

*News from the U.S.A.*

### More foster kids finding homes with kin, thanks to shift in courts

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Kinship care, the practice of family members taking in relatives' children when parents are unable to care for them, has been around for ages. But it's only been in recent years that Pennsylvania joined a national trend, with courts pushing child welfare agencies to make finding kin a priority.

"I firmly believe that there's no question that kids are better served by staying with people they know," said Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Max Baer. "Kinship caregivers can have a tremendous impact on children's lives by offering them a place where they can feel safe."

Since 2012, kinship care has increased 24 percent in Pennsylvania, according to the state Office of Children & Families in the Courts. In 2014 — the most recent year for which figures are available — 19,200 children statewide were being supervised by the courts, with 37 percent in traditional foster care and 18 percent in kinship care. The rest remained with their parents with some court intervention.

While most caregivers in kinship programs are relatives by blood or marriage, the courts have expanded the definition to include others who have a nurturing relationship with the child, such as coaches, teachers or family friends.

The state Supreme Court handed down rules requiring child welfare agencies to make finding family members a priority. The rules, updated in July, state that "diligent efforts" to locate kin must be made in every child's case.

For caseworkers, this quest for kin includes knocking on the doors of any family members they can find, as well as making phone calls, social media searches and computer database checks. Sometimes, the search widens to other states.

"It's a lot of legwork," said Krysta Heffner, a Lehigh County kinship supervisor. And it must be done quickly. By law, children whom authorities suspect are not safe with their parents must immediately be placed in foster care, with a court hearing on their case held within 72 hours.

Another hearing occurs 10 days later, then another in 30 days. At each hearing, judges and juvenile court masters — specially trained attorneys authorized to make decisions regarding dependent children — must ask what efforts have been made to find family members.

Under pressure from the courts, caseworkers have learned to get creative when looking for kin.

When an angry parent tells workers that there's no one in the family who can take a child, the worker might ask to see the contact list on the parent's cellphone, Hand said. Or they ask whom the parent would call if they needed something in the middle of the night. The cellphones and Facebook pages of older children also can provide clues, especially in cases when a mother says she has no way of getting in touch with a child's father, Hand said.

Family or not, kinship caregivers must still pass the same strict background checks, child abuse clearances and home inspections that other foster parents face "It's a massive undertaking," McGonigle said.

"I give kinship parents a lot of credit," Hand said. "We come to them, sometimes in the middle of the night, and ask them to rearrange their entire lives."

Research shows that children in kinship care fare better than those in traditional foster homes. Only 6 percent of kids in kinship care try to run away, compared with 16 percent in traditional foster homes and 35 percent in group homes, according to the Center for Law and Social Policy, a Washington, D.C. anti-poverty advocacy agency.

"Our foster parents are wonderful people, but there is just something intrinsic in a child to know that the person taking care of them is family," Buerhle said.

"Focusing on both the physical and emotional well-being of children is critical, and safe kinship can help us accomplish both," Moore said.

Baer, the Supreme Court justice, agreed.

"Many of the children are traumatized when they come into the system, and our job is to make them better, not traumatize them more," he said.

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