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A photograph of two young Black children standing outdoors. The child on the left is a boy wearing a dark green corduroy jacket and dark pants, looking towards the girl. The child on the right is a girl wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with a blue heart pattern and a mustard yellow corduroy skirt with buttons. They are standing in front of a green leafy background.

**Kin Caregivers of Black Children and Youth in Care:
Their Experiences of Permanency Processes and
Substitute Care, with a Focus on Guardianship**
Report of Caregiver Interview Findings

CHILDREN AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER
TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH - OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND CHILD WELL-BEING

Kin Caregivers of Black Children and Youth in Care: Their Experiences of Permanency Processes and Substitute Care, with a Focus on Guardianship

Report of Caregiver Interview Findings

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Table of Contents

Project Background and Purpose	i
Executive Summary	iv
Chapter 1. Introduction and Methods.....	1
Chapter 2. Choosing Between Adoption and Guardianship	4
Chapter 3. Caregivers’ Experiences of Substitute Care and Permanency Planning Professionals and Processes	7
Chapter 4. The Caregiving Experience	11
Chapter 5. Caregiver Perceptions of the Role of Race in Substitute Care and Permanence Planning for Black Children	17
Chapter 6. Discussion	19
Appendix A. Kin Caregiver Interview Protocol	22
Acknowledgments and Suggested Citation	24



Project Background and Purpose

This report presents results from a qualitative study of Illinois caregivers that examined permanency planning for children in the care of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). This qualitative study was one component of a study of subsidized guardianship, an infrequently used but promising alternative for finding permanent homes for children in foster care. In the overall study, we gathered data from both permanency professionals and caregivers who have at least one Black child in substitute care with the goal of becoming that child's permanent caregiver. We collected data through interviews and surveys with each group.

We sought to understand the following:

1. How professionals have experienced different permanency options, with a particular focus on guardianship, and how they perceive these options.
2. How caregivers have experienced permanency planning and how they perceive different permanency options.
3. Professionals' and caregivers' perceptions of racial issues in permanency planning and outcomes.

Our aim is to inform efforts to use guardianship wisely to increase the number of children placed in loving, stable, permanent homes, especially Black children.

Funding

This research was supported in part by the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion of the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC) as part of its Call to Action to Address Racism and Social Injustice Research Program. **The program aims to “enhance exceptional cross-disciplinary research strengths and expand collaborations to build cultures of research and scholarship that address structures of racism and injustice.”**¹ The Office of the Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at UIUC launched the program to address the root causes of racial disparities with generative ideas, imaginative strategies, and productive collaborations. The research was also supported as part of a DCFS contract with UIUC that funds the Office of Translational Research in the School of Social Work.

Collaboration with DCFS

An advisory team of administrators and analysts from DCFS guided and supported the implementation of this research. The advisory team included staff from the DCFS Division of Strategy and Performance Execution, the Office of Research and Child

1. Office of the Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (2022) [Call to Action to Address Racism & Social Injustice Research Program : Request for Proposals 2022-2023](#). University of Illinois at Urbana-Illinois.

Well-being, the Office of Racial Equity Practice, and the Permanency Division. The advisory team assisted the research team with research design, data collection, and preparation of reports and presentations. This support included providing DCFS administrative data to support recruitment for interviews and surveys, providing data to assist with determining the representativeness of the survey sample, offering feedback on the development of the surveys, and promoting survey completion with permanency staff.

Defining Caregiver

This study aims to reflect the perspectives of caregivers in Illinois settings. In other settings and historically, caregivers are commonly referred to as ‘foster parents,’ ‘adoptive parents,’ or ‘guardians.’ In this report, caregivers are those people who are not the biological parents of a child who provide the day-to-day care for a child who has been removed from their biological parents’ custody for reasons such as abuse and neglect. We are grateful to the caregivers who participated in our study.

The Context for the Study

When children are removed from their homes because of maltreatment, the goal of DCFS is to return them to a loving, safe, stable, and permanent home as soon as possible. Ideally, children are reunified with their birthparents, but when this cannot be done safely, DCFS seeks to place children and adolescents in other permanent homes. Unfortunately, the most recent statistics show that 47.3% of children and youth who entered substitute care from DCFS in 2018 were not placed in a permanent home within three years. Some never find permanent homes: in 2020, 598 Illinois youth aged out of substitute care without ever returning to a permanent home during their childhood.² The difficulty of placing children in permanent homes is worse for Black children in substitute care. While a majority of White children entering substitute care with DCFS in 2018 reached a permanent home within three years (57.2%), less than half of Black children did (46.7%).

Enhanced use of guardianship has the potential to increase the number of children reaching permanent homes and reduce racial disparity in permanency. With guardianship, a caregiver becomes the permanent caregiver of the child but does not adopt the child. Usually, the guardian receives a subsidy from DCFS to support the care of the child, which is referred to as subsidized guardianship. Typically, the guardian is kin to the child, such as their aunt/uncle, grandparent, or older sibling. Fictive kin (non-family members with a relationship to the child, such as a teacher, neighbor, etc.) may also take on this role and associated responsibilities. At the time that guardianship is awarded, the guardian has already been providing stable and loving foster care for the child. Guardianship in Black families is consistent with “the value placed on extended family and taking care of one’s own,” and draws on deeply rooted traditions of kinship networks in African cultures and in African American communities³. With guardianship, birthparents’ rights do not need to be terminated, so typically, one or both of the birthparents will retain some parental rights, including the right to visitation. Birthparents can also, at a later time, petition the court to regain custody of their children. Many kin caregivers are committed and able to provide children permanent homes, but they do not want to terminate the parental rights of the birthparent, who is often a close relative such as their son, daughter, or sibling.

Part of the context of this study is a longstanding debate about the value of adoption versus guardianship. This context is described in detail in our [Policy Context and Lessons Learned](#) report. Some experts have claimed that adoption represents a greater commitment and is more stable,⁴ and a preference for adoption has been codified in both Federal and Illinois law,⁵ as well as the guidelines of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court

2. This is the most recent statistic available from the federal Children’s Bureau. Children’s Bureau (2022). [Child Welfare Outcomes Report Data](#).

3. Cross, T. et al. (2004). How does subsidized guardianship respect culture? Perspectives on African American, Native American, and Latino experiences, in Bissell, M. & Miller, J. L. *Using subsidized guardianship to improve outcomes for children: Key questions to consider*. Children’s Defense Fund, pp. 55-95.

4. Murray, K. J., Bartlett, J. D., & Lent, M. C. (2021). The Experience of Children and Families Involved with the Child Welfare System. *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Across the Lifespan: A project of the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan* (NPEIV), 1441-1462. Takas, M. (1993). Permanent care options involving kin in child welfare cases. *Current Issues in Pediatric Law*, National Association of Counsel for Children, 91–105.

