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Kinship Caregivers and Child Welfare

Understanding Your Role and Options

NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

For questions, please contact
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HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE DOCUMENT

Welcome! This document is designed to be interactive and easy to navigate. Here's how to get the most out of it:

- **Table of Contents:** At the beginning, you'll find a clickable table of contents. Simply click on any section title to jump directly to that part of the document.
- **Embedded Links:** Throughout the document, you'll see clickable links that take you to relevant websites or other sections within this document for deeper context or additional resources.
- **Navigation Tips:** If you ever want to return to the top or explore a different section, use the table of contents or follow the internal links provided.

Feel free to explore and click around—this document is built to guide you efficiently through the information you need.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE



When children experience disruptions in their lives due to abuse, neglect, or dependency, the presence of familiar, loving adults can be a powerful source of healing and stability. Kinship care—placement with relatives or close family friends—honors the child's existing bonds and family relationships, helping them maintain a sense of belonging during uncertain times. Some families work out arrangements on their own to use kinship caregivers before a child is at risk, while other times, the formal child welfare system gets involved. Kinship caregivers play a vital role in providing safety, continuity, and emotional support to children in need. This document is designed to guide and empower you in your caregiving journey, ensuring you are aware of the resources, support, and benefits you and/or the child(ren) placed with you may be qualified to receive.

For a brief overview of the purposes and functions of the child welfare system, please visit this factsheet made available by the Child Welfare Information Gateway titled "How the Child Welfare System Works."

Who is this guide for?

- A kinship caregiver who is currently caring for a child who is in custody of a child welfare agency (foster care) or serving as a Temporary Safety Provider (TSP) of a child whose family has an open assessment or in-home child welfare case;
- A youth in foster care placed with a kinship caregiver; or
- Anyone who is looking to understand the resources, supports, and benefits that a child in foster care may benefit from when placed with kin.

Who are "kinship caregivers[1]"?

- RELATIVE KIN are related directly to the child by **blood, marriage, or adoption**.
- NONRELATIVE KIN are individuals with a **"family like"** relationship with the child. If a child is a member of a State-recognized or Federally recognized tribe, nonrelative kin also includes any member of that tribe, regardless if there is a family-like relationship with the child.
    - *Examples of nonrelative kin could be neighbors, friends of the family, mentors, coaches, teachers, faith community members, etc.*

What if I am caring for a child or youth who is NOT in DSS custody or involved in an open case with child welfare?

This guide is for kinship caregivers caring for a child in foster care or serving as a Temporary Safety Provider (TSP) during an open child welfare case. If the child in your care does not meet this criterion, these options may not apply. Contact your county department of social services and ask to speak to someone in Economic Services to explore public assistance.

Why do children and families become involved with child welfare, and how are kin involved?

When a department of social services (DSS) accepts a report of child abuse or neglect, a DSS caseworker meets with the family to determine if conditions are present that pose a major threat to the child's safety. During this assessment, if DSS determines the child is not safe in their home, DSS explores the use of a Temporary Safety Provider (TSP) or Foster Care.

Temporary Safety Providers (TSP)

What is a Temporary Safety Provider?



A Temporary Safety Provider (TSP) is someone — often a relative or close family friend — who steps in briefly to help keep a child safe without the child being removed from their parents' legal custody. This is used only during a short-term crisis when there are safety concerns in the home that can be resolved quickly. While the parent is the only one who makes the plan to use a TSP, the local county child welfare agency must approve the TSP. The family works with their caseworker and safety network to come up with a plan, and the child stays with the TSP temporarily while the parent addresses the safety concern.

If you agree to be a TSP, the child welfare caseworker will discuss and assess several requirements with you which can be found on the DSS-6193 Initial Provider Assessment.

[1] While NCDHHS DSS policy uses the term 'caretaker' in its manuals to align with N.C. General Statute, family partners and stakeholders who reviewed this document requested that this and other public-facing materials use the term 'caregiver' to be more family-friendly.

Why Would a Family Use a TSP?

- There's a specific safety concern in the home (e.g., a parent needs a few days to stabilize or make changes).
- The goal is to prevent the need for a formal court-ordered removal. DSS may recommend removal to the Court if safety concerns cannot be resolved, but using a TSP can help families address issues quickly and avoid that step.

What you should do as a TSP:

- Provide a safe place for the child to stay short-term.
- Support the parent's plan to resolve the safety issue. This plan is developed through a Child and Family Team meeting.
- Stay in close contact with the caseworker and follow the agreed-upon plan.
- Help the child feel safe and stable during this brief time.
- Provide sufficient resources to meet the child's basic needs (shelter, food, clothing, etc.). A plan can also be developed with the parents and child welfare agency during a Child and Family Team meeting about any needs for the child and how these can be met.

When a child is placed with a TSP:

- Parents retain legal custody of the child.
- Parents retain the right to make major decisions about the child's care, medical, or educational needs.
- Parents should be able to resolve immediate safety concerns quickly and TSP placements should not be long-term. When immediate safety concerns cannot be resolved quickly, court involvement should be considered to allow parents to maintain their constitutional right to due processes. If court involvement occurs, you may still be considered to be a kinship placement.

Foster Care



Foster care occurs when a child/youth is placed in the custody of a county DSS. This happens when DSS provides evidence to the courts about the reasons for removing the child from their parents, and the court orders a child to be placed in foster care. Kinship foster care is when a child/youth is placed with a relative or kin. In situations where a child comes into foster care, DSS is required to explore all adult relatives and other people with legal custody of any siblings the child may have for placement. Even if kin can't serve as a placement resource, they should be engaged early and often,

as they may serve as part of the child and family's support network or a connection to other relatives available to be a placement resource.

