



CWLA Celebrates

# Kinship Care:

Continuing the  
Tradition of Caring,  
Collaborating, Navigating,  
and Advocating

*By Eileen Mayers Pasztor and Leandrea Romero-Lucero*

CWLA and its member agencies and organizations share a vision that all children will grow up in safe, loving, and stable families, with nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime. We work together with practical, management-focused, practice-oriented consultation and training to achieve the best possible outcomes for children and all their families—birth, kinship, foster, and adoptive. In honor of September’s Kinship Care Month and National Grandparents Day, this article highlights how CWLA staff and colleagues across the country continue to collaborate in support of kinship families.

## History of a Name

The informal care of children by kin, especially for families of color, has existed for centuries, long before the formal child welfare system was established. Tired parents could get a rest when grandparents would take youngsters and teens for a few hours or days. Relatives stepped in when parents faced financial, medical, or other crises. Children would live with grandparents, aunts and uncles, or extended family members when parents needed to find employment in another locale and couldn’t take the children with them—or when parents in the military were deployed.

It was only 30 years ago that relatives raising younger family members were identified as needing a specific child welfare program name. For example, “family preservation” was coined in the 1970s and “foster care” and “adoption”

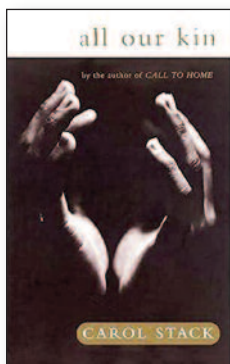
programs originated in the previous century. But there was no nationally recognized, consistent name for the policies, programs, and practices connected with relatives raising children.

The name “kinship care” is attributed to the National Commission on Family Foster Care, convened in 1990 by CWLA in collaboration with the National Foster Parent Association. The Commission’s mandate was to address growing concerns about the need for improved outcomes for children in foster care. However, in its research and deliberations, the commissioners recognized significant legislative, economic, and social factors connected to the care of children by kin—with compelling, commensurate challenges.

For example, in 1979, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on the *Miller v. Youakim* case, which originated in Illinois and provided benefits for relatives equal to those of foster parents, enabling more kin to care for the children in their families. In the 1980s, the tragedies of the crack cocaine epidemic, HIV/AIDS, and poverty propelled more children into the care of relatives; at the same time, the foster parent population decreased because of the economy, housing, and affordable, accessible child care.

The Commission recognized the need for a name that would differentiate between care by relatives and care by foster parents. They looked for a name that would respect and reflect the significance of family relationships—variously described as relative care, extended family care, home of relative care, and foster care with relatives. The strength of

kinship systems among diverse cultural and ethnic groups had long been documented—for example, in the acclaimed 1974 book by Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (Stack, 1974). The term “kinship care” eventually was selected,



defined as the full-time protection and nurture of children by relatives, members of their Tribes or clans, or anyone to whom the family relationship is ascribed. This also can include non-related extended family members. The definition aimed to be inclusive, respectful of cultural

values and ties of affection. Whether formally through child protective services or informally through family arrangements, kinship care could help reduce the trauma of family separation and provide cultural and community ties.

In 1991, CWLA published the report of the National Commission on Family Foster Care, with a special chapter on kinship care, titled “The significance of kinship care” in *A Blueprint for Fostering Infants, Children, and Youths in the 1990s* (National Commission on Family Foster Care, 1991). Based on CWLA’s publishing reach and reputation, the term “kinship care” has prevailed.

## Policy and Practice Choices and Challenges

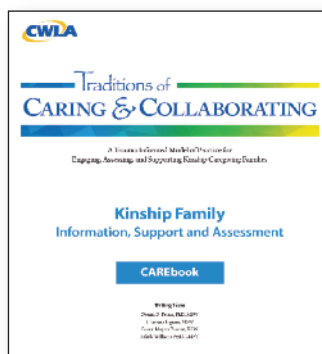
For three decades, CWLA has continued to shine a light on the strengths and needs of kinship families with books, a special double issue of the CWLA academic journal *Child Welfare*, national conferences, and a Kinship Care Summit. Recognizing the need for supportive legislation, CWLA and partners advocated for the Kinship Caregiver Support Act in 2004 and again in 2007 to assist millions of children being raised by grandparents and other relatives, with support from bipartisan Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), Olympia Snowe (R-ME), and Thad Cochran (R-MS). But it was not until 2008 that Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (H.R. 6893), allowing states to extend federal Title IV-E funding to kinship care families through the use of subsidized guardianships.

