

Variations in the use of kinship diversion among child welfare agencies

Early Answers to Important Questions

What is kinship diversion?

There is no uniform definition of kinship diversion. The child welfare agencies in which we studied the practice describe situations in which—during an investigation of child abuse or neglect, or while in-home services are provided—a child cannot remain safely with their parents/guardians. Rather than seeking custody of the child, the agency facilitates moving the child to a relative’s care. The practice is referred to by many different terms (see textbox). In this brief we use the term “kinship diversion.”

How does the field refer to the practice?

Our studies uncovered a variety of terms used interchangeably with “kinship diversion,” including safety planning, voluntary placement, parental placement, redirection, informal kin care, and prevention services, among others.

¹ Walsh, W. Informal Kinship Care Most Common Out-of-Home Placement After an Investigation of Child Maltreatment, Carsey Institute Fact Sheet, Winter 2013.

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What are stakeholders' opinions about kinship diversion?

Among the stakeholders we interviewed, opinions about kinship diversion ranged widely. Some stakeholders expressed the view that the practice is never appropriate, while others indicated that it should always be the first option when a child must be removed from their home. Stakeholders with a negative opinion of the practice noted concerns about the lack of legal representation for parents and lack of oversight. They also noted disparities in available resources and supports for all involved (parent, child, kin caregiver).

At the other end of the spectrum, many stakeholders reported their belief that bringing a child into state custody is a negative outcome; they noted that custody did not ensure that needed services would be provided. Respondents also mentioned that parents may be more cooperative when the child welfare agency is not involved. Overwhelmingly, these stakeholders felt strongly that families should retain responsibility and be empowered to drive the planning and decision making, and they believed that families are best able to keep children safe.

Agencies administering the kinship diversion estimation tool found that workers were overwhelmingly supportive of kinship diversion practices. Front-line caseworkers in five states provided their opinions of the practice, and over 90 percent of these workers were very supportive. During field work (i.e., qualitative data collection) in one state

Stakeholders report there are often two main decision makers in facilitating kinship diversion arrangements: the child's parent(s) and the agency representative (i.e., the caseworker and/or supervisor). In many child welfare agencies, the decision to divert is often discussed early on during family

percent compared with 1 percent) were less common. Additionally, children in kinship diversion were the subject of multiple maltreatment referrals or maltreatment referrals against multiple individuals as often as the broader population of children receiving preventive services (69 percent vs. 67 percent). There appears to be no indication in this state, therefore, that kinship diversion is reserved for children with specific referral histories. However, children formally removed to kin were more likely to have multiple maltreatment referrals and referrals involving multiple perpetrators than children in prevention cases (in-home and kinship diversion).

During field work in one state, caseworkers and kinship caregivers provided information on differences between arrangements in which

formally removed (taken into custody) were more likely to participate in family meetings than families of children not formally entering care.

Are services and supports provided in kinship diversion? We

learned through our work that services and supports are inconsistently provided to children, parents, and kin caregivers during kinship diversion. There do not appear to be protocols to ensure consistency in assessing families' needs or providing services. In the one state in which we conducted field work, caseworkers reported that children may live with kin for 30 days to two years, and many reported that they felt uncomfortable about having to close out a case but often needed to do so due to limited staff resources. Staff also noted the fluidity of kinship diversion arrangements—for example, cases in which a child lives **with a** relative for a short time while the parent is seeking housing, and then moves back with the parent. In-home services would be provided to both the parent and kin caregiver in some cases.

Caseworkers reported that services provided to children, parents, and kin caregivers in diversion arrangements may be similar to other ongoing (in-home) services, though local jurisdictions varied on the availability of services. In communities with fewer resources, in-home/prevention services were lacking for all families, not just those in which children were diverted. Services were based on the needs of the child and identified in the assessment when the child was first moved to the kin caregiver's home.

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