Children and youth remain in foster care until the court system determines the best place for the child to live permanently. Ideally, the child will be reunified with their birth parents (returned permanently to their home). For this to happen, birth parents are given expectations they must meet for the child to safely return home. It is common for the court and child welfare system to begin to plan for other potential permanent options for the child, where a legal caregiver role is established through adoption, guardianship, or custody. This is called concurrent planning. Concurrent planning in foster care means working on two plans at the same time: helping parents try to reunify with their child while also preparing another permanent option, like adoption or guardianship, if reunification isn't possible. This way, children can achieve stability more quickly without waiting for one plan to end before another begins.

Kinship Foster Care: Unlicensed versus Licensed

Unlicensed kinship care means you're caring for a child in your family or close network, whom DSS has custody of, without going through the formal foster parent licensing process. You may still work with child welfare, but you don't receive the same financial support or training as licensed caregivers. The Unlicensed Kinship Care Program provides financial support to eligible unlicensed kinship caregivers of children in foster care. Please refer to the FAQ Foster Care section in the Appendix.



Licensed kinship care means you've completed the foster parent licensing process and been issued a license by NCDHHS DSS while still caring for a child you're related to or know well. This allows you to receive monthly financial assistance and access to a licensing agency for ongoing support and training — just like non-relative foster parents. Licensing is not a requirement, but kinship caregivers may choose to become licensed foster parents and should discuss this option with their county child welfare agency or a private licensing agency.

How to Become a Licensed Kinship Caregiver

Foster Home Licensing Overview

Kinship caregivers typically already have a child placed in their home before the licensure process begins. Licensure formalizes the arrangement, ensuring the caregiver receives the same training, support, and resources as other foster parents while continuing to care for their relative. North Carolina requires foster parents to be licensed through the NCDHHS Division of Social Services by working with their local county DSS or a licensed private agency. The licensing process includes training, a comprehensive home safety assessment, background checks, and other child safety assurances. For a kinship home to be licensed, the following requirements must be met:

- Be at least 18 years old (a waiver is required for under the age of 21)
- Have a stable home and income (income can be waived if the family has support)
- Maintain a drug-free environment
- Be willing to be fingerprinted and pass a criminal records check
- Complete all required training and be licensed in the state of NC




Foster Home Licensing Steps

1. Watch the Foster Parent Orientation Video: View the required orientation and save your certificate of completion.
2. Choose a Supervising Agency: Select either your local county Department of Social Services (DSS) or a licensed foster care agency. Selecting an agency to represent you during this process is an important decision. We suggest you contact several agencies to discuss your fostering goals to make an informed choice.
3. Attend and participate in an agency orientation session hosted by your chosen agency to learn about their process and expectations.
4. Complete an approved pre-service training such as MAPP Foundations or National Training Development Curriculum (NTDC). Kinship caregivers — those related to the child by blood, marriage, or adoption — may complete the reduced 15-hour NTDC Kinship course, which is the only approved shortened training for kinship families. Kinship families who are interested in becoming a licensed therapeutic foster parent must take the 30 hours pre-service plus 10 hours of therapeutic specific training, totaling 40 hours. What is the difference between being a licensed family foster parent and a licensed therapeutic foster parent?

   ** If you are interested in becoming a licensed foster parent for both children related to you and children not related to you, you should discuss with your agency the need to complete the full 30-hour pre-service training. The NTDC's reduced training hours will only allow you to be licensed as a kinship caregiver for children who are related to you by blood, marriage, or adoption.*
5. Completion of Mutual Home Assessment by your supervising agency. This includes safety evaluation of the home, fire inspection, medical evaluations, criminal background checks of all adult household members etc. This is not the same as an adoption home study.
6. Your supervising agency will complete your Foster Home Application and submit it to the NCDHHS Division of Social Services for review and licensure.
7. Kinship caregivers are not required to be licensed foster parents for children who are not their kin. If I am licensed as a kinship placement, can I be a licensed foster parent for children who are not related to me?
8. Licensed kinship parents in North Carolina must renew their license every 2 years, completing fire and safety inspections, background checks, medical evaluations etc., and 20 hours of in-service training.

To learn more about kinship licensing, please visit FAQ Kinship Foster Home Licensing section in the Appendix.

OPTIONS FOR PERMANENCE

What does "permanency" mean?

North Carolina law recognizes several legal options to achieve permanency — a stable, long-term living arrangement. Local county DSS agencies are required to work with the parents to reunify children with them, unless a court orders otherwise. If reunification is no longer a permanent plan, other permanent plans are considered. This process is called concurrent planning, which means the agency works toward reunification while at the same time preparing an alternative permanent plan, such as adoption, guardianship, or custody, so children do not experience unnecessary delays in achieving stability. As a kinship caregiver, you may be considered for one of the following permanency plans:



- Adoption
- Guardianship
- Custody

Permanency Planning Review (PPR) Meetings

Permanency Planning Review (PPR) meetings are required by NC law to ensure that every child in foster care has a timely, stable, and permanent plan. These meetings review progress toward reunification with parents and consider alternative permanency options if reunification is not possible. Kinship caregivers provide critical insight into the child's daily life, emotional wellbeing, and long-term stability. Their perspective helps agencies and courts evaluate whether permanency options like guardianship or custody are appropriate. Caregivers may also express their willingness or limitations in providing long-term care. Kinship caregivers should be **formally invited, fully informed, and actively engaged** in PPRs. Their voice is essential in shaping the child's path to a safe and permanent home.

Choosing the Right Path:

Each option has different legal, emotional, and financial implications. The child's needs, parent's circumstances, and caregiver's desires all play a role. You have the right to seek legal guidance on the various options. DSS and the Court will consider things like:

- The child's relationship with their birth parents
- The child's familial and tribal connections (especially in Indian Child Welfare Act cases)
- The child's age and preferences (if appropriate)
- Your willingness and ability to provide a safe, stable home

Adoption

What it means: You become the child's legal parent, with full parental rights and responsibilities.

