



## Children's Action Alliance

### SAFE IS SAFE:

## How a Double Standard of Safety Can Hurt Children in Kinship Foster Care

All children who live in foster care require financial support so their temporary families can provide them safe care and bring stability to their lives. But children removed from their homes by the Department of Child Safety (DCS) and placed with relatives or family friends – known as kinship families – are often missing the support that comes to licensed foster families. They miss out on the financial support from licensing payments and the one-on-one support from licensing agencies. Kinship families face many barriers to becoming licensed foster parents because DCS applies different standards to determining a kinship home safe for placement and determining that same home safe and qualified for foster home licensing.

### Home called safe for kids but can't be licensed

"Anne" was an aunt to two children placed with her by DCS. She resided in a manufactured home. To meet licensing requirements, she was advised that she would need to install home skirting, fix holes in walls, fix the heating and cooling system, and have bedrooms with doors for the children.

These renovations would be incredibly costly and Anne did not get licensed. Even without the renovations, the children continued to live with her, but could not receive the licensed foster home reimbursement.

### KIN CAREGIVERS OFFER LOVE AND LIFELONG FAMILY CONNECTIONS

National research confirms that abused and neglected children placed in kinship care experience increased stability, higher levels of permanency and better behavioral and mental health. When kinship caregivers are supported and prepared, their involvement reduces the negative impact of insufficient income, stress, and the responsibility for caring for children who have special needs.<sup>1</sup>

Due to these benefits, many states offer significantly more support to kinship families. Some provide reimbursement at the full foster care rate upon placement. Some states issue provisional licenses which are time limited and allow a kinship caregiver to receive licensing payments after basic safety checks.<sup>2</sup>

### BARRIERS FOR KINSHIP FOSTER HOME LICENSING

There are a number of specific barriers that make pursuing foster home licensing harder for kinship families in Arizona.

**Foster parent training and the foster home licensing process are not well designed for kinship families.** DCS uses videos to introduce families to the foster home licensing process, but they are not inviting to kinship families. For example, some kinship families may never make it to video #3 when detail is first shared about the ability of kin families to become licensed. Kin caregivers who want to become licensed must participate in additional hours of training and must submit a large number of documents. These kin caregivers have immediate responsibilities

to support the children already in their care. The significant steps of the licensing process can be overwhelming.

**Families face financial expenses to prepare for licensing.** Expenses come from preparing the home for inspection, taking CPR/First Aid classes, and requiring every adult in the home to get a physical examination. These costs can add up to over \$600 for families without a pool and rise to over \$2,500 if the family needs to install a pool fence.

**Different processes for criminal history background checks prevent many kinship caregivers from getting licensed.** When placing children in homes with relatives, DCS submits fingerprints to the

<sup>1</sup> ChildFocuspartners.com: Children in Kinship Care Experience Improved Placement Stability, Higher Levels of Permanency, and Decreased Behavioral Problems: Findings from the Literature; Albany Kinship Summit Drafting Committee. (2017). New directions for child welfare kinship care policy and practice. Child Welfare Journal –Special Issue on Kinship Care, 95(3), 137 – 165.

<sup>2</sup> Information from UT, MN, OK; Beltran, A., & Epstein, H.R. (2013). Improving foster care licensing standards around the United States: Using research findings to effect change.

Department of Public Safety for a criminal background check on all adults in the home to determine safety. For foster home licensing, caregivers must qualify for a Level 1 Fingerprint Clearance Card, which is denied for a broad range of crimes, no matter how far in the past. Even when children are already safely in care, the kinship family may not be able to get licensed. This is a stricter criminal history background standard for licensing than what is required under the federal Adam Walsh Act.

**DCS has been lacking clear policies on waiving non-safety licensing requirements for kinship caregivers.** Since 2008, federal law has allowed waivers for non-safety licensing requirements to help kinship families become licensed, but DCS has not had consistent or written policies on these waivers. In February 2019, DCS adopted waiver guidelines. If they are applied consistently, opportunities for kinship families to become licensed should improve.

## CHILDREN IN KINSHIP FAMILIES MISS VITAL FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Relatives are usually the first choice for placement of children by DCS. They are contacted by DCS with little or no warning and step up in times of crisis to keep their families together. In addition to the responsibility of caring for children who have suffered traumatic experiences and separation from their parents, these relatives face unexpected expenses, such as beds and pool fencing and baby equipment and child care. They have to adapt their housing situations for the children, pay for monthly expenses and special needs, and manage their own challenges of health care and aging. Yet, as unlicensed kinship families, they do not receive the same financial or programmatic support from DCS as licensed foster parents.

Unlicensed kinship families do not receive the foster care payment that averages \$641 per month for licensed families. Instead, unlicensed kinship families qualify for much lower financial support through two sources: (1) the Kinship Caregiver Stipend of \$75 a month per child, which is now received automatically and without regard to income,<sup>3</sup> and (2) a Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF, "child-only" benefit that provides \$164 for the first child and a lesser amount for subsequent children. But because the procedural steps required to obtain TANF are often not completed, a large percentage of children in kinship families go without this minimal assistance. As a result, many kinship families have only \$118.24 they can count on each month to help keep the children in their care safe, healthy, and stable.

3 Arizona Department of Child Safety. (2019). Annual Supportive Resources Report: State Fiscal Year 2019; posted 11/01/19 on <https://dcs.az.gov/reports-data/dcs-reports>

## DCS asks parents to foster more children but won't license them

"Christina and John" were licensed foster parents who adopted two siblings and then gave up their foster home license. A year later, they were asked by DCS to take in two other siblings of their adopted children. They sought to be re-licensed as foster parents. To meet the child-adult ratio licensing requirement, they were told they would need to have a second adult in the home at all times. This is not practical so they did not pursue licensing. Nonetheless, the DCS Case Specialist placed the two additional children with the family. Without being licensed, they did not receive the foster home payment despite the numerous expenses they absorbed to care for the children.

## Children living with unlicensed kin caregivers miss out on critical financial support



Arizona Department of Child Safety. (2020). Annual Supportive Resources Report: State Fiscal Year 2020; posted 11/01/20 on <https://dcs.az.gov/reports-data/dcs-reports>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Arizona should take clear steps to remove systemic barriers that block support for children in kinship families. Arizona should make safety standards consistent so that all families who are considered safe to care for children placed by DCS can become licensed.

1. DCS and the legislature should streamline processes so that unlicensed kin caregivers automatically receive the “TANF child-only” benefit already in state law.
2. The legislature should, at minimum, double the amount of the Kinship Caregiver Stipend.
3. The Department of Child Safety should implement the new licensing waiver policy and case management practices so that a family who is judged safe to care for children is also judged safe to become a licensed foster home.
4. The Department of Child Safety and state lawmakers should develop systems to provide kinship families with strong assistance through the foster care licensing process.
5. The Department of Child Safety introductory videos and training for prospective foster home parents should be adapted for kinship caregivers.
6. State lawmakers should require a provisional license and a foster home payment to support kin who have children placed by DCS in their care as they go through the licensing process.
7. State law regarding criminal background checks for licensed foster parents should be amended to reflect the mandates of the federal Adam Walsh Act.

## Kinship Families