5. Testa, M. (2022) [Disrupting the foster care to termination of parental rights pipeline: Making a case for kinship guardianship as the](#)

Judges.⁶ But recent research finds no difference in stability between adoption and guardianship.⁷ Moreover, some experts argue that the preference for adoption can obstruct stable guardianships with kin caregivers who can provide children with permanent homes within their extended family.⁸

Description of the Overall Study

The overall study gathered data from both professionals and caregivers, using both semi-structured interviews and online surveys for each. This yielded four components of the study. We have produced a research report for each component. Below we list the four components of the study,

1. Interviews with 40 Illinois professionals working on permanency cases (including 13 permanency supervisors, 11 permanency caseworkers, 6 DCFS attorneys, 5 guardians *ad litem*, and 5 judges).
2. A survey of Illinois permanency caseworkers and supervisors, with 267 respondents (including 158 caseworkers, 68 supervisors, and 41 other staff; 52% DCFS staff and 48% private agency staff).
3. Interviews with 11 kin and fictive kin caregivers caring for Black children.
4. A survey of 137 caregivers caring for at least one Black child with an adoption or guardianship goal.

In addition, we have written two research briefs presenting key findings from professionals and caregivers, respectively, and a report on the policy context of the study and the lessons learned across all four components. The research briefs and Policy Context and Lessons Learned report also present our recommendations for enhancing the use of subsidized guardianship in Illinois. All products associated with this research project are available on our [subsidized guardianship webpage](#). This includes reports on each component of the study and associated research briefs.



[next best alternative for children who can't be reunified with their parents](#). *Family Integrity & Justice Quarterly*, 1(1), 74-82.

6. National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (2000). [Adoption and Permanency Guidelines](#). Reno, NV.

7. Rolock, N., & White, K. R. (2016). Post-permanency discontinuity: A longitudinal examination of outcomes for foster youth after adoption or guardianship. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 70, 419-427.

8. Creamer, K. & Lee, A. (2022). [Reimagining permanency: The struggle for racial equity and lifelong connections](#), *Family Integrity & Justice Quarterly*, 1(1), 62-71. Gupta-Kagan, J. (2015). The new permanency. *UC Davis Journal of Juvenile Law & Policy*, 19, 1. Milner, J. & Kelly, D. (2022). [The need to replace harm with support starts with The Adoption and Safe Families Act](#). *Family Integrity & Justice Quarterly*, 1(1), 6-7. Sankaran, V.S. (2022). [Ending the unnecessary pain inflicted by Federal child welfare policy](#), *Family Integrity & Justice Quarterly*, 1(1), 26-33.



Executive Summary

In this study, we interviewed long-term kin and fictive kin caregivers of Black children and youth who were or had been in the custody of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Our semi-structured interviews with caregivers asked about the circumstances that led the children to come into their care, their experience of permanency planning and processes, why they had chosen adoption or guardianship, and the relationships they and the children in their care continued to have with the children's birthparents. Caregivers were also asked if they perceived that the child, the birthparent, or they had been treated unfairly by child welfare professionals due to race. We interviewed 11 caregivers of Black children who were or had been in DCFS custody who were listed in DCFS records as having a goal of adoption or guardianship as a permanency option. These children were ages 2-19 and had been living with their caregiver for two to eight years. We interviewed caregivers from each of the Illinois DCFS administrative regions. Nine of the caregivers received casework services from community agencies contracted with DCFS, and two received casework services directly from DCFS. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, except in one case in which the interviewee declined recording. In this case, researchers took notes on the interview. A qualitative data analysis was conducted of the transcripts, using both a priori and inductive coding and utilizing Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software.

Highlighted Findings

Choosing Between Adoption and Guardianship

- Caregivers gave three reasons for choosing guardianship over adoption: a) concern about a negative impact of adoption on familial relationships, b) a desire to allow for the possibility that the birthparent might become able to reunify with their children, and c) the children's preference for guardianship over adoption.

- The three caregivers who chose adoption over guardianship for children in their care explained they had done so because they felt that adoption gave the children more permanence and clarity in the face of loss.
- Although most interviewees had been made aware of both adoption and guardianship as options prior to the permanency goal being set, three of the caregivers told us that guardianship had neither been explained to them or identified as a permanency option for the children they cared for.

Caregivers' Experiences of Substitute Care and Permanency Planning Professionals and Processes

- Three of the 11 kin caregivers we interviewed relayed stories in which either they or the birthparent had to advocate to get children in DCFS custody placed with kin instead of in non-relative foster homes.
- Caregivers expressed concern about the length of the permanency process, excessive turnover of casework staff, caseworkers who were not fully knowledgeable about all aspects of the process, some caseworker practices that did not seem appropriate to them, and the insufficiency of caregiving and parenting supports.
- The interviews revealed examples of inadequate communication between agency staff and caregivers and between organizations involved in processing guardianships and adoptions.

The Caregiving Experience

- Most of the caregivers were willing to have some level of ongoing relationship or communication with the birthparents of the children they cared for. Caregivers who had chosen to become guardians and caregivers who had chosen to adopt the children they cared for did not differ on this.
- Most of the caregivers expressed willingness to support a relationship between the children in their care and the children's birthparents. The willingness of the kin or fictive kin caregivers to support this relationship did not seem to be related to their choice of guardianship or adoption.
- The joys of the caregiving experience included enjoying their relationships with the children in their care, seeing them eventually flourish, and guiding them towards college, career, and adulthood. The lows included challenges in addressing the children's trauma, difficulty dealing with birthparents, grieving for the separation of children and birthparents from each other, and unmet need for supports with parenting.
- Two kin caregivers offered suggestions for systems improvement. One suggested increasing the level of support provided to caregivers in promoting the well-being and development of the children in their care. The other suggested contracting with outside agencies to provide peer supports to kin caregivers.

Caregiver Perceptions of the Role of Race in Substitute Care and Permanence Planning for Black Children

- When asked whether they felt that they, the children, or the birthparents may have been treated unfairly due to their race, eight caregivers (two of whom were white), said "no." Two caregivers, both Black, said they were unsure but thought they may have. They both described incidents in which they thought that they, the birthparents, and the children may have been treated unfairly due to race.

Conclusion

The interviews with the caregivers provide counterexamples against the prevalent idea that guardianship is less stable for children than adoption. Interviewees chose adoption or guardianship for the children they cared for based on what they believed was the better option for each of the children they cared for. Those who chose guardianship seemed no less committed than those who chose adoption to provide love, care, and parenting through the age of 18 and beyond. This finding is consistent with the need to provide comprehensive and accurate information on both permanency options to kin and fictive kin caregivers.

