kinship system, either directly or through contracts with community agencies. Support includes helping kin families access government and community benefits, including foster care subsidies, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Medicaid, mental health treatment, legal services and support groups, among others.

KPM rewards organizations by providing them with a clearer picture of their process, the details behind each step of the process, and the barriers that prevent frontline staff from performing these steps in an effective or timely manner. KPM also provides critical information needed to identify barriers and assess where improvements can be made.

Perhaps most important, KPM engages frontline staff in efforts to achieve better outcomes. Too often, barriers and solutions are identified without the input of staff who work most closely with children and families. Using KPM, agency leaders can realign their system to get better outcomes for families through kinship care, while also engaging their frontline workforce to provide firsthand knowledge about families' needs.

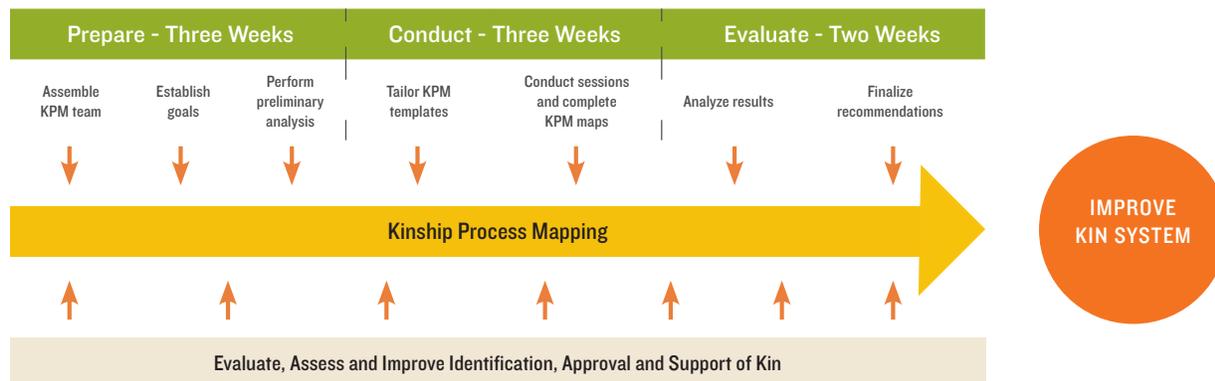
KINSHIP PROCESS MAPPING TIMELINE

Approximately two months are required to implement the three core phases of KPM as shown in Figure 3 on page 4: (1) preparing for KPM; (2) conducting process mapping sessions with a wide range of child welfare staff; and (3) analyzing results and providing recommendations related to KPM findings.

EXECUTIVE-LEVEL SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

Executive-level support and engagement are essential to effectively implement KPM and act on recommendations for system improvements. Executive-level support begins with the decision to proceed with KPM, and continues throughout the KPM process to encourage ongoing participation across all levels of the agency.

Figure 3: Estimated Timeline for Completing the KPM



*These are suggested timeframes that may vary depending on the agency's KPM objectives, number of KPM sessions conducted, etc.

While not expected to participate in KPM discussions, executives play the following vital role:

- understanding the purpose of KPM;
- championing the value of KPM across the agency;
- communicating the relationship between KPM and other initiatives designed to improve outcomes for children and families;
- supporting the work of a kinship team assigned to prepare for, conduct and analyze the results of KPM;
- sharing the analysis and resulting decisions about practice; and,
- providing leadership and guidance on policy or practice changes needed to improve kinship services.

Executives also support mid-level management in the KPM process. In most child welfare organizations, mid-level managers are vital to the success of any effort given their relationships with frontline staff who carry out the work and with executives who are responsible for achieving outcomes. Executives and mid-level managers can work together to ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of why the organization is implementing KPM and how it can ultimately help children and families.

CONCLUSION

Federal and state policy promotes kinship care for children whenever they can't stay safely with their parents. Despite evidence that placement with and connections to kin can reduce trauma and promote well-being, many child welfare agencies still face obstacles in matching their policies and practices with the preference for kinship care. When used as designed, KPM can help agencies identify these obstacles and develop solutions to achieve their kinship care goals.

ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For additional tools and resources on kinship process mapping, visit www.aecf.org.