

## Kinship Care in Washington State: Prevalence, Policy, and Needs

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### Background

The 2001 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to:

... study the prevalence and needs of families who are raising related children. The study shall compare services and policies of Washington state with other states that have a high rate of kinship care placements in lieu of foster care placements. The study shall identify possible changes in services and policies that are likely to increase appropriate kinship care placements.<sup>1</sup>

This report describes the prevalence and characteristics of kinship care, needs of kinship care providers in Washington State, policies and services available in Washington and other states, and policy options that may increase appropriate kinship care placements.

Kinship care is the full-time care of children by relatives. Kinship care occurs *informally*, when children are not involved with public child welfare agencies, and *formally*, when public child welfare agencies are involved in placing children with relatives. Informal and formal kinship caregivers are gaining greater recognition by federal and state governments for their roles in the child welfare system.

#### Prevalence and Characteristics of Kinship Care

Nationwide, an estimated 2.2 million children are cared for by relatives, 58 percent more than in 1990. Washington State has experienced a similar trend over the past decade. Relative caregivers are now rearing approximately 32,000 children in Washington, representing approximately one out of every 50 children in the state. The majority of kinship care is informal: there are nine informal kinship arrangements for every formal arrangement. One-third of children placed in non-institutional, or family, settings by the state live with relatives.

Most relative caregivers are women, usually grandmothers. They tend to be older, poorer, less educated, and have more health problems than the average parent.

---

<sup>1</sup> ESSB 6153, Section 608(5), Chapter 7, Laws of 2001.

## Support for Kinship Caregivers in Washington State

Washington State provides financial support to kinship caregivers through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only grant or foster care payments (if caregivers are licensed). The state offers kinship caregivers several legal custody options; however, informal caregivers have little legal authority unless they pursue one of these options in court. Formal kinship caregivers, because they care for children in state custody, have access to more state-provided services than do informal caregivers. Other resources are available through public, private, and community-based programs.

## Challenges and Needs of Kinship Caregivers

To gather information for this report, the Institute convened a series of kinship caregiver focus groups and analyzed the results of a statewide survey of kinship caregivers conducted by the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and private stakeholder groups. This research identified a number of key challenges and needs faced by kinship caregivers.

- **Financial Needs:** Kinship caregivers most frequently reported the need for more financial assistance for the children in their care. Caregivers stated that the TANF child-only grant is inadequate, and they continue to need help providing basic necessities as well as accessing medical care, affordable housing, and adequate transportation in order to be able to care for their relatives' children.
- **Legal Barriers:** Many kinship caregivers indicated that the complexity and costs of the legal system present a significant challenge when they attempt to establish a permanent legal relationship with the children in their care. Caregivers also noted that they lack legal standing in custody cases and are sometimes excluded from placement decision-making processes.
- **Bureaucratic Barriers:** Kinship caregivers reported that public agencies and caseworkers do not respect the contribution of relative caregivers in assuming responsibility for children. Caregivers described agencies as uncoordinated and caseworkers as interpreting rules incorrectly.
- **Social Service Needs:** Both informal and formal kinship caregivers expressed the need for easier access to a variety of support services, particularly respite care, child care, and counseling.
- **Information Gaps:** Kinship caregivers often stated that there is little information readily available about services, policies, and laws relating to kinship care. According to caregivers, this can make obtaining assistance more difficult.

## Changes in Services and Policies to Consider

The Legislature directed the Institute to identify possible changes in policy to *increase* kinship care placements where appropriate. To encourage more relative placements, Washington State could consider addressing the five policy areas identified in this report. Because most kinship-relevant policies and programs have not been rigorously evaluated, the specific actions provided should be viewed as examples rather than research-based recommendations.

- **Increase Financial Assistance:** In response to caregivers' expressed financial needs, the state could provide more financial assistance by increasing the TANF child-only grant or creating a special subsidy for unlicensed kinship caregivers (for formal only or including informal caregivers). The state could also offer the current guardianship subsidy to unlicensed relative caregivers who assume guardianship of children in state custody.
- **Reduce Legal Barriers:** The legislature could establish a clear priority for relative placements and enact consent or custody laws so informal kinship caregivers can more easily access legal services and assistance for establishing custody.
- **Reduce Bureaucratic Barriers:** To make public agencies more responsive to the specific needs of kinship caregivers, DSHS could create specialized "kinship care" caseworkers and coordinate social service agencies for easier access to information.
- **Increase Social Services:** Many kinship caregivers requested that social services be more easily accessible. In response, the state could provide foster care services to informal relative caregivers and create or strengthen public-private partnerships to enhance services at the community level.
- **Improve Availability of Information:** Many kinship caregivers noted that they would have taken advantage of more services had they known they existed. In response, the state could create a "Kinship Navigator" position, establish a toll-free hotline, or collaborate with support groups to improve the distribution of information to caregivers.

There are bound to be considerable variations in the relative costs and benefits of these policy options. While cost estimates would be valuable to policymakers, they were beyond the scope of this study.