The caregiver interviews revealed several administrative shortcomings that point to a need to build systemic and professional capacity to administer substitute care and permanency planning. This would facilitate informed communication with caregivers and timely action to serve each child's best interest. The interviews also suggest that kin and fictive kin caregivers also need more support from child welfare agencies. This includes additional attention to providing subsidies, help in responding to children's experiences of trauma, and support with parenting and interacting with birthparents.

This study suggests several areas for future research. These areas include a) whether the preference for placing children with kin is optimally and equitably administered, b) factors contributing to the length of the permanency process, c) the impact of lengthy permanency processes on the foster care outcomes of older children, and d) factors contributing to the turnover of permanency caseworkers.





Chapter 1

Introduction and Methods

In this study, we administered semi-structured interviews to long-term kin/fictive kin caregivers of Black children who were or had been in the custody of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The topics we discussed in interviews included why they preferred adoption or guardianship; their experience of substitute care and permanency planning professionals and processes; their experience of caregiving; and whether they perceived that the child, the birthparent, or they had been treated unfairly by professionals due to race. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and DCFS.

Research Design

This qualitative study was designed to (1) inform the development of a survey that would be administered to the state's population of long-term kin/fictive kin caregivers of Black children in DCFS custody and (2) capture qualitative information that might not be available in a survey.

Composition of the Sample

To facilitate recruitment of caregivers for interviews, DCFS sent an Excel file to the research team. The Excel file listed youth in DCFS care more than 24 months who had been with their current caregiver for at least 12 months. The file provided caregivers' addresses, information on their relationship with the child, the race of the child, the permanency goal for the child, and the DCFS region responsible for the case. From this file, the research team identified 256 caregivers who met the following criteria: a) the child they cared for was Black, b) the caregiver was either kin or fictive kin, and c) the permanency goal was either guardianship or adoption. Recruitment letters were mailed to all 256 eligible caregivers. The recruitment letter explained the study, offered the caregivers a \$50 gift card for participating, and gave caregivers multiple avenues for contacting the research

team (telephone, email, and mailing address).

The final sample included all 11 caregivers who met the inclusion criteria and responded to the recruitment: nine kin caregivers (a sibling, a cousin, an aunt, three grandparents, one great grandparent, and two great aunts) and two fictive kin caregivers. These caregivers lived in the Central (2), Cook (3), Northern (4) and Southern (1) regions. One caregiver lived out-of-state and provided kinship care for children who had been maltreated in Illinois. Two of the caregivers had worked primarily with DCFS caseworkers, and nine of the caregivers were primarily served by caseworkers from contracted agencies. Five of the caregivers had an adoption goal for the child(ren) in their care; four had a guardianship goal. One caregiver of three children not related to each other had an adoption goal for one child and a guardianship goal for two others. Although one of the caregivers was listed by DCFS as having a guardianship goal for the three children he cared for, we learned that the contracted agency that worked with them had decided not to pursue guardianship or adoption for the children and had not discussed guardianship with him.

Nine of the caregivers identified themselves as Black; and two identified themselves as White. Eight of our interviewees were women; three were men. They ranged in age from their 30s to their 80s. Five of the caregivers had one child in their care, three had two children in their care, and three had three children in their care. The ages of these 20 children and youth ranged from 2 to 19 at the time of the interview. These children had been placed with their caregiver for at least two and up to eight and a half years. Four caregivers had the children in their care for less than three years. Seven caregivers had the children in their care for three or more years.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with each caregiver for approximately one hour.

Interview Protocol

Questions in the kin/fictive kin caregiver interview protocol were in the following categories:

- Relationship to the child(ren) and the child(ren)'s birthparents
- Length of time caring for the child(ren)
- How and why the child(ren) came into their care
- Highs and lows of the care arrangement
- Experience with foster care licensing
- Who has been involved in permanency planning for child(ren)
- Which permanency options were discussed and when
- Whether permanent guardianship was described and given as an option and when
- Caregiver's view of the best permanency option for the child(ren) in their care
- Planning for subsidies for adoption or guardianship
- Caregiver's perception of whether they, the child(ren), or the child(ren)'s birthparents have been treated unfairly due to race by anyone involved in the child's placement and permanency planning
- Caregiver demographics (age, race, ethnicity, gender)

The interview protocol is presented in Appendix A of this report.



Interviewing Procedures

Researchers gave caregivers the option of participating in interviews by telephone or Zoom and asked their permission to record the interview. For most participants, the interview was conducted and recorded via Zoom, either with or without video. A few participants chose to participate via phone. In these cases, the call was linked to a Zoom call for the purposes of recording only. At the participant's request, one caregiver phone interview was not recorded. In this case detailed notes were taken by the researchers conducting the interview. Most of the interviews were led by two Ph.D. level researchers (Landa and Cross), although time constraints meant that some interviews were led by one of these two researchers. A junior researcher (Hines, Parsons, Thebaud, Sharva Hampton-Campbell, or Mary Jane Steiner) also assisted with the interviewing on most interviews. The interviews were transcribed by professional transcribers or members of the research team. The transcripts were checked for accuracy by at least one researcher.

Data Analysis

The research team used the interview protocol and a preliminary review of transcripts to develop a data codebook. We uploaded interview transcripts to the Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. At least two members of the research team then used the a priori codes from the data codebook to code each transcript. A doctoral level researcher resolved any differences in coding. We used Atlas.ti to produce a report for each code across all the transcripts. The first author used the code reports to inductively develop codes that either refined the initial a priori codes or created new broader thematic categories leading to the findings of this report.

Findings

Over the next four chapters we discuss the findings from this study. First, we discuss caregivers' choice of adoption or guardianship for the children in their care, including the extent to which guardianship was explained and offered as a permanency option. Then, we share the caregivers' experiences of the substitute care and permanency planning processes and professionals who worked with them. These experiences included difficulties that three of our interviewees had with getting the relative children in their care initially placed with them. Next, we share our interviewees' experiences of the caregiving experience, including their and their children's interactions with birthparents, what they identified as joys and challenges, and supports they received to supplement DCFS services. This section also highlights suggestions for improvement that caregivers shared. Finally, we then share caregivers' perceptions of the role of race in substitute care and permanency planning for Black children.