Key Features:

- The parent has either voluntarily relinquished their rights, or their rights were terminated by the court. Terminating a parent's rights is a serious action and is considered only when there is clear and convincing evidence showing that specific legal grounds exist and that termination is in the child's best interest.
- The child in your care may be eligible for adoption assistance (financial support). For more information about adoption assistance, go to the FAQ Adoption Assistance section in the Appendix.
- Youth ages 12 and older are required to give consent to be adopted.
- The child will receive a new birth certificate listing you as the parent.
- If a parent relinquishes their rights specifically to you, a Post-Adoption Mediated Contact Agreement can be voluntarily utilized for the child and their parents to maintain safe, meaningful connections.

Guardianship

What it means: You are appointed by the court to make decisions for the child, but parental rights are not terminated.

Key features:

- You have legal authority over the child's education, health, and welfare.
- The case is closed, and DSS is no longer involved.
- Parents may still have visitation rights.
- You may qualify for the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP financial assistance). To learn more, go to the FAQ Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program section in the Appendix.
- Guardianship may only be terminated by the court if it's no longer in the child's best interest, or if the guardian is found unfit, unwilling, or unable to fulfill their duties.

Custody

What it means: The court grants you legal custody of the child, which is different from guardianship or adoption.

Key features:

- You have the right to make decisions about the child's daily care and well-being.
- Parental rights are not terminated, and parents may retain some rights or visitation.
- DSS involvement ends, and the case is closed, however courts may ask to continue reviewing the case for a period of time.
- This option is often used when the caregiver is a relative or kin and adoption or guardianship is not appropriate.
- You will not receive any financial assistance unless you pursue child support.

RESOURCES



For Youth in Foster Care

LINKS: Independent Living Services for Transitional Age Youth

The purpose of the LINKS Program is to build a network of relevant services with youth so that they will have ongoing connections to family, friends, mentors, the community, employers, education, financial assistance, skills training, and other resources to help them transition into adulthood.

The following youth/young adults are eligible for LINKS funding, unless they have more than $10,000 in a personal bank account or are an undocumented non-citizen:

- Youth in foster care, ages 14 to 21
- Young adults currently or formerly in foster care, ages 18-21
- Youth who left foster care through adoption or guardianship (including KinGAP) at age 16 or older

County child welfare agencies use LINKS funding every year to support youth transitioning to adulthood. The funds can be used to purchase supplies and materials, provide incentives for youth participation in programming, provide goods or services to individual youth and young adults, and for other costs of operating the LINKS program.

In addition, there are LINKS funds available to assist individual youth and young adults with Transitional and Housing costs. Eligible youth may receive up to $3,000 in Transitional Funds every year to assist with transitional costs, such as educational or vocational achievement, transportation, or finding a job.

Housing funds up to $1,500 a year can be provided to young adults who are at least 18 years old, but not yet 21 who aged out of foster care. These funds are first-come, first-served and they are not an entitlement, meaning that once the fund runs out each year, no additional funds are available.

Foster Care 18-21 Program

Foster Care 18 to 21 is a program that offers young adults aging out of foster care the opportunity to continue foster care placement and transition to independence with county child welfare agency supervision. This occurs when foster youth agree to remain in foster care after their 18th birthday.

Young adults who exit foster care at age 18 are also able to return to the Foster Care 18-21 program later as long as they have not reached their 21st birthday.

Young adults who were in foster care on their 18th birthday may continue to receive foster care benefits and services until their 21st birthday if they meet one of the following requirements:

- Completing high school or a program leading to an equivalent credential (i.e. GED)
- Enrolled in college, a vocational program, or other post-high school educational program

- Participating in a program to reduce barriers to employment or help the young adult gain employment
- Employed at least 80 hours a month (or approximately 20 hours a week)
- Incapable of completing the educational or employment requirements due to a medical condition or disability

Young adults must also:

- Have been in foster care upon his/her 18th birthday;
- Be 18 years of age, but not yet 21 years of age;
- Enter into a Voluntary Placement Agreement with a county child welfare agency and agree to abide by the provisions of the agreement; and
- Agree to reside in an approved placement.

Young adults receiving Foster Care 18 to 21 services remain eligible for foster care maintenance payments. Young adults who enter into Foster Care 18 to 21 may reside in a kinship family, licensed foster care home or facility, a college or university dormitory, or in a semi-supervised independent living setting such as an apartment or host home. The young adult may also live with their biological or adoptive family (for those who were adopted as adults).

For more information on the Foster Care 18 to 21 Program, please contact your caseworker at your local department of social services.

Education and Training Vouchers (ETV)

The Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV) provides federally funded aid to former foster youth for post-secondary education (universities/college) goals and vocational training.

Eligibility Requirements:



- Youth must fall into one of these categories:
  - Youth was in foster care on or after their 17th birthday; or,
  - Youth was adopted from foster care with the adoption finalization on or after their 16th birthday; or,
  - Youth entered a kinship guardianship placement from foster care on or after their 16th birthday.
- Youth is a U.S. citizen or qualified non-citizen.
- Youth must be at least 18 to apply. Youth may reapply for ETV funds if they have a current grant, up to the age of 26.
- Youth must have been accepted into or be enrolled in a degree, certificate, or other accredited program at a college, university, technical or vocational school. To remain eligible for ETV funding, youth must show progress toward a degree or certificate.

To apply for ETV, please click here.

NC REACH Program

NC Reach provides state-funded grants for former foster youth to attend public community colleges and universities in North Carolina. These grants can be used to pay tuition, fees, books, and room and board.

The eligibility requirements for NC Reach funding are as follows:

- Must be a legal resident of North Carolina to be eligible for in-state tuition rates.
- Those who have aged out of North Carolina foster care at age 18; OR
- Those who have been adopted from North Carolina foster care on or after their 12th birthday; OR
- Exited from foster care to a permanent home through guardianship with the support of the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP) at the age of 14.
- Enrolled in a minimum of 6 credits in a public community college or university in NC (funding cannot be utilized at private or out-of-state colleges and universities).
- Students may qualify for funding through age 25.

