



Florida Should Increase Support for Informal Kinship Families

Priscilla Wilson, Florida State University

Florida has long recognized that strong families are the foundation of safe communities. Keeping children out of foster care saves the state money and preserves family bonds that formal systems cannot replicate. Informal kinship caregivers, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and family friends, do exactly that, stepping in at their own expense to protect children before the state ever gets involved. Yet these same families remain largely invisible to the support systems their tax dollars fund. Without targeted action, Florida risks preventable crises and avoidable costs from the very families doing the most to help.

My ongoing analysis of the 2024 National Survey of Children's Health reveals an access gap. Children in informal kinship care have 53% lowered odds of receiving mental health services than children in non-kin households. Relative caregivers face nearly four times higher odds of difficulty obtaining care. Among families who seek services, more than 85% report significant barriers. And among children with an identified mental health need, over 70% receive no care at all. These gaps persist even after accounting for income and insurance coverage, suggesting that poverty alone does not explain them. The caregiving arrangement itself is a barrier.

To fulfill the commitment of [Senate Bill 69](#) and support relative caregivers outside of the formal foster care system, Florida legislators should permanently fund kinship navigator programs. Creating a dedicated line item within the Department of Children and Families will stabilize these community services while successfully drawing down federal matching funds under the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#).

Informal Kinship Families Are Not Equally Connected to Child Welfare Supports

When a Florida child is removed from an unsafe home, the state's [Community-Based Care system](#) (a network of privatized foster care agencies) steps in to manage placements and guide families toward legal permanency. Once a child is reunified with their birth family, adopted, or placed under guardianship, the case closes, and formal oversight ends.

Sometimes, relatives of a child who has been removed from their home, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and family friends, enter this system through licensed foster care and receive structured support to care for their loved one. However, the majority of [kinship caregivers](#) step in without formal involvement in the system. Many do so to prevent foster care altogether. Because these families exist outside formal child welfare pipelines, they are largely absent from the systems that coordinate support. As a result, they often lack access to the mental health, educational, legal, and respite services their children need.

These children frequently carry the effects of trauma, instability, and loss. Their caregivers actively seek support, yet many encounter fragmented systems that are difficult to navigate. Current service structures are

not adequately reaching these families.

Research Shows That Informal Kinship Families Are Not Receiving Adequate Mental Health Services

A recent population-level analysis provides new insights into how caregiving arrangements shape access to mental health services across the United States. Findings from my analysis of the 2024 [National Survey of Children's Health \(NSCH\)](#), a national and state-representative dataset of approximately 50,000 children, reveal distinct patterns in how families access care.

- **Barriers start when entering informal kinship care.** Children living in informal kinship care arrangements are significantly less likely to receive mental health services than their peers in non-kin households, even after accounting for income, insurance coverage, and health status. This suggests that caregiving arrangements play a meaningful role in whether children are connected to services in the first place.
- **Access challenges persist across all families.** Even among families who seek care, barriers are widespread. More than 85% of caregivers report difficulty obtaining mental health services, reflecting system-level challenges such as provider shortages, waitlists, and administrative burden.
- **Unmet need drives the access crisis.** When children are identified as requiring mental health support, the gap between that identification and actual receipt of services emerges as the strongest predictor of access difficulty. This indicates that the problem extends beyond individual caregiving contexts to broader system constraints affecting all families.

Together, these findings suggest that informal kinship families face a dual challenge: reduced connection to services at the point of entry and exposure to broader system-level barriers once care is sought.

What Florida Must Do To Connect Informal Kinship Families to Care

Children in informal kinship care face reduced entry into mental health services, while barriers to obtaining care after seeking services are widespread across the system. This layered disadvantage places informal kinship families at elevated risk of unmet need. Untreated childhood trauma compounds over time. When service systems are difficult to access, today's unmet need becomes tomorrow's crisis.

Florida has the infrastructure and opportunity to strengthen support for kinship families while addressing system-level barriers to care. Addressing this gap requires policies that both improve entry into care for informal kinship families and reduce system-level barriers that affect all families.

Florida Legislators Should Permanently Fund Kinship Navigator Programs

The [Florida Senate Bill 96 \(2021\)](#) required each Community-Based Care lead agency to establish a kinship navigator program. Community-based kinship navigator programs provide hands-on assistance with legal documentation, school and healthcare enrollment, and access to financial support. SB 96 was a clear recognition by the legislature that relative caregivers need dedicated, structured support. Permanently

funding these programs is the next necessary step to fulfill that legislative commitment and achieve the long-term goals outlined in SB 96.

To measure and scale this success, the [Florida Institute for Child Welfare](#) at Florida State University, in partnership with the [Children's Home Network](#) and [Kids Central, Inc.](#), is actively studying these programs across the state. They are documenting the impact of peer support, mental health referrals, legal assistance, family-finding, and dedicated navigation services. These programs are on the verge of achieving a formal rating by the [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#), a designation that would unlock expanded federal funding. A permanent state legislative investment now is exactly what is needed to get them across that finish line.

The legislature should create a dedicated budget line item for kinship navigator services within the Department of Children and Families, structuring the appropriation to draw down available federal matching funds under [Title IV-B of the Social Security Act](#) and the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#). This mechanism would multiply the impact of every state dollar invested. Expanding and stabilizing funding while using these federal reimbursement funds strengthens access without requiring families to enter formal child welfare systems. Furthermore, the state should establish coverage requirements stipulating that a portion of these funds be directed towards rural and underserved counties, where informal kinship arrangements are most common. This is to ensure that federal matching funds translate into equitable access.

Informal kinship caregivers step in to keep families together, yet many remain outside the systems designed to support them. These families face barriers to entering care and system-wide constraints that limit access once they seek care. Addressing both requires strengthening pathways into care while improving system capacity, coordination, and responsiveness. When Florida extends support beyond formal child welfare cases and builds systems that families can realistically navigate, we will move from closing cases to sustaining families.