Chapter 2

Choosing Between Adoption and Guardianship

Extent to Which Guardianship is Explained and Offered as a Permanency Option

Although most interviewees had been made aware of both adoption and guardianship as options prior to the permanency goal being set, three of the caregivers told us that guardianship had neither been explained to them nor identified as a permanency option for the children they cared for. Two of these caregivers were great aunts who had been caring for their children for years, one from the child's birth and one from her two children's infancy and early childhood. The third caregiver was fictive kin, who was caring for three siblings who were ages 14-17 when they were placed with him two years prior to the interview. Although this caregiver was listed in the DCFS data file as having a guardianship goal, he was unsure of what guardianship was and said his caseworker had told him they would not discuss a permanency goal because it could not be attained before the siblings turned 18. The caregiver told us that the 17-year-old (19 at the time of the interview) would receive extended care through age 21.

Caregiver Preferences for Adoption/Guardianship

Four caregivers opted for guardianship over adoption; three opted for adoption over guardianship; one caregiver chose guardianship for two of the children she cared for and adoption for a third. Three caregivers had not made an informed choice between adoption and guardianship because, as explained previously, they reported that guardianship as a permanency option had not been explained to them. Two of these caregivers had adoption goals for their children; the third was told there would be no permanency goal for the children he cared for. The age range of the children for whom the caregivers had chosen guardianship ranged from four to 15 (at the time of the interview). The age range of the children for whom the caregiver had made an informed choice of adoption over guardianship ranged from five to 18 (at the time of the interview).

Caregivers gave three reasons for choosing guardianship over adoption: a) concern about the impact of adoption on familial relationships, b) a desire to allow for the possibility that the birthparent might become able to reunify with their children, and c) the children's preference for guardianship over adoption. No caregiver who had chosen guardianship indicated that they preferred guardianship to adoption because it would be easier to return the child to foster care or because their responsibility for the child would not extend to the child's adult years. The older brother caring for his 14- and 15-year-old sisters explained his preference for guardianship:

I didn't want to cause any damage [in my] relationship with my mom and ... sisters. I believe ...adoption ...would have terminated my mom's rights ...There is no way I could do that because I still communicate with my mom.

Similarly, the cousin caring for a nine-year-old said, "I did not want to adopt because of the family dynamic."

A grandmother caring for her four- and seven-year-old grandchildren explained that she chose guardianship because it was her preference that the children go back to their mother if the mother were to become "able, stable, and solid;" adding that the children loved their mother. Similarly, the great-grandmother of a 12-year-old stated,

I wanted to be his guardian in case ... his mother did get well, she could always come back ...[and] have the option of having her son ...If I adopted him, I would be taking him away from her. And I didn't want her to feel that I was taking her son.

The fictive kin caregiver who chose guardianship for two and adoption for one of the children in her care explained that professionals had given the children information on both adoption and guardianship, and both she and professionals asked them to decide which they preferred. It was her perception that the 14- and 15-year-olds had chosen guardianship because of their relationships with their birth family.

Two of the girls ...still have a big connection with their family...I think that...they didn't want their family to feel like they were casting them to the side, because they still talk to their mom, they still see their mom ...One of them see[s] ... and visit[s] with their dad.

This fictive kin caregiver explained that the oldest child in her care (age 17 at the time of the interview) chose adoption because

She didn't have a good relationship with her mom, and she didn't really know her dad. So, I think that's why she chose to go with adoption.

The three caregivers who chose adoption over guardianship for children in their care explained they had done so because they felt adoption gave the children more permanence and clarity in the face of loss. The grandmother who adopted her granddaughter just before she turned 18 explained how adoption enabled her to address in some way the pain her granddaughter felt when she was in court and witnessed her parents voluntarily relinquishing their rights as her parents.

We've always wanted adoption ...I'm more of a mother than her mother ever was ...I've mothered her. I've nurtured her, even from a baby ...The more permanent to us, it was ...important ...We wanted it permanent ...We've been in court in and out for years now. The parents both signed their rights away ...They said that I'm not your parent...and [CHILD] was actually in the courtroom ...If I would've known that they were going to talk and ask the mother all these questions ...I wouldn't have let her be in the room, because it was very painful...They both did that to her. So, I felt ...I want to be your mom. I've always been your mom.

The aunt of the five-year-old who chose an adoption goal, said,

They did discuss guardianship...I can't remember all the details of the differences between the two, but for me I just don't want [CHILD] to feel confused on belonging anywhere. She calls me Mom. And she's been calling me Mom for a long time. And her mom is not involved. At first, she was, and then ... She's always been inconsistent ... I just want her to know that she has a family and a home. I don't want ...her to question.

The grandfather caring for his grandchildren, ages six, seven, and nine at the time of the interview, explained that he chose adoption because he wanted to protect the children by closing the door to reunification with their mother, his daughter.

With permanent guardianship, you leave the door open for an unfit parent to acknowledge her rights, to know that she still has those rights. And with my situation, those rights are not deserving ...I'm looking out for the best interest of the children ...If giving a permanent guardianship would leave the door open, I think that would do more harm than good to the children... My daughter deserves an opportunity. However, ...she's been given countless ...opportunities for the past six years. She shows no interest... I don't want her to give someone the impression that, 'I'm ready now,' and then ...revert back to the negative.

Caregivers Who Were Unaware of Guardianship as a Permanency Option

As noted previously, two of the kin caregivers with adoption goals, both great aunts of the children they cared for, did not have a chance to make an informed choice between adoption and guardianship because to their knowledge they had not received any information about guardianship and had not been asked to make a choice between guardianship and adoption. One of these great aunts explained that adoption made sense for her great niece because it would keep her out of the foster care system. "I've not allowed her to stay in the system. I was trying not to make her stay in the system." Both she and the other great aunt expressed that adoption was good because it enabled the children they cared for to remain a part of their families and not be removed to the care of someone outside of the family. Their comments emphasized their commitment to providing their children with permanent care from their family in contrast to their being in foster care with strangers. They did not reflect on the possibility that guardianship might also provide that form of permanency, which is not surprising because, according to their account, guardianship as a permanency option had never been mentioned or explained to them.

Why would I leave her out there in the system hanging with somebody else that's not even related? I think it's important for her to be with family.... There's a lot of ... people, ... [my] grandchildren, great-grandchildren, that's all interested in her. So, it's not like she's just going to somebody else. She's still in the family.

Well, when we discussed [permanency], she said that they were young enough that they didn't want them to just stay in foster care. She's like, 'So we have to look for adoption.' So, I'm like 'Adoption?' She's like, 'Yeah.' So, I don't think I really thought about it. I'm like, well I've had them all these years. What would I do? I wouldn't just give them to some strangers because they've been with me since he was nine months old. This is the only home he really knows. Why would I give him to a stranger?... I don't think I was given ... options that I'm aware of, but I knew what was best for the children was to stay with me. I knew that.