## Navigator Programs and a Model of Practice

Despite the commitment to raise children safely and prevent unnecessary separation and the need for foster care,

many relatives faced significant challenges and barriers accessing resources. As a result, CWLA members and staff worked together to promote Kinship Navigator Programs. Gerard Wallace, Esq., a nationally recognized champion of such efforts, led the development of a New York State model that was adapted across the country. Key components included how to access resources for information, referral, and education; stabilization and permanency services; specialized supports for trauma-informed care; outreach with other systems and education for professionals; and the need for collaboration with immigration, corrections, and child welfare.

While navigator programs have been essential, CWLA also has recognized the need to train agency staff in a kinship care “model of practice.” CWLA’s *Traditions of Caring and Collaborating: A Trauma Informed Model of Practice for Engaging, Assessing, and Supporting Kinship Caregiving Families* (TCC) identifies major



issues of concern for kinship families, whether formal or informal: legal, financial, health and mental health for children and kinship care-

givers; family relationships; school; children’s behavior; supports; fair and equal treatment; and the opportunity to make recommendations for improved services and supports. A “model of practice” helps ensure that all staff—direct service, supervisors, and managers—are working toward the same goal and using the same strength-based approaches.

As part of efforts to support kinship caregivers, the Southwest Family Guidance Center & Institute (SWFGC), a statewide child welfare and mental health agency in New Mexico, currently is part of their state’s Children, Youth, and Families Department’s Kinship Navigator Grant. SWFGC’s mission, as indicated on the website, is “to provide extraordinary service, aspiring for excellence in everything we do. At the core of the programming is a commitment to equity, bridging gaps of social, emotional, and educational disparity.”

The agency staff, under the leadership of President and CEO Dr. Craig Pierce, initially believed the navigator role would be an “easy start up” because of work already underway with children and families. But they were in for a surprise when inundated with hundreds of requests across the state. Identifying, accessing, and connecting various types

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of resources and services required filling a gap between the expertise of individual agency staff members and working as a team with kinship families. After many hours of research on kinship navigator programs in other states to put theory into practice, SWFGC found CWLA's kinship care resources. A curriculum that featured essential concepts—including a trauma informed model of practice for education, support, and assessment—also connected with key word such as “traditions” and “caring and collaborating” seemed to be the missing link.

Training staff in a model of practice made an immediate difference in their level of confidence, ability, and trust in themselves. For example, relying on a set of tools to help assess a family's strengths and needs was empowering for the staff. The agency soon realized that what families' thought they needed was mostly short-term crisis response. But CWLA's work tools also helped focus on meeting longer term needs and aided staff in learning new skills.

This included using the same strength-based language among staff, children and families, and community partners. Focusing, for example, on families instead of homes, respecting kinship caregivers instead of caretakers, and replacing the term “biopsychosocial” with “Collaboration Strength-Needs Assessment,” which achieves the same purpose but is more person- and family-friendly.

Identifying kinship family strengths and needs based on the model of practice helps identify what is going well with kinship families and what supports they need. Using CWLA's trauma informed model of practice to collaborate with kinship caregiving families helps ensure equality in services and supports.

Another dynamic in providing and advocating for kinship care services has shined a light on how many agency staff, caregivers, and public leaders have been personally involved with kinship care—either being raised by kin or raising younger family members.

Being both a professional and a caregiver poses unique challenges. As one kinship caregiver and agency manager explains, “I should know what I'm doing all the time, so I don't give myself a break when I don't always do the right thing as a parent or advocate.” Many dozens of personal and professional achievements, challenges, and insights sharing historical and current perspectives are detailed in

CWLA's 2020 book *Reflections on Kinship Care: Learning from the Past, Implications for the Future* (CWLA, 2020).

## National Kinship Care Month

Before the inspiration for the name “kinship care” and commensurate policies, programs, publications, and practices, there has been a National Grandparents Day. Established in 1978 by President Jimmy Carter, it is celebrated on the first Sunday after Labor Day to “give grandparents an opportunity to show love for their children's children, and to help children become aware of strength, information, and guidance older people can offer” (American Presidency Project, n.d.).

