



Commonwealth of Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services

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New Service Array Gives Relative Caregivers More Options, Will Help Improve Outcomes for Kids

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By Elizabeth Caywood

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Across the Commonwealth, relatives and fictive kin are unsung heroes of our Kentucky Department for Community Based Services child welfare program.

Kentucky leads the nation in utilization of kin placements: Thousands of families care for children who would otherwise be in foster care. Because of the tremendous commitment from these families, more children have the opportunity to continue to thrive with familiar people and surroundings.

Our department - the state agency that administers protective and family services - is working to give these relative and fictive caregivers access to a better menu of services

to help them care for the children in their homes. This is possible because state legislation passed in 2018 gave my department more flexibility to develop and fund these options, and because of House Bill 2, sponsored by Rep. Chris Fugate and recently signed into law by Governor Matt Bevin. This new law maximizes services available to kinship and fictive caregivers.

This service array, as we call it, includes a comprehensive list of services and supports available to caregivers, and also offers them a choice about what kind of caregiver they want to be classified as, and what that means for the types of assistance they can receive.

Under our new service plan, as soon as caseworkers connect with a relative or fictive caregiver, they will share all custodial options and related service and permanency options for the family. Caregivers will make their selections from the menu of options based on their own preferences and the known and anticipated needs of the child.

This service menu is responsive to all families and incorporates services and benefit programs, utilizing multiple fund sources, from each of DCBS' main program areas and many others administered by other cabinet agencies: cash assistance, Medicaid, health insurance, respite care, child care, foster care, placement supports, and post-permanency supports. This approach ensures a fuller array of services that are more sustainable and allows for empowerment of the caregiver through their ability to choose. Relative and kin caregivers who do not want any of the "strings" that come along with public funds and do not seek government intrusion any further in their lives can choose not to select assistance. Conversely, relative and kin caregivers can choose to become a foster parent, including the newly launched child-specific foster home, if that option best meets their preferences and the child's actual or anticipated needs.

We are frequently asked about Kinship Care cash assistance – which was frozen in 2013 because of lack of funding. I've been with DCBS since 1999 and saw the start of this program and its good intentions. I also saw how, within years of its implementation, budget issues made it increasingly difficult to sustain. It was draining money from other

family assistance programs, and it was not shown to increase permanency outcomes – reunification with birth parents or permanent custody by the relative -- for children.

Modest but worthwhile supports were created in the years since 2013, including a Kinship Support Hotline, a Kinship Care Advisory Group facilitated by the Kentucky Youth Advocates, and population of kin caregiver support groups statewide.

Finally, under Governor and First Lady Bevin's charge, we have been empowered to do more for this population. Now, DCBS is championing the state's child welfare transformation.

Kinship and fictive caregivers are key to this transformation: Children separated from their birth families who can live with someone they know have a better sense of belonging, less trauma, and more stability. Our leadership and staff greatly value kin caregivers and work every day to ease their placement issues and to provide them services that are sustainable and responsible. To say otherwise or to stand up an unsustainable service would be disingenuous.

We shaped our service array with guidance from national experts, court officials, and community partners, and also conducted focus groups with DCBS staff, relative and fictive kin caregivers, youth in care, and former foster youth.

Now, a greater lift and patience are needed for quality implementation, evaluation, and ongoing improvements. We are still listening to good ideas. On behalf of the families, we have to get this right. We need time to clear confusion to make this massive shift. Never before has DCBS had such opportunity to make such a difference for Kentucky children. Thousands of Kentucky kinship families have made their commitment. Now, they have ours.

Additional information is available at <http://chfs.ky.gov/>.