Chapter 3

Caregivers' Experiences of Substitute Care and Permanency Planning Professionals and Processes

Initial Placement with Kin/Fictive Kin Caregivers

Although DCFS is required to prioritize placement of children in relatives' homes for children who need substitute care, three of the kin caregivers we interviewed reported that kin had to advocate to get their children in DCFS custody placed with family instead of in non-family foster homes. An aunt with an adoption goal for her five-year old niece described how she was initially passed over as the child's caregiver in favor of non-family foster homes. She described how the rightful placement of the child with her only occurred because of the advocacy of the birthmother, her sister.

I was asked by my sister [to be the caregiver for the child]. [The child] had been in DCFS custody since the age of two, and my sister couldn't get her back. She found out that ... family should have been offered a chance to have her, and that opportunity wasn't given. She asked me, would I take her. And I ... said, yes. And it took maybe four months before I got her ... She had been in different homes [during a year's time] ... I was her fourth. My sister ... told the judge, 'I have a sister who wants my daughter ... There's supposed to be a family member ... asked if they would take the child before they ... go to into another home. Nobody asked if any of my family wanted my baby.'

A second caregiver, a great aunt with an adoption goal for her two-year old grandniece, described trying, but not being able to have this child's older sibling placed in her care thirteen years earlier. Although the great aunt told the caseworker she would adopt this child, the child was placed in the home of non-kin who was able to adopt the child after six months.

She got adopted by the person that was a foster parent to her at that time...She was six months old. Even after they had me fill out an application ... She asked me, and I said, 'Yes, I would adopt her.' The social worker never called me back. So, I called ... six months later. 'What's happening ...You never called me back.' 'Oh, I decided I was going to let the foster parent adopt her.' I definitely would have taken her.

An older brother with a guardianship goal for two younger sisters described a situation in which the child welfare agency seemed to be inconsistent with prioritizing kin placements. He had been trying for years to have them placed in his care.

I wanted to do it the minute I found out they were going to be in the system ...I did find out I was unable to because I was in college at the time. I tried to pursue them then, but they told me ...I wasn't stable enough ...It took years. So, I had to wait until I graduated. And even after graduation, there was still some time because they were staying with my cousin ...And then the opportunity came when ...they were placed back into foster care ...with a different caregiver...I really started pursuing them ...and [would] not take no for an answer ...Before they got to me, they were [over a six-year-period] placed with my cousin ...my aunt ...[and] with three to two other [non-relative] foster parents before they were eventually placed with me.

Challenges in the Permanency Process and Substitute Care

When caregivers described their permanency processes, several concerns emerged about the capacity and practice of DCFS and contracted community-based agencies. Caregivers expressed concern about the length of the process, excessive turnover of casework staff, caseworkers who were not fully knowledgeable about all aspects of the process, and some caseworker practices that did not seem appropriate to them.

Four caregivers expressed concern about the length of time of the permanency process. One caregiver identified as a cause of delay the contracted agency's failure to initiate a search for the child's father. The judge finally ordered the agency to do so.

They didn't try to ... find him until the judge decided 'Okay, why haven't you done it?' So then, they had to place an ad in a newspaper.

The grandmother who had adopted her granddaughter eight days before her 18th birthday explained that it was her perception that the agency was short-staffed and had not consistently worked on processing the adoption. She described having to push very hard and repeatedly to get and keep the process moving.

Every few months I'd call and say, 'How's the adoption process going?' I don't think they were actually working on it at all. I don't think that anybody was actually doing anything and there would be times that I would call them, and they had forgotten. ...They hadn't done this or that yet ... I know they're short staffed. I know that it's hard. But like I said, there were times that I couldn't get ahold of them. There were times that it would be three or four times I called them and something still hadn't gotten through or gotten done ... I told them ... 'Her 18th birthday [is coming up]. Am I ever going to get her adopted'? And so, they said ...it had to get done before her 18th birthday. And I'm like, 'Well, I've been trying to do this for a long time now.'

Most concerning were the statements of the fictive kin caregiver who understood that the contracted agency that worked with him would not consider guardianship or adoption for the three boys in his care (aged 14 to 17 when they were placed with him) because agency staff believed the lengthiness of the process would not enable them to complete it before the adolescents aged out of the foster care system. (The eldest was to receive extended care to age 21.)

To my understanding, the main issue is their ages. And by the time you get to actually go to court and process all that stuff, they will have aged out. So there really isn't a point in spending everyone's time and money trying to do that ...They basically told me that there's no point because by the time we get it done, they're all going to be old enough to not whatever ...be adopted or whatever...Based on their

ages, I've been given pretty much all the information that they're willing to do. I mean there's not a whole lot they can do. I wish there was more, but ...there's not ...They're not 10-year-old kids, so it's not like there's a lot of variable time there that we can play with. They [agency staff] ... have very limited resources...

Several caregivers remarked on their experience of caseworker turnover during their permanency process. The aunt with an adoption goal said, "I've had so many caseworkers." The great-aunt who had been pursuing an adoption goal for two years said,

I think the problem with the permanency and why everything is so slow is the turnover rate in caseworkers, because since the process has started, we've had at least five different caseworkers. So, every time it's a new caseworker, it gets pushed back or you have to go back to court and that gets pushed back...Once you get a new caseworker, you don't hear anything, and the ball gets dropped, and you start over...

Two caregivers believed their caseworkers appeared to lack full understanding of the permanency process. The caregiver pursuing guardianship of her cousin described trying to work with her caseworker on the stipend.

I'm back and forth with the lawyers, as far as the stipend amount that gets her to 18 ...what type of assistance might be required to get her ...to age 18 ...I did option for the attorney, and I'm glad that I did ...I wanted it to be over so bad that I had optioned not to do the attorney review. And I was just going to sign the papers and go. But the very first paragraph, when we were doing it on our own, it referred to statutes and it gave legalese...I asked her about that, and she was not able to explain or give me any sort of explanation about it. And it just discouraged me so much because if you are a person that develops, you are the person who writes out the information for the document, and you don't know what's in it, or you can't refer to, you don't know what it references...It turned me off. So, I optioned for the lawyer, which...prolonged the process, but I'm glad that I did that.

The other great aunt with an adoption goal explained,

My caseworker ...she's fresh out of college, and there's so many things she doesn't know ...This is her first job ...Whenever I ask her something she always has the same answer, 'I don't know. Well, I'll ask.' ...When I do have a question for her, she generally does not have an answer. But like I said, she's at least the fifth caseworker."

Two of the caregivers we interviewed shared very concerning situations that occurred while permanency planning was in process. The great aunt with an adoption goal for her two grandnephews had them in her care for over eight years, had been licensed to provide foster care for 25 years, but had never received a stipend for caring for her grandnephews. When asked, 'Will you get a subsidy with the adoption, and is that something that you've been working on with the agency?', she responded,

Well, that has not been discussed with me ...When I took guardianship, that doesn't come with the subsidy or anything ...When I took guardianship, that came with nothing. I mean, you get no support at all.

