



Kinship Navigators Help Families Find Their Way

By Christie Renick

After losing her husband last year, 63-year-old Lynn Urvina is raising her teenage granddaughter on her own in western Washington. But thanks to a network of social workers, support groups and nonprofits, Urvina isn't alone.

Her job as one of Washington state's 14 kinship navigators means not only is she in the know about services available for people like her, but she gets to travel throughout her three-county territory to make sure other folks in situations similar to hers realize they are part of a larger community.

"Of course everybody's journey is a little bit different, but I like them to know that at least some of our experiences are similar," Urvina said. "Sometimes that helps clients feel a little more comfortable talking about their families because they understand that mine isn't perfect, either."

Kinship navigator programs provide services and supports to families raising relatives' children and take different forms in different states. Florida, New York and Washington are all states with established, comprehensive navigator programs that have evolved with caregivers' needs over the years, according to Heidi Redlich Epstein, director of kinship policy at the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law.

"I don't think there's a perfect model that's already up and running, probably because of funding, but there are pieces of each program that I like a lot," Redlich Epstein said.

Families like Urvina's and those of her clients are far from alone. Nationally, it's estimated that there are 20 kids in informal living arrangements with relatives for every one child in foster care. In the state of Washington, there were about 3,600 kids in foster care who were living with relatives in 2015, and another 39,000 kids living in informal kinship placements.

Many states have no budget to support those families who are caring for their relatives' children outside the structure of the foster care system, but Washington has set aside about \$1 million per year just for that purpose. Urvina's agency connects low-income families with informal kinship placements to much-needed resources, like help with utility bills, moving expenses, shoes and clothing for the kids — whatever the family might need.

But beyond the financial challenges, many families struggle socially as well. Retirement-aged caregivers can find it difficult to relate and socialize with their friends who aren't taking care of small children or teenagers, according to Urvina.

Through support groups, older adults can find others like them who understand what they're experiencing day-to-day and maybe don't mind going to McDonald's and talking about Disney movies.

"People need to be connected to resources, to other people in similar situations, to legal information, and I feel like I'm kind of that connection," Urvina said. "That's really my main goal."

For many people taking in the children of relatives, it may be the first time they have had to ask for help or sign up for public benefits. And they might not be comfortable voicing their needs.

"It's hard to ask for help — I was there. The first thing I really had to ask for was medical coverage for my granddaughter because until she was adopted we weren't allowed to put her on our medical insurance, so I had to go to the state for medical insurance," Urvina said. "It's hard, it's just not what people are comfortable with, oftentimes."

She also helps her clients think through bigger picture issues.

"We talk about financial planning when you're older and you've got little ones, and health care planning and some of those things that are more pertinent to the adults," she said.

Urvina works with families in three different counties, some who don't live close to an urban area where there might be more services for kids with special or more complex needs. In those cases, families might be given transportation assistance or access to a remote support group that meets by phone or video.

Hilarie Hauptman is a program manager within the aging and long-term support administration of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. She said one of the state's kinship navigators got creative in connecting rural families by using technology like telehealth to facilitate a support group, and sometimes relative caregivers take matters into their own hands.

"We put together a video, and in it someone said, 'I just bring it up in conversation wherever I go,' and that's how they would find other people like them," Hauptman said. Sometimes the best way to help people find that one-on-one support that is so vital, she said, is to be a role model or ambassador for others.

Washington's kinship network began as a pilot project in the mid-2000s with financial support from Casey Family

Programs, a private foundation focused on child welfare, and today is a well-developed program that spans the state.

With the passage of the federal Family First Prevention Services Act earlier this year, people serving these families are hopeful that other states will be able to develop programs under the new law.

"We're thrilled that there is preventative funding that's looking at the whole population of relatives raising children," Hauptman said, referring to the section of the law that focuses on preventing children from ever entering foster care. Placing children with relatives is one way of accomplishing that goal.

Under Family First, states can apply for federal reimbursement for up to 50 percent of the cost of kinship navigator programs. But is that enough to allow states to start or expand a program?

Redlich Epstein of the American Bar Association says 50 percent is significant.

"The only federal funding available before this was through the Fostering Connections Act. It is a fantastic boost to this concept of kinship care," Redlich Epstein said. "There are a lot of potential good things in the new law for kinship caregivers."

Urvina, who received an award for her work from Casey Family Programs last year, has been a kinship navigator now for a decade. She's told her own story many times, and she's seen and helped families in all different situations. When asked what she wishes people would ask about kinship care, she was quick to respond.

"I wish they would ask what they can do to help. And I'd ask people to lose the judgment, to leave it behind," Urvina said. "I found this quote, adapted from Joseph Crumley, and it's one of my favorites: 'Before you say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, remember, there are many healthy apples on that tree.'"

Christie Renick is the southwest editor for The Chronicle of Social Change.



Heidi Redlich Epstein



Lynn Urvina