

BY ALISON CALIENDO



Formal Kinship Caregivers and the Challenge of Licensing

One of my first experiences with a formal kinship family was with a spirited grandmother named Annette, whose name has been changed to protect her privacy. When Child Protective Services called, she unquestioningly accepted placement of her five grandchildren. The children's mother

and familiar community and activities, including school and church.

However, after several months had passed, Annette found she was spending much of her time fighting to become a licensed caregiver so she could get access to foster parent train-

ing and she had to take a leave of absence from work to provide transportation for their many required appointments. She didn't know how she could continue to support them.

A licensing worker had visited her home and said she would have to move into a larger house in order to have the correct number of bedrooms as required by licensing regulations. Even though the cost of moving was prohibitive, the child welfare agency said there was nothing they could do to assist her.

Annette did not understand why she had been approved for placement of the five children if she did not meet the requirements for licensure. She was confused, overwhelmed, scared and nearly broke trying to care for the five children. But Annette's experience was not unique. While the number of unlicensed formal kinship caregivers is unknown, qualitative data suggests the number is not inconsequential, and this number is only likely to

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had been murdered in front of them, and their father subsequently incarcerated. These children were lucky to have a stable relative willing to step in and provide fierce love and protection in addition to a connection to fam-

ily, education in trauma-informed parenting, and financial reimbursement. This was time she would have preferred to spend providing additional care for the children, but the cost of their care had quickly drained her savings

grow as the reliance on formal kinship care continues to expand.

Formal kinship care has increased throughout the past decades due in part to its well-documented advantages. Relative homes are just as safe or safer than non-relative placements. Children are less likely to be re-abused or neglected, they experience fewer placement moves, and they are more likely to be kept with their siblings. If needed, kinship caregivers are more likely to provide permanency in the form of guardianship or adoption. Most significantly, relative placements allow vulnerable children to maintain family and community connections, according to Kids Are Waiting and Generations United published in 2007.

While the increasing use of formal kinship care is positive, there are several factors at work that create a population of unlicensed caregivers. What relatives usually don't understand when they receive the initial request to accept placement, is that there are two different decision-making divisions in a child welfare agency: a division that makes a placement decision and a division that makes a licensing decision. These two divisions are often at odds, and the result is conflicting standards for relatives.

While federal law supports relative *placement*, each state dictates separate requirements for foster parent *licensing*. These licensing requirements can go beyond what is required to meet standards for placement, for example, the specific number and use of bedrooms for children. Relatives who meet the child protection standards for placement and already have children placed in their home may be surprised they do not meet the licensing requirements.

This disconnect in placement and licensing policy creates a two-tiered system of care for children placed in formal kinship care. Annette was denied licensure based on the inadequate number of bedrooms in her home. With the placement, but without licensing,

Annette became an unlicensed formal kinship caregiver, doing the work of a foster parent with no financial support.

Unlicensed relatives are provided a different level of support by the child welfare agency. Annette desired to be licensed in order to receive the same access to training and financial reimbursement as foster parents.

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Unlicensed kinship caregivers have limited access to training, support and financial resources. For the foster children in their homes, unlicensed relatives are potentially unable to provide the same quality of care as licensed relatives. The children in unlicensed homes do not receive access to the same support, such as a caregiver trained in trauma-informed care, a fully inspected home, and supplemental financial resources to sustain placement.

Kinship caregivers are exceedingly vulnerable to the financial strain of additional children. When relatives already have low income, accepting children without the option of licensing quickly pushes these families into poverty, forcing them to rely on other less adequate public support.

The gap between federal law around relative placement and state policies around licensing creates two different experiences of foster care for children in formal kinship care that varies in disparity state by state. Each state's licensing policies must move toward being able to keep up with the needs of children in kinship

care so this two-tiered system of care does not become further entrenched.

Let's reflect back on Annette's situation. The state placed Annette's grandchildren with her and then denied licensing, creating incredible hardship for a family already hit by tragedy. Yet Annette, like many kinship caregivers, continued to care for the children as best she

could, signing up for welfare and food stamps for the children and pawning most things of value in her home.

For many kinship families unable to find the resources to be licensed, the children, who are at the heart of child welfare, are the ones who lose the most. To begin to improve the experience and outcomes for these foster children and their unlicensed kinship caregivers, we must take a critical look at how law, policy and practice intersect to create the two-tiered system (licensed and unlicensed) that currently exists for formal kinship caregivers; advocate for more compatible placement and licensing standards; and reach out to surround kinship caregivers and the children in their homes with the support the current policies fail to provide. ●

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