More than money, NC Reach provides students with a wide array of support and services to help them stay on track and graduate including program coordinators that work with students to help them navigate and connect with local resources, seminars and workshops to help students strengthen academic abilities, and career readiness learning opportunities.

To apply for NC Reach, please click here.

Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SaySo)

SaySo, a program of Children's Home Society of North Carolina, is a statewide association of youth aged 14-26 who are or have been in the out-of-home care system in North Carolina. This includes all types of substitute care, including foster care, kinship care, group homes, and mental health placements. Founded in 1998 by a stakeholder of older youths in care, adult caregivers, and adult professionals, SaySo has been recognized in NC and nationally as a youth-driven advocacy organization. The mission of SaySo is to work to improve the substitute care system by educating the community, speaking out about needed changes, and providing support to youth who are or have been in substitute care.



Through a series of yearly conferences, events, and opportunities for youth in foster care, SaySo helps youth with their life within the system of care, as well as transitioning out of care. This is accomplished by informing young people of services and resources available to them, as well as teaching them essential life skills.

To learn more about SaySo, visit this link contact 1-800-632-1400, or email sayso@chsnc.org.

RESOURCES

For Kinship Caregivers

Parenting Children & Youth in Care



- FosteringNC has a collection of online courses and resources that kinship caregivers may find beneficial when it comes to parenting the unique needs of children and youth in foster care (i.e. child development and the effects of trauma, supporting the transition into adulthood, trauma-informed behavior management, etc.)
- Triple P Parenting (Positive Parenting Program) is an evidence-based parenting support system that helps caregivers raise confident children by teaching practical strategies for everyday challenges. Courses are offered for no or low cost, available online or in some communities in person.
- National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) for Foster and Adoptive Parents offers a resource library with videos, podcasts, and articles to strengthen caregivers' ability to meet the needs of children and youth in their care.

Post Permanency Support

Families who achieve reunification, guardianship, or legal custody from foster care or any type of adoption can face unique challenges. To better help families navigate these challenges, NCDHHS provides Success Coach Services Model across all 100 counties to any of these types of families. The Success Coach Services Model is voluntary, in-home support that is offered at no cost. The service is family driven, with the Success Coach actively partnering with families to address their identified needs through personalized assessments. Services can be utilized continuously for up to two years while achieving your family's self-identified goals. Your Success Coach will develop services based on the assessed needs of your family. The Success Coach can assist your family with an array of services, such as:

- Parenting strategies, skill building and reinforcement
- Crisis intervention, prevention and management, 24/7 crisis support
- Advocacy
- Ongoing emotional support for families
- Support for special school needs
- Service coordination
- Identifying and connecting with community resources
- Education and training

Your family can reach out for services at any point after reunification, guardianship, legal custody or adoption. Success Coach can be accessed as many times as a family may need throughout their journey. Access the Success Coach Model Referral form.

Financial Support

Many caregivers need financial support to help provide for foster children and youth in their care. Kinship caregivers who would benefit from financial support should speak with their social services worker about what services and supports are available to them.

Finding and Paying for Child Care

- This tipsheet from Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network has information on finding and paying for child care.
- To apply for child care assistance in NC, visit this link.
- To find child care facilities in NC, visit this link.

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)/Work First

The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program is designed to provide financial assistance while helping low-income families become self-sufficient. Even if a relative caregiver or the caregiver's family does not qualify for TANF benefits, it is possible to apply for and receive benefits for the relative children being cared for in the home. In these situations, only the children's income is considered for eligibility. If the children have little or no income, they will likely be eligible to receive TANF benefits. Caregivers do not need to have legal custody to apply for TANF benefits, but they do need to meet their State's TANF definition of a kin caregiver. A caseworker can provide information or refer a caregiver to the correct place to find information on eligibility for TANF, how to apply for benefits, documents and other information needed, and whether to apply just for the children or for the entire family. Depending on their State of residence, these benefits may be available until children's 18th birthdays. Caregivers receiving the Unlicensed Kinship Payments can still receive TANF benefits if they meet program eligibility. To learn more about NC's TANF program, called Work First, visit this link.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/Food and Nutrition Services (FNS)

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) refers to the Federal Food Stamps program. In North Carolina, this is referred to as Food and Nutrition Services (FNS). FNS is available to families with incomes below a certain level. In this case, the entire household's income is considered, and the relative children can be included in family size for determining the benefit amount. A caregiver cannot apply for FNS for the children only. Applications are generally made at the same office where TANF applications are made. Find out more at this link. To apply for FNS in NC, visit this link.

Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) may be available to children or caregivers who are disabled. This is also available to anyone over age 65. SSI is a federal program that provides monthly payments to individuals with limited income and resources who are aged, blind, or disabled. For kinship caregivers raising children with disabilities, SSI can be a crucial source of financial support. If the child qualifies, these benefits can help cover basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter — lightening the financial load on caregivers and ensuring the child receives the care and stability they deserve. Information about SSI benefits is available from the local Social Security office or online at this link.

Social Security – Survivor Benefits

Social Security survivor benefits provide monthly financial support to family members of a deceased worker who paid into the Social Security system. For kinship caregivers raising children who have lost a

parent, these benefits can be a critical source of income. Eligible children may receive payments to help cover everyday expenses, offering stability during a difficult time and helping caregivers meet the child's needs without added financial strain. Information about survivor benefits is available from the local Social Security office or online at this link.

Health Insurance

Medicaid is a state and federally funded health insurance program that provides coverage for low-income individuals and families. Children in the care of kinship caregivers may qualify for Medicaid, especially if the children meet income and eligibility requirements. This coverage can help pay for doctor visits, hospital care, prescriptions, and other essential health services — ensuring children receive the medical attention they need while easing the financial burden on caregivers. Most children qualify for Medicaid while they are in foster care, and some qualify when they exit foster care to permanency. If you are caring for a child in foster care, you do not need to apply for Medicaid as this is done by the county DSS agency. If you are a prospective parent to a child through adoption, custody, or guardianship, talk with your caseworker to determine if your child will qualify for Medicaid after they exit foster care. To apply for Medicaid in NC, visit this link to apply online or go to your local county Department of Social Services.



Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program

The WIC program (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) provides nutritious foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and referrals to health and social services for eligible families of children ages 0-5. Kinship caregivers can benefit from WIC if the children in their care meet eligibility requirements. This support helps ensure that children receive essential nutrients during critical stages of growth and development, easing the financial burden on caregivers and promoting healthier outcomes for the whole family. To learn more about WIC, visit this link. To find the WIC Program in your county, visit this link.

Child Support

Child support is a financial obligation that helps ensure children receive the resources they need to thrive, even when parents live apart. For kinship caregivers, child support payments can be a vital source of income to help cover essentials like food, clothing, housing, and education. If a child's biological parent is legally required to pay support, those funds can be directed to the caregiver, easing financial strain and supporting a stable, nurturing environment for the child. Child support payments are typically determined by the court based on factors such as the parents' income, the child's needs, and state guidelines. To learn more about child support, visit this link. If you have legal custody or guardianship of a child and would like to apply for child support, visit this link. If the child in your care is in foster care, you cannot apply for child support as the child is not legally in your custody.

Navigating Birth Parent/Kinship Caregiver Relationships

Foster care often creates complex relationships between caregivers. Birth parents and kinship caregivers come together with the shared goal of supporting the child's best interests. Ideally, these caregivers collaborate to help the child maintain or strengthen healthy connections with their birth parents during their time in temporary care — this is called shared parenting. When the temporary caregiver is a relative or close family friend, the pre-existing relationship with the birth parent can either ease the caregiving experience or create additional challenges — depending on how the birth parent responds to the situation.

FosteringNC has a course "Critical Partners for Permanency" which includes information about shared parenting.

Kinship caregivers who decide to go through the foster home licensing process may have access to a foster home licensing training designed just for kinship caregivers called National Training Development Curriculum (NTDC). This topic is explored in the NTDC training. More information about NTDC can be found under the "how to become a licensed kinship caregiver" section of this document.

Additionally, Creating A Family has a section on its website "Working with Birth Parents for the Child's Best Interest" with podcasts, articles/tipsheets, suggested books, and free courses on this topic, as well as others related to kinship care. One podcast episode with Dr. Joseph Crumbley shares information about the complicating factors in the relationship with kinship caregivers and children's parents and how to navigate family systems when these dynamics change.

Navigating the School System

Under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), children in foster care — including those placed with kinship caregivers — have special protections to make sure school is stable and supportive. The law requires schools to enroll them quickly, keep them in their original school when possible, and provide transportation and support so their education isn't disrupted. Find out more information about educational stability for children and youth in foster care on the NC Department of Public Instruction website.

- The American Bar Association developed a document "The Role of Kin Caregivers in Education" that provides helpful information.
- Getting the Child You Love the Educational Support They Need: A Tip Sheet from the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network that provides helpful information such as registering a child for school, asking for educational resources, etc.
- FosteringNC has a course "Helping Children and Youth Succeed in School: A Course for Resource Parents" where participants learn how to support and advocate for the educational needs of children and youth in care. Participants will also learn about educational outcomes, legislation that provides resources and supports including Individualized Education Plans and 504 Plans, as well as their role in supporting and advocating for the educational needs of children and youth in care.

How do I know what school my child should attend?

- NC Department of Public Instruction (DPI) Parent's Corner has information about enrollment, testing, early learning, and more.
- Great!Schools is a website that allows you to use your address to find the school your child is supposed to attend. It also provides school ratings.

What are 504 Plans and IEP's (Individualized Education Program)?

A 504 Plan is a written plan that describes the disability-related needs of a student and how those needs will be met. A 504 plan may include accommodations, assistive technology, and other school services.



An IEP (Individualized Education Program) is a legal document developed for students with disabilities who need specialized instruction in school. It outlines the child's unique learning needs, the services the school will provide, and measurable goals to help the child succeed. Kinship caregivers can request an evaluation if they believe the child may qualify, and they have the right to participate in the planning process alongside educators and specialists. The IEP ensures the child receives tailored support under the federal IDEA law.

- More information can be found on the 504 Resources page from the Exceptional Children's Assistance Center (ECAC).
- More information can be found on the IEP Resources page from the Exceptional Children's Assistance Center (ECAC).
- Creating a Family has an online course, "Navigating Special Education and the IEP/504 Process," on their website.

How can my child apply for financial aid for college?

- Kinship/Grandfamilies and the FAFSA – College Financial Aid: A resource to assist kinship families who have children in their care entering their senior year of high school and are interested in applying for college financial aid.
- Review the Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) and NC Reach sections in this resource to learn more about financial aid specific to youth who qualify.

Navigating the Court/Legal System

The Court Process in NC

> In North Carolina, each county's Department of Social Services (DSS) investigates reports of child abuse, neglect, or dependency. If DSS finds cause, it may file a petition to involve the court and, if needed, request to remove the child from their home to ensure safety.

When a petition is filed, birth parents or caregivers named in it are called respondents and will receive a copy along with a summons that lists the court date and the name of a court-appointed attorney. The petition includes allegations — the reasons DSS believes the child needs protection.

If the court agrees the child should be removed, DSS is given legal custody and becomes responsible for deciding where the child will live. This is when kinship caregivers may be asked to step in, so the child can stay with family instead of being placed in foster care.

FosteringNC has a 60-minute webinar course "Court: Roles and Obligations of Foster Parents" that

explains the roles of key players in the court process, the types of court hearings in child welfare, the responsibilities of foster parents in court proceedings, and NC's Foster Parents' Bill of Rights.

Notification of Hearings

Kinship caregivers who have placement of children in foster care are required to be notified of court hearings. You have the right to attend AND the right to be heard. You may receive notification from either the county caseworker or from the court.

