



Kinship Care in North Carolina: Promising Steps Forward

Rapid Evidence Review

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North Carolina has a shortage of licensed foster homes (Carnes, 2025), which makes it even more important to identify and support kinship placements. Placing children with relatives (related by blood, marriage, or adoption) or with other trusted adults who have a “family-like” relationship with the child (non-relatives, sometimes called “fictive kin”) is often the best option. Research shows that these placements help children stay connected to people they know, keep their cultural and community ties, and are more stable. Children in kinship care also tend to have better mental and behavioral health outcomes than children placed with non-kin foster parents (Hassall et al., 2021; Dickerson et al., 2021; Koh, 2010; Winokur et al., 2014).

Over the past decade, North Carolina has made significant progress in supporting kinship caregivers. However, support still varies across counties and important gaps remain. In 2023, the percent of children in relative foster homes in North Carolina (24%) was lower than the national average (31%; TAECF, 2025). This rapid evidence review highlights strategies North Carolina can use to better support kinship caregivers, based on policies and practices from other states.

Context: How North Carolina is Supporting Kinship Caregivers

Financial Support for unlicensed kinship

caregivers. In November 2023, the North Carolina Division of Social Services (NCDSS) implemented a statewide Unlicensed Kinship Care Payment Program. Through this program, eligible relatives caring for children in foster care can receive a monthly payment (up to a set amount per child, based on age), even if they are not licensed (NCDHHS, 2024). This program was created to narrow the gap in financial support between licensed foster parents and unlicensed relatives, and to make it easier for children to live with kin when possible. Kin who are not related to the child (“fictive kin”) are not eligible for this payment.

Licensing waivers and training exceptions for kinship caregivers.

North Carolina is creating a separate licensing path for kinship caregivers who meet the state’s legal definition of “relative”. While foster parents are legally required to complete at least 30 hours of pre-service training, relatives may now qualify for an exception that allows fewer training hours. Right now, the only approved reduced training option is the 15-hour National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) Kinship Pre-Service Training. Caregivers who are not legally considered relatives but have a family-like relationship (“fictive kin”) to the child do not qualify for this exception and must complete 30 hours of pre-service training to become licensed foster parents.

Children in Foster Home Placements
(relative vs. non-relative)



Source: KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2025



Expansion of Kinship Guardianship

Assistance Program (KinGAP). Since 2017, North Carolina has offered the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP) (NCDHHS, 2020). Through KinGAP, licensed kinship caregivers (relative or fictive kin) who become a child’s legal guardian—after reunification and adoption have been ruled out—may receive monthly financial support and Medicaid coverage for the youth until adulthood. A 2025 state law expanded eligibility by reducing the minimum age for KinGAP from 14 to 10. Children under age 10 may qualify when an older sibling is eligible and guardianship is appropriate (NCDHHS, 2025).

Online kinship information and support.

North Carolina’s Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) offers online resources for kinship caregivers, including a kinship care webpage and a “Know Your Options” guide. These online tools help caregivers understand the child welfare system, legal options, and available supports such as Medicaid, child care, and food assistance (NCDHHS, n.d.). In addition, kinship care trainings, webinars, and peer support groups are offered in many areas of the state from programs and organizations, such as High Country Caregivers’ Relatives as Parents Program (RAPP; see reference list for full list).

The Challenge: Remaining Gaps in Support for Kinship Caregivers

Differences in financial support. There is unequal financial support when kinship caregivers receive much less money than licensed foster parents, even though they are meeting the same daily needs for a child in foster care. The new program that provides monthly payments to unlicensed relative caregivers is an

important step forward. However, the payment is much lower than the foster care board rate paid to licensed foster parents (\$351 vs. \$702 for a child ages 0-5), and it does not include “fictive kin”.

Barriers in the licensing process and access

to KinGAP. Becoming a licensed foster parent can help kinship caregivers access higher monthly foster care board payments and, later, post-permanency financial supports such as KinGAP. However, the licensing process can be slow and burdensome. It often includes many hours of training—especially for those willing to provide specialized or therapeutic care—along with home visits, home inspections, and sometimes costly home modifications that kinship caregivers may not be prepared for. Many kinship caregivers are already safely caring for the child when the licensing process starts. Even so, they must meet these requirements while balancing work, family responsibilities, and the daily needs of caregiving.

Lack of knowledge and awareness of

supports and services. Many kinship caregivers do not receive clear, consistent information about their options, such as kinship licensure, KinGAP, and the new kinship payments for unlicensed relatives. They often rely on what a caseworker tells them, and that information can vary by worker and county. It can also be hard for caregivers to keep up when rules, eligibility, training, or paperwork requirements change. North Carolina does offer online resources, but families may still need more hands-on help to navigate benefits and services.