The other situation of concern involved a kin caregiver's perception of inappropriate behaviors on the part of two private agency caseworkers. Before her sister had advocated for her niece to be placed in her care, the niece was fostered by one of the caseworkers employed by the agency supervising her care. When the child was placed with her aunt, the caseworker who had been the child's foster parent continued to reach out to the aunt to inquire about the child. The aunt experienced concern that there was a competition for the child. She experienced that the caseworker's colleague, who supervised her case, was 'white on rice,' or zealously seeking reasons to remove her niece from her care.

I don't even know how to start. There were specific people in the beginning in the case that wanted

[CHILD]. *There was a caseworker that turned into a foster parent. She was [CHILD's] caseworker and turned into a foster parent and became [CHILD's] caregiver. She took [CHILD]. She had [CHILD]. And my sister told me... 'This lady wanted my baby.'...And the caseworker in the beginning that brought me [CHILD] was connected to that lady. So, when I first got [CHILD], they were like white on rice. And the guy, the caseworker told me that [CHILD] could be with my mom, who has my sister's other two children. So, I took her one day to my mom's house ...That lady sent the police to my mom's house to get [CHILD], because she said that [CHILD] wasn't supposed to be in nobody's care but mine. And there was a big argument ...with me and the caseworker who [had] told me she could be with my mom. He kept saying he didn't tell me that. And I said, yes, you did tell me that ...I think they was ...trying to get [CHILD] back. I raised such a big deal about it, that they ended up getting rid of that caseworker for me and sending somebody else. And I didn't deal with that lady anymore. I was being nice because that was the home [CHILD] came out of ...but after that I cut ties with her. And even after that, she still tried to text me and say, 'I still have some things of [CHILD's], and I really am sorry...I was just doing my job.' And she was trying to reach out, but I didn't give her no more responses.*

Instances of Poor Communication by Permanency Professionals

Some of our discussions with caregivers revealed examples of inadequate communication between agency staff and caregivers and between organizations involved in processing guardianships and adoptions. Some caregivers had holes in their knowledge of the permanency process that were likely due to inadequate communication from agencies. The most glaring example was our finding that three caregivers we interviewed had not received any information about the option of permanent guardianship. In addition to not knowing anything about guardianship as a permanency option, the great-aunt with an adoption goal for two children who had been in her care for over eight years understood that DCFS caseworkers had been working on the adoption for the last three years; yet she said she did not know if the agency had tried to reunify the children with their birthmother. She had no idea of whether the mother's rights had been terminated, and no one had discussed the possibility of an adoption subsidy with her.

The older brother with a guardianship goal for his two younger sisters did not know that there was a subsidy for guardianship. He lived in a state other than Illinois and was caring for his sisters under the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children, which is a "contract among the states intended to ensure that children placed across state lines receive adequate protection and services (p.1)." ⁹ This caregiver believed that the two state child welfare agencies and the private agency with which he most often interacted were not able to coordinate their work. He believed that difficulties in inter-organizational, cross-state coordination were compounded by the turnover of staff in the out-of-state private agency that he worked with most directly.

[There] was a lot of transition with [PRIVATE AGENCY] ...The worker my sisters did have...recently retired, then they end up getting another worker, and then they end up getting another worker recently this year...[STAFF IN OUR STATE CHILD WELFARE AGENCY]...were confused as well...Our caseworker would have no idea of what's going on. It was just like, 'Give us some papers here. They need this from you.' And we're like, 'Okay, we sent this.'...So Illinois, they were sending the information that they needed to [OUR STATE CHILD WELFARE AGENCY], and [its] worker would say, 'Hey, [PRIVATE AGENCY], we need this information from you.' And I'm like, 'Okay. We sent it.'

9 Brown, J.G. (1998). *The interstate compact on the placement of children, State structure and process*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General. OEI-02-95-00041. <https://oig.hhs.gov/oei/reports/oei-02-95-00041.pdf>



Chapter 4

The Caregiving Experience

Caregiver Descriptions of Their Relationships with Birthparents

The majority of caregivers we interviewed were interested in having or willing to have a relationship with the birthparents of the children in their care, but the level of contact they wanted and had achieved varied substantially. In our sample, we found little or no difference in the amount of contact with birthparents between caregivers who had chosen to become guardians and caregivers who had chosen to adopt.

Only one caregiver was not open to contact with the birthparent. This caregiver was the birthparent's cousin and had a guardianship goal. Although guardianship usually enables the birthparent to visit their child, the caregiver said she herself wants nothing to do with the birthparent.

I just need her to stay away from me. That's all. And she does. I see her at family functions.... We had an aunt that died, and I saw her at the funeral ...So, just things like that. But she doesn't come over. She's often homeless. She's often without a phone.

Another caregiver, a grandmother who adopted her grandchild, explained that she communicates with her daughter (the birthparent) and baby-sits for her only because she worries about the well-being and safety of another grandchild who is still in the birthmother's care.

The kin guardian we interviewed, who hopes that her great-grandson and his birthmother can eventually reunify, awaits her granddaughter's (the birthparent's) calls.

She's still out there. Sometimes she calls us from Michigan. Sometimes she calls us from Minnesota. Sometimes she calls us from all over. She just runs. I don't know. She just goes. Yes, she has a mental

problem. She's been in and out of mental institutions...Once she called here to let us know, 'I'm in [NAME] hospital.'... I said, 'Well, I have [CHILD], and I'm his guardian.' And she said, 'Oh, good.'

Kin caregivers with adoption goals for the children they cared for spoke of their relationships with the birthparents in ways that illustrate the variation in how this relationship develops:

I think she's comfortable with them being in my care because she knows I'll do a better job ...She'll show up for their birthday or stuff like that.

My niece is bipolar ...All of her children have been taken away ...Sometimes she wants to see [CHILD]. Sometimes she won't...A couple of weeks ago she called and said, 'Oh, I made a mistake. I didn't want you to adopt her.' A couple of times before...she called...and said, '...The people told me I can't see her.' I tell her all the time, I said, 'You are her mama. You will always be her mama. If I decide I want to bring her to see you, and you want to see her, you can see her. I'm not going to ever deny you the right to see her.'

I spoke with my daughter just recently. My daughter wants a relationship with me...And I let her know that she's my daughter, and I love her unconditionally.