Courtroom Tips

- Arrive early — plan to be at the courthouse at least 30 minutes before your hearing. Let DSS staff know you're present and listen carefully for your case to be called.
- Dress respectfully — avoid casual or distracting clothing like torn jeans, short skirts, hats, or printed T-shirts.
- Turn off electronics — silence phones and devices before entering the courtroom. Some courtrooms do not allow electronics (including cellular watches).
- No food or drinks — these aren't allowed inside.
- Show respect — address the judge as "your honor," avoid cursing or emotional outbursts, and don't chat during the hearing.
- Listen and speak carefully — don't interrupt and only speak when asked. If you don't understand something, ask for clarification before answering.
- Plan for child care — unless the court requests a child's presence or a child wishes to speak in court, arrange for someone to care for them during the hearing.
- Before leaving — make sure you understand the judge's decisions and orders. If you do not understand an order or have questions about your rights and responsibilities in the court process, consider seeking the assistance of a licensed attorney.

Additional Resources

- NC Courts Help Topics – Abuse, Neglect and Dependency: Learn about abuse, neglect and dependency, child protective services, foster care, court process, and parental rights.
- Legal Options for Grandfamily & Kin Caregivers – This resource from the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network explains legal options for kin who have children come into their care.
- Legal Options for Grandfamily & Kin Caregivers in North Carolina – This resource from Creating a Family explains legal options for kin who have children come into their care, specific to children and families in NC.
- Creating a Family offers free, virtual legal clinics to assist grandparents raising grandchildren (and other relatives raising kin) living in NC with making well-informed decisions based on clear knowledge of their legal rights and responsibilities as they move through life transitions. Licensed attorneys will be available to answer questions.
- Legal Aid of NC – A statewide, nonprofit law firm that provides free legal services in civil matters to low-income individuals.

SPECIAL LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

What is the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)?

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) is a federal law passed in 1978 to protect the rights of Native American children, families, and tribes when child welfare cases involve children who are members of federally recognized tribes. In North Carolina, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and the Lumbee Tribe are currently the only tribes ICWA applies to.



When does ICWA apply?

ICWA applies to child custody cases involving Native American children, including:

- Foster care placements (when a child can't be returned to their parent or guardian on demand)
- Termination of parental rights
- Pre-adoptive and adoptive placements
- Juvenile court custody or guardianship cases

Who has the authority to decide what happens (tribe or child welfare system)?

- Tribal courts have full authority over cases involving children who live on reservations.
- In other cases, parents or guardians can request that the case be moved to a tribal court.

Who can be involved?

- The child's tribe and Native American custodian have the right to be notified and involved from the beginning of child welfare involvement, and step in at any time during foster care or court proceedings.
- Tribal courts have the same legal power as state courts, and their decisions carry the same weight.

Need help?

- The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) keeps an updated list of tribal contacts for questions about membership and ICWA cases.
- In North Carolina, the NC Department of Administration American Indian Affairs can help connect you with local tribes and resources.

Other Resources

- Legal Assistance for Native Kinship/Grandfamilies Involved with Child Welfare: If you are a Native parent or relative caregiver (whether grandparent, other extended family member, or family friend) of a child who was removed from their parents by a state child welfare system, this resource prepared by the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) is for you.
- How Relative Caregivers Can Advocate for Relative Native Children in State Child Welfare Agency Custody: The National Indian Child Welfare Association developed this resource as a tip sheet that tribal service providers can give to people who are seeking to become a caregiver for a minor relative child or seeking to provide support to and/or advocate for a minor relative child in an out-of-home placement.
- Raising Relatives - A resource guide for Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian families caring for their kin.

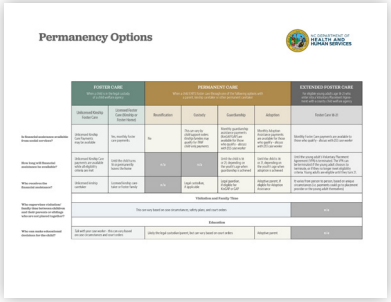
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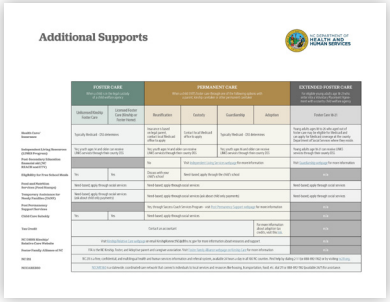
- NC DHHS Kinship/Relative Care: Kinship families can learn more about resources available statewide, many of which are listed on this resource document. If you have specific questions that you need assistance with, please email KinshipKonnectNC@dhhs.nc.gov.
- Foster Family Alliance (FFA) of NC: FFA is the statewide kinship, foster, and adoptive parent and caregiver association. FFA supports kinship caregivers in a variety of ways such as kin specific support groups, free trainings, and more.
- FosteringNC: A collection of courses, videos, articles, and other resources of special interest to kinship, foster, and adoptive parents.
- Fostering Perspectives: Fostering Perspectives promotes the professional development of North Carolina's child welfare professionals and foster, kinship, and adoptive parents.
- Creating A Family: Creating a Family is a support and training nonprofit for foster, adoptive, and kinship families, whose mission is to strengthen these families and the professionals who support them by creating evidence-based, trauma-informed resources, community support, and training.
- SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out): SaySo is a statewide program of youth ages 14 to 26 who are, or have been, in the substitute care system in North Carolina. This includes all types of substitute care, such as foster/kinship care, group homes, and mental health placements.
- Child Welfare Constituent Concerns: The Constituent Concerns Office responds to questions, concerns, complaints, and general questions about child welfare services within North Carolina and the role of the county/local department of social services (DSS) in child welfare matters. Anyone may contact this office when they have a concern about the involvement of DSS and the proper handling of a child welfare case, including Child Protective Services (CPS) Assessment, CPS In-Home services, or foster care/Permanency Planning Services. Inquiries may be sent by phone, email, and mail.