Recommendations:

1. Update training requirements and expand definition of "relative."

While some states require fewer hours and others require preservice training without legally setting a statewide minimum, North Carolina's foster parent preservice training requirement is fixed in statute at 30 minimum hours for all potential foster parents. Any exception or waiver for reduced training applies only to caregivers who meet the statutory definition of 'relative' (related by blood, marriage, or adoption). Because "fictive" kin are not included in that definition, NCDSS lacks legal authority to waive or reduce training hours for these caregivers without a legislative change to the 30-hour preservice training requirement and/or by expanding the legal definition of "relative" to include non-relative kinship caregivers.

Amending North Carolina's training requirements for non-relative kinship caregivers would open the door for more of these caregivers to step in. This would give agencies more safe placement options close to home and support the state's goal of placing children with caregivers who already have strong relationships with them.

Examples from other states:

Illinois' state law defines "relative" as either 1) someone related by blood, marriage, adoption, tribal custom or 2) fictive kin (Illinois General Assembly, 2024). Thus, non-relatives are included in Illinois' kin-first approach and in the states' kinship home certification and payment rules (Illinois General Assembly, 2024).

2. Establish kin-specific licensing standards.

North Carolina has already taken important steps toward a kin-first approach. The next step is to create kin-specific licensing standards, which are a separate set of licensing rules tailored for kinship caregivers that keeps safety checks in place but cuts back on requirements that do not affect safety. A 2023 federal rule gives states and tribes flexibility to do this. As of January 2026, the Children's Bureau has approved kin-specific licensing plans in 18 states (including South Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisiana) and five tribes. North Carolina is not on the approved state list (USDHHS, 2026).

With legislative changes, North Carolina could build on its progress by legally establishing a kin-specific licensing plan that includes both relatives and fictive kin, allows reduced preservice training for kin, and keeps required safety standards. The State could then submit this plan for federal approval, increasing the number of eligible kinship families who can be licensed quickly, access payments sooner, and, when appropriate, become eligible for KinGAP.

Examples from other states:

Oregon's (approved) Relative Pathway is a streamlined way for relatives to become certified, with less paperwork and a more supportive process while still requiring the same safety standards and home study used for non-relative foster parents. After a year of implementation, there was an 18% increase in early/first placements with relatives (Oregon, DHS, 2025).



3. Develop a kinship navigator program and expand support. County agencies partner with local private and nonprofit organizations to help kinship caregivers find services and supports. That means support can look very different depending on where a family lives. Some counties have a lot of capacity and resources to help, while others have limited options. A statewide kinship navigator program, which is designed to connect caregivers to benefits, supports and services, could provide consistent, centralized help for kinship caregivers.

It's also important to strengthen the community supports that navigators can refer families to. One promising example is KinCarolina, a South Carolina-based program offering peer, informational, and financial support to formal and informal kinship caregivers of children with disabilities. Early findings show improvements in caregivers' understanding of disabilities, child behavior, and overall well-being. The UNC team plans to adapt and expand in North Carolina.

4. Increase transparency and public reporting. As North Carolina continues to align practice with a kin-first approach, it is important to be transparent and to track progress. Public reporting can help ensure agencies are consistently prioritizing kinship placements.

What North Carolina should report. NCDHHS should publish clear, easy-to-find information so families, advocates, and community partners can understand how kinship licensure and supports are changing. Quarterly updates could include:

- The status of the kin-specific licensing plan and progress on implementation statewide
- How many relatives are receiving unlicensed kinship payments
- How many kinship caregiver homes are licensed
- How many children are placed in out-of-county placements (kinship and non-kinship homes)
- The average time it takes to become licensed through the kinship licensure pathway
- County- and region-level trends in payments to unlicensed and licensed kin
- The number of youth receiving KinGAP payments

Making this information public would help caregivers, advocates, and local agencies understand what options are available for kin, see where problems still exist across the state, and support the State's goal of building a kin-first culture. Public reporting can also show whether policy and practice changes are working. If the numbers do not improve, it may signal a gap between policy goals and the day-to-day realities children in foster care face.

Examples from other states:

- **Illinois:** The KIND Act requires DCFS to publicly report data on kinship care.
- **Maryland and Washington:** Both states provide public, interactive dashboards that track how many children are placed with licensed and unlicensed relatives (Maryland Department of Human Services, 2025).



Key Terms and Definitions

Board payments: Payments provided by the state to licensed foster parents or unlicensed relative caregivers to help with costs associated with caregiving.

Fictive kin: Trusted adults who are not related to a child by blood, marriage, or adoption but who have a “family-like” relationship with the child

Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program: a permanency option for eligible children in foster care that provides financial support and Medicaid when they exit foster care to live with a kin caregiver (who had been licensed for at least 6 months) as a legal guardian

Kinship navigator program: a program that helps kinship caregivers learn about and access programs and services to meet their needs and the needs of the children in their care.

Kinship placement: When a child is removed from their home and enters foster care, the priority of the child welfare agency is to find an able and willing kin caregiver to care for the child until the child can safely return home.

Licensing: The process of becoming a licensed foster parent. It often involves home visits and inspections, criminal background checks, home study, and completion of training.

Placement stability: The number of placement changes while in foster care. Ideally, the child stays in one safe home.

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Acknowledgments

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