Relationships Between Birth Parents and Children

Similarly, the guardianship/adoption choice did not seem to influence the willingness of the kin or fictive kin caregivers to support a relationship between the children in their care and the children's birthparents. Most of the caregivers appeared willing to support this relationship. The grandmother with a guardianship goal for her 4- and 7-year-old grandchildren, said of the birthmother, "She's involved. She visits." The fictive kin caregiver of the 14- and 15-year-old children for whom she pursued guardianship explained,

I try to keep a connection with their family...[They] still talk to their parents...And that's been fine because their parents come over to see them in my home.

The great aunt with adoption pending for her 9- and 11-year-old great nephews explained that she invites the birthmother to sibling visits that she and her sister regularly arrange for the children in her care and the two in her sister's care.

[The birthmother] lives [in the same city]. I can do a sibling visit and she can come to that. So long as if I'm there, she can come.

However, the caregiver seeking guardianship of her nine-year old cousin reported that the child saw her birthmother by accident and not by design. "We'll see her on the street, more so than something that's scheduled or coordinated."

Some caregivers who supported a continuing relationship between child and birthparent, reported that the birthparents and their children were nevertheless not actually seeing one another. The great-grandmother who became guardian of her 12-year-old great grandson, when asked whether her great grandson spoke with his mother, responded,

No, he doesn't want to. He's free to talk to her. As a matter of fact, she doesn't even ask about him when she calls. She never asks about her son. We tried to figure it out, and the social worker always kept in contact with her.

The grandfather with a pending adoption of his 6-, 8-, and 9-year-old grandchildren explained that the children had not seen their mother for four years. When asked if the children had a relationship with their mother, he answered,

Not at all. Last time my children seen her was 2018 ...She chose not to have a relationship with them ...

The door is open ...There was one time, it was in 2017 and 2018, ...against DCFS wishes, I would allow her to come to the church after church service and interact with the children in an auxiliary room ...And still, to this day, my daughter knows the doors of the church is open.

Several caregivers reported a need to protect the children they cared for in their interactions with their birthparents. When the aunt pursuing adoption of her five-year-old niece was asked when the child had last seen her birthmother, she answered, “Probably last fall maybe...Somewhere around the time before she lost custody.” When asked if she had any hopes that the child’s relationship with the birthmother would change, she responded,

I hope so. I can only pray about that, but from the things that I ... observe, it’s safer for her not to be connected to her right now...It’s hard because [CHILD] still talks about her, misses her.

The older brother seeking guardianship of his younger sisters, said:

They talk with my mom. I have certain boundaries that I set with that ...My mom, ... stuff she used to do with me as a kid affected me. I know [when to say] ‘Okay, that’s where we cut if off. This is not the appropriate time for you to talk with them.’ ...I set up those boundaries ...to protect them.

The fictive kin of the 17-year-old who had chosen adoption expressed that difficulties with the parent had negatively affected the child, and the judge had ordered that the birthmother could not contact the daughter without supervision. The fictive kin caregiver of the three adolescents, for whom the private agency would not pursue either a guardianship or adoption goal, believed it was important for the young men to have opportunities to connect with their mother. Although he was advised to forbid contact with their mother, he did not believe this was right for them. He let them see their mother but was usually present at visitations with her to ensure their safety.

I’m not supposed to let them associate with her, but I do because they’re not little kids, and she’s their mother. I couldn’t imagine not being able to see my mother. Usually, I’m around ...It’s not a safe environment ...I’m there almost every single time.

Joys of Being a Kin/Fictive Kin Caregiver

Caregivers were asked about the highs and lows of their caregiving experiences. As highs, most of the caregivers spoke of their relationships with the children, seeing them eventually flourish, and guiding them towards college, career, and adulthood.

The cousin seeking guardianship spoke of the joy the caregiving relationship with her younger cousin was bringing to her.

...She is a blessing. Kids keep you young ...She’s been thriving. She’s in a loving environment, and she goes to school every day. We have a routine ...The highs are learning to be a parent...

The fictive kin caregiver who was unaware of having a guardianship or adoption goal also spoke glowingly of the opportunity to form caregiving relationships with the three teenage boys in his care.

They’ve got a very safe, comfortable place where they can live ...They’ve got a great family. I’ve got 13 other nieces and nephews. Everybody in my whole family has taken [to] them like [they are] my own kids ...You get a hole kicked into the wall every now and then, or whatever happens because they’re kids, but in general, they are awesome. I love them ...They’re my kids.

The fictive kin caregiver with a guardianship goal for two girls and an adoption goal for a third, spoke with relief about seeing the girls begin to flourish.

It’s been real good because I’m starting to see them flourish as individuals because they have a stable

environment, and they get to do things and talking to them, getting them to open up ...Over these last five years, it's been a dramatic change from when they first came ...really quiet and scared to ask them things. And now they talk all the time.

Several caregivers planned to support the children they cared for with transitions to adult life. The older brother seeking guardianship of his young sisters, explained that his plan was

To raise them up ... so they can be their best, so they can be ... successful ...in society... They ... didn't have time to think about [plans after they graduate from high school]. I believe this is probably a point in their life where they can actually breathe and know they are safe ... and don't have to worry ... It's still a ... bit of adjusting...We're trying to work things out with school...I have to treat them like my kids, but still have that boundary that they are my sisters, as well. We've been talking about [college]. We've been trying to see what they want to do as far as a career...We're ...trying to help them navigate what their interests are, what they like, what they don't like.

The fictive kin caregiver with a guardianship goal for two girls and an adoption goal for a third was also speaking with her adolescents about college.

So far it looks like [they will all go to college]. Two of them are sophomores and one of them is about to be a freshman...We've been talking about college. They've been talking about careers... I've been looking into [paying for college]. Because they are in DCFS, they are able to go to college for free, even after the guardianships and adoption go through. I just learned that ... I'm really encouraging them to take advantage of the opportunity because they don't have to pay.

Challenges of Being a Kin/Fictive Kin Caregiver

Some of the lows that caregivers described suggest the need for supports that may be of value to caregivers and the children they serve as they move toward permanence. Three caregivers identified as lows challenges they experienced in addressing trauma experienced by the children they cared for. The aunt with an adoption goal for a five-year-old child said,

She's had a lot of emotional trauma. A lot of fear of being left...At first it was very hard for her to sleep in a room by herself...She went through a lot of stages of fear, different anxieties, a lot of trust issues.

The brother with a guardianship goal for his younger sisters explained,

When I did get my sisters...they were dealing with a lot of anger, a lot of rejection, a lot of things... because they were in different homes...a lot of trauma that we just had to get through...I used to have to deal with a lot of anger behaviors, like tantrums, a lot of rage, a lot of lying, and a lot of not wanting to talk to us.

The grandmother who had adopted her granddaughter just before she turned 18, said,

She's had such a hard life, and this is her mother, and so that breaks a deep bond connection that you're supposed to have inside of you. So that is very deep cutting, you never get over that ...She has problems, anxiety, depression ...She doesn't like to talk ...The lows are just having to see her so down, having to have heard her say that she didn't want to live anymore.