APPENDIX

A. Comparing Types of Kinship Placements and Benefits/Resources

These charts show the different services and supports for each type of care. They can help you compare what is offered if you are caring for a child in foster care or learning about options for a child in your home who may leave foster care to live with you through custody, guardianship, or adoption. Many of the services and supports discussed in this document are outlined in these charts.





Link to charts

B. FAQ Temporary Safety Provider

Will children in my care receive child care, payments, food stamps, Work First/TANF payments?

It is important you discuss this with the county child welfare agency you are working with. Typically, Temporary Safety Providers do not receive any financial support as the parents still have legal responsibility for them. Check with your caseworker to determine if any local supports are available.

C. FAQ Foster Care

How long will the children/youth remain in my home?

The time a child is in foster care is meant to be temporary while safety concerns that led to the family's involvement with child welfare are resolved. Therefore, each family has different circumstances that can impact how long a child is in foster care. Throughout the time that a child and family are involved with child welfare, Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings must occur to regularly discuss the status of the child and family and determine the steps that must be taken for the child to exit care to a permanent home. Kinship caregivers who have placement of children in foster care have a right to be notified of and participate in CFTs to hear and ask questions about the status of the child's permanency goals and plans.

Who qualifies for the Unlicensed Kinship Payments?

You may be eligible for the financial support if you meet the following criteria:

- The child(ren) placed in your home must be in the custody of a local county DSS;
- The child(ren) placed in your home must be related to you by blood, marriage, or adoption, and if applicable, any half sibling(s) of the child(ren) placed with you regardless of your relationship to the half sibling(s);
- The child(ren) must be between the ages of 0 through 17;
- You must be an unlicensed caregiver;
- You must agree to receive the payments.

How much are Unlicensed Kinship Payments?

The monthly payment amount is half of the Standard Board Rate (SBR) payment that a licensed foster parent receives. Monthly Standard Board Rates are listed by age groups in the Appendix 3.5 Foster Care Funding manual. These rates are subject to change based on legislation.

How can the youth in my home connect with peers, access educational resources, and build mentorship, life skills, and leadership training?

NC LINKS services and SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out) are just two of many opportunities available to youth. Both programs offer free events for youth and supportive adults, providing meaningful benefits to families. Talk to your child's DSS caseworker for more information about other local supports and opportunities. For more information about your county LINKS program, contact your child's county DSS caseworker or the LINKS worker in the county you reside in. For information about SaySo, please visit the SaySo website or this section this document to learn more.

What if I am a relative who lives in another state and is caring for a child who is in foster care of a NC county?

There are times when children in NC's foster care system are placed with relatives or other kin who live in another state. In order for this to happen, the case must go through the Interstate Compact for Placement of Children process (ICPC), which assesses the home and can assist with getting the kinship caregiver resources such as kinship licensure. Relatives in another state caring for children in the NC foster care system may still be eligible for Unlicensed Kinship Payments, Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payments, Adoption Assistance, and Medicaid for children they are caring for, if eligibility criteria are met. Ask your child's caseworker for assistance information.

D. FAQ Kinship Foster Home Licensing

How long does it take to become a licensed kinship placement?

The foster care licensing process typically requires three to six months and encompasses training, background checks, home assessments, and other procedural requirements. Kinship caregivers often assume care of a child under emergency circumstances, with the hope that reunification will occur swiftly. While timely reunification is possible, it cannot always be guaranteed. Accordingly, it is essential for kinship caregivers to be proactive and initiate the licensing process as early as possible.

If I am licensed as a kinship placement, can I be licensed as a foster parent for children who are not related to me?

Yes, this is possible and encouraged for those who are able and willing. If you are interested in caring for children in foster care in addition to relatives, talk with your licensing agency. Doing so may affect the type of application you complete, and the number of training hours required.

What is the difference between being a licensed family foster parent and a licensed therapeutic parent?

A family foster parent provides a safe, stable home for children who mainly need care and supervision, while a therapeutic foster parent cares for children with more serious emotional, behavioral, or medical needs and receives extra training and support to help them heal. Licensed therapeutic parents must complete additional training hours, and do receive additional financial support and support from their licensing agencies than traditional family foster parents receive.

How much are licensure payments?

Monthly Standard Board Rates are listed by age groups in the Appendix 3.5 Foster Care Funding manual. These rates are subject to change based on legislation.

E. FAQ Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP)

What is KinGAP?

KinGAP is designed to support children in foster care who are placed with licensed relatives or close family friends — known as kinship caregivers — when reunification or adoption are not appropriate options. Its core purpose is to provide a permanent, stable home for the child while preserving important family connections. Families who were not licensed foster families while the children were in foster care do not qualify for KinGAP.

How much are KinGAP payments?

Monthly KinGAP payments are listed by age groups in the Appendix 3.7 KinGAP and GAP Payments Manual. These rates are subject to change based on legislation.

Are the payments the child's money or the legal guardian's money?

Kinship guardianship assistance (KinGAP) is tied directly to the child but is intended to be used by the guardian(s) to provide for the child's day-to-day needs. Assistance is not intended to create a savings account for the child, but to support the family's care of the child, including food, shelter, clothing, and other needs. Children and youth may have feelings about the guardian "being paid" to take care of them, and/or may wonder if the assistance money should be "theirs" to spend as they like. Guardians may need to explore the child's feelings about the assistance, and use the conversation to teach about money management, budgeting, and real-world expenses.

Which children/youth are eligible for KinGAP?

- The prospective guardian must be a relative of the child(ren), defined as someone related by blood, marriage, or adoption, or an individual with a substantial relationship with the child or the child's parent prior to foster care placement. NOTE: This definition of relative is different than the definition of relative for Unlicensed Kinship Placements.
- The youth have lived in the licensed home for at least 6 consecutive months before guardianship is awarded
- The youth is the placement responsibility of a NC county DSS at the time of entry into KinGAP.
- The youth is at least 10 years of age but not older than age 18 or is a younger sibling of the qualified youth who is also placed in the guardianship arrangement.
- The youth demonstrates a strong attachment to the prospective guardian and has been consulted regarding the guardianship arrangement.
- The prospective legal guardian shall have entered into a guardianship assistance agreement with the county DSS who holds custody of the youth prior to the order granting legal guardianship.
- The court has determined that Reunification and Adoption are not appropriate permanency options for the youth.