CWLA colleague and advocate, Gerard Wallace from New York, began working some years ago with members of Congress to draft resolutions for National Kinship Care Month with the aim of making it both celebratory and strategic. The challenge continues and, during this past year, CWLA's Public Policy Team—Vice President John Sciamanna, Policy Associate Shaquita Ogletree, and intern Sophie Greenberg—surveyed states regarding interest in and support for Kinship Care Month. Overwhelmingly, states were eager to learn more about taking steps to pass proclamations, as well as finding unique and impactful ways to celebrate kinship families during September, as well. Three main challenges consistently were identified:

- improving the slow pace of background checks and removing those barriers to connecting children with safe and caring kin;
- streamlining services among agencies; and
- removing stigma and biases regarding the benefits of kinship families, especially in smaller communities.

Overall, states agreed that celebrating national Kinship Care Month would enhance community support and promote positive changes in federal and local policy. While a national Kinship Care Month has yet to be achieved, agencies and organizations around the country are championing their own efforts. New York State's KinCare Coalition marked its eighth celebration of Kinship Care Month, presenting awards to outstanding caregivers, organizations, professionals, and champions around the state. The Coalition proclaimed, “We'll celebrate the treasured natural resource of kinship caregivers statewide, and highlight the important contribution that kin play in supporting and raising children, along with the advocates who fight so fiercely for them. In honor of champions who have

devoted decades to their work, the New York State KinCare Coalition presented a Lifetime Achievement Award for Kinship Care to Gerard Wallace.

Whether it is National Grandparents Day or National Kinship Care month, CWLA advocates for the support of all children, youth, parents, and families every day. This commitment perhaps was best explained by Maya Angelou: “Each family is so complex as to be known and understood only in part even by its own members. Families struggle with contradictions as massive as Everest, as fluid and changing as the Mississippi...Yet, when practical, the preference should be for family” (Angelou, 1985).

For more on CWLA’s role in kinship care, see [\(link to come\)](#) “Celebrating CWLA’s Kinship Care History: 30 Years of Caring, Collaborating, and Advocacy.”



**Eileen Mayers Pasztor, DSW**, was staff director for the National Commission on Family Foster Care, and became CWLA’s first national Kinship Care Program Director. She is a co-developer of CWLA’s Traditions of Caring and Collaborating: A Trauma Informed Model of Practice for Engaging, Assessing, and Supporting Kinship Caregiving Families. Over the years she has had the privilege of working with the individuals named in this article.



**Leandrea Romero-Lucero, PhD**, served as the Program Director for Fostering Family Program at Southwest Family Guidance Center & Institute. She is a kinship caregiver for a niece and two nephews ranging in age from 5 to 16. Dr. Romero-Lucero recognizes the challenges kinship families face and how often they are left to struggle alone, resulting in her advocacy for navigator services and implementation of CWLA’s Traditions of Caring and Collaborating Trauma Informed Model of Practice.

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# CWLA Celebrates Kinship Care

## Special Issue

### Kinship Care and Child Welfare: New Directions for Policy and Practice

Guest Editors: Mark Testa, Eunju Lee, and Charlene Ingram

This two-part special issue focuses on children in kinship care—those who are being raised by grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, and non-related extended family members. *Child Welfare* journal brings attention to this less visible area of public child welfare, by featuring policy-based and empirical research on kinship families.



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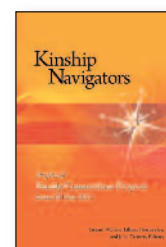
### Kinship Navigators: Profiles of Family Connections Projects from 2012 to 2015

Edited by Gerard Wallace, Liliana Hernandez, and Julie Treinen

The growth in the number of children who are living formally or informally with their relatives is one of the most stunning changes in the child welfare system.

Emphasis on kinship care policy, practice, and research is necessary to continue to enhance services and supports for kinship caregivers and families.

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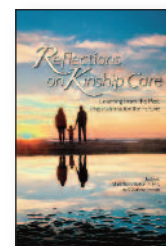


### Reflections on Kinship Care: Learnings from the Past, Implications for the Future

Edited by Mark Testa, Robert Hill and Charlene Ingram

This publication shares a historical perspective of kinship care, current policy and practice, and offers a vision for the future through recommendations. The reflections shared by the contributing authors carry us through the development of kinship care.

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