Children and youth who qualify for guardianship assistance can receive the same amount of monthly

financial support as foster and adopted children who qualify for adoption assistance. Individuals or youth who exit foster care under KinGAP may continue to receive guardianship assistance payments after reaching 18 years of age if:

- The individual or child reached 16 years of age before the guardianship assistance agreement became effective,
- He or she chooses to continue receiving guardianship services until reaching 21 years of age, and
- The division determines that the individual meets any of the following
  - Is completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential
  - Is enrolled in an institution that provides postsecondary or vocational education
  - Is participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment
  - Is employed for at least 80 hours per month
  - Is incapable of completing the educational or employment requirements (a-d) due to a medical condition or disability that is supported by regularly updated information in the case plan for the individual.

Are there any limits on how guardians can spend guardianship assistance dollars, or can they use it however they would like?

Legal guardians have the same rights as birth parent/primary caregivers to decide how family resources are spent. Guardianship assistance is child-specific, but given to the guardian(s) to decide how to spend. There are no restrictions on how money should be spent.

If the child I assumed guardianship of was never in foster care, do I qualify for KinGAP payments?

While you do not qualify for KinGAP payments, you may qualify for Work First/TANF child-only payments.

Are there post Guardianship services and supports available?

Yes. Please visit the Post Permanency Support section in this guide.

F. FAQ Adoption Assistance

What is Adoption Assistance?

Adoption Assistance eligibility in North Carolina is limited to a few special conditions, as it was primarily created to keep children with special needs from lingering in the foster care system.

Who is eligible for Adoption Assistance?

To qualify, the child must meet one of the following criteria:

- at the time of the initiation of the adoption proceedings, the child must be in the custody of a public or private child placing agency because of either a judicial determination that it was contrary to the welfare of the child to remain in the home or a voluntary placement agreement (VPA) or a voluntary relinquishment; OR
- the child was previously in the custody of a NC DSS agency for the purpose of foster care; OR

- the child meets the eligibility criteria to receive SSI (based on their disability); OR
- the child was previously adopted and determined eligible for Title IV-E adoption assistance and is available for adoption because the prior adoption has been dissolved or the child's adoptive parents have died; OR the child exited foster care through Guardianship, received Guardianship Assistance Payments (GAP) and is now being adopted.
- *the child must also be a US Citizen or Qualified Alien.

All adoptions finalized in NC, (except for stepparent, foreign adoption, and adoption of non-citizen children), are eligible for non-recurring costs up to $2,000.00 per child. Once the adoption has been finalized, you would submit your receipts, a copy of your fingerprint clearance letter and Responsible Individuals List (RIL) background checks (DSS-5268 form) for each applicant to your local DSS County agency (ask for Adoptions/ Eligibility Worker). Any reasonable costs associated with the process of adoption, such as attorney fees, filing fees, etc. can be reimbursed up to the capped amount.

For private adoptions (via private agency or attorney), please reach out to the Department of Social Services in the NC county you currently reside in to inquire if the child you are adopting may qualify. https://www.ncdhhs.gov/localDSS

How much adoption assistance do families receive each month?

The amount of adoption assistance varies depending on the child's needs and the number of children in the home. Talk with your county DSS worker to determine your family's eligibility for support. An Adoption Assistance Agreement is a written agreement between the agency and the prospective adoptive parents to specify the nature and amount of adoption assistance benefits a child qualifies for.

The Court granted me guardianship of my relative child from DSS custody and now I want to adopt. Will they qualify for adoption assistance?

If the child was in a NC DSS agency custody in foster care, yes, they could be eligible for benefits. Please reach out to the NC DSS agency in the county in which you currently reside. If you've moved out of state, then contact the NC DSS agency that previously held custody.

G. FAQ Post Permanency Services and Supports

What are Post Permanency Services?

NCDHHS provides post-permanency support services across all 100 counties that are available to families who have achieved permanency through reunification, guardianship, legal custody or adoption. The Success Coach Services Model aims to empower families by providing tailored support to achieve stability and positive outcomes in their lives. The service is family driven, with the Success Coach actively partnering with families to address their identified needs through personalized assessments. Services can be utilized continuously for up to two years while achieving your family's self-identified goals. Your Success Coach will develop services based on the assessed needs of your family. The Success Coach can assist your family with an array of services, including:

- Parenting strategies, skill building and reinforcement
- Crisis intervention, prevention and management, 24/7 crisis support
- Advocacy
- Ongoing emotional support for families

- Support for special school needs
- Service coordination
- Identifying and connecting with community resources
- Education and training

How much does it cost?

Success Coach Services are FREE, and voluntary services that are offered in-home.

Who is eligible?

- The child must have achieved permanency prior to beginning services through a court order granting reunification, guardianship or legal custody from foster care. Any type of adoption, post decree, are eligible.
- While services cannot start prior to a child's achieving permanency, a referral can be made so that the family is aware of the program and supports available.
- Services are available until youth reaches age 21.
- Service agreement allows for working with a family for a period of 2 years continuously on goals, or the family may have shorter time frame.
- Services are offered at any point post-permanency and can be utilized as often as the family needs.
- NOTE: This service cannot be court mandated as a condition of an order as it is 100% voluntary on the family's part.

Can I learn about this service from a family that has already gone through the program?

Please take a moment to hear from families who have experienced the positive impacts of participating in the Success Coach Program in this video: Success Coach: Helping Families Win.

How can I receive these services?

Please visit the website for Post Permanency Services. There is a list of which providers serve each region/county and contact information.