Two caregivers spoke about difficulty dealing with the birthparent. One was the cousin caregiver with a guardianship goal. She described the birthmother as suffering from mental illness and homelessness. The other caregiver challenged by the birthparent was the fictive kin caregiver awaiting adoption for one child and guardianship for two others.

The low would probably be for one of the children['s] ...parent. Their parent was influencing them to do negative behavior at one point. It took a while to get that solved. She had even left my house, and she

started calling me because she wanted to come back. She was with me, and she left, and then she came back. The biggest challenge was her mother's negative influence, and her mother making her feel guilty about being in DCFS. So, it was really just trying to kind of go between the communication between her and her mom, so that her mom wouldn't have that negative influence.

The grandmother seeking guardianship of her two grandchildren identified the children's separation from her daughter, their mother, as the low for her. She spoke with pain about their separation from each other, while recognizing the need to have the children in placement at that time: "Well, she's involved. She visits. But the children should be living with their mother." This grandmother was committed to becoming the guardian of the children, hoped for their eventual reunification with their mother, and felt sadness about the losses experienced by the children and their mother in their separation from one another.

The grandfather waiting to adopt his three grandchildren (6, 8, 9 years old) struggled with unmet need for parenting supports.

[Agency staff] don't offer much ...They don't offer anything. I've been screaming out for some form of ...grandparent network ...These children didn't come with any ...instructions When I'm faced ...with a ...dilemma, and I don't have an answer ...I need someone who has faced said dilemma ...to share that with me. But unfortunately, DCFS hasn't done that, nor [PRIVATE AGENCY] ...Right now, it's just placement warehousing ...I've learned that things aren't the way that they were when I was a child...It can be ...challenging when it comes to behaviors ...ADHD issues ...their schooling ...I need to learn.

Voluntary Supports Valued by Kin Caregivers

Two kin caregivers shared stories of how others had voluntarily supported their caregiving efforts in ways that were critical to them. The 88-year-old great-grandmother who had become a permanent guardian for her great-grandson, explained how one of his teachers had stepped forward to assume care for him if the great-grandmother could not. In this case, the great-grandmother was the only family member who could care for her great-grandson. The great-grandson had chosen her as his caregiver by asking DCFS to contact her when his mother could not care for him. Given her age, the great-grandmother felt that it was important to have a backup plan.

What they did, was they said, 'from my age, I needed a backup if anything happened to me.' So, one of his teachers at the school that I had him in ...says, 'I will do that for you...if anything happened to you. I can take him.'...She went to court with me, and the judge was impressed ...She is the person to have him if anything happened to me...

The older brother seeking permanent guardianship of his younger sisters explained how friends from his church had supported him and his wife in caring for his sisters.

What made this transition easier is because we had informal supports from friends from our church A couple ...literally went through the same process...and so they helped us. They walked us through, and they supported us ...so much. They bought my sisters clothes, anything that they needed. It was like a mentorship. They gave us advice. They were always available, and they ...supported my sisters. They ... had conversations with them. They would take them out to eat ...Another ...brought them beds ... dressers. Because when we got my sisters, we literally didn't have anything ...Nothing at all.

Caregivers' Suggestions for Improvement

Two of the kin caregivers we interviewed made suggestions for improving support for caregivers. One called for more supports with promoting the well-being and development of children in substitute care.

I wish there was more support from the agency as far as any assistance that can help a child ...be productive ...more help and guidance in care. I don't see these people until there's a deadline they have to meet ...I wish ...they would provide more support that could help me make sure I'm helping her, ...things for your child to ... keep from ...going through depression, ...anxiety.

The other was a recommendation that DCFS contract with outside agencies to provide peer supports to kin caregivers.

We didn't know how to navigate, what to do ...I would suggest there is an outside agency ...that contracts with DCFS ...that they have a kinship care coordinator. An organization ...I used to work with ... created a kinship care coordinator position...to [help] navigate. They ...help ...with resources ...anything ...you need assistance with.... That would be a big support to caregivers.





Chapter 5

Caregiver Perceptions of the Role of Race in Substitute Care and Permanence Planning for Black Children

We asked caregivers whether they felt that they, the children, or the birthparents may have been treated unfairly due to their race. The majority, eight caregivers (two of whom were white), said no. Two other caregivers, both Black, said they did not know for sure, but thought they might have. One of these caregivers, the Black great-aunt with an adoption goal for two children, was an experienced foster parent who had previously fostered non-relative children under a foster home license she had received 25 years earlier. She thought that her not receiving appropriate supports from her DCFS office, including informational and financial supports, over the more than eight years she cared for her Black grandnephews may have been attributable to racism. She wondered whether not being informed of guardianship was due to her race. When asked if she, the children, or the birthparent had been treated unfairly due to race, she answered:

I don't know because I was not familiar with guardianship or how that whole situation worked. So, once I got the kids ...I went to their house, and I took them, nobody ever came. Not one person checked on the kids or me at all...When I did call down to DCFS to find out, she was like, 'Well, when you take guardianship, then you're pretty much on your own ...We don't have any compensation or anything to help you with the kids.' 'What?' I'm thinking to myself ...So you would give somebody four kids and just give them all four kids? So, at this point for a whole year, I had absolutely nothing, no kind of a support from them at all. So, for that whole year, I took care of these four kids with the same money that I had taking care of my own family, with no support or anything. Nothing ...He was nine months old, and he had to get formula and pampers. So, I had to do all that stuff on my own. ...There was no support system in place at all.

Another caregiver, the aunt, who identified as Black, said that the birthparent, her sister, also Black, did believe

she was treated unfairly due to race. The aunt caregiver also thought her caregiving family may have experienced racist treatment. When asked whether anyone involved had been treated unfairly due to race by anyone involved in the child's placement, she said,

My sister would say yes, absolutely yes. She said it. She has said it for a very long time. I only felt that way in the beginning when that situation happened [being told she violated policy by bringing the child to the child's grandmother's house]. I feel even when the guy came over to my house in the beginning, he was being very stereotypical, maybe because my son had a Bob Marley poster on his wall ...He made a reference to us smoking marijuana and how we couldn't ... And I said, 'Nobody in here smokes marijuana' ...I thought it was strange ...The guy was ...questioning ... [my husband] about a case from the nineties. And I don't know if that's protocol or not, but ...we ...felt like we were ...under the examining gun a little too hard.





Chapter 6

Discussion

This section discusses conclusions we can draw from the interviews with caregivers. A separate report will draw on findings from all four components of the larger study to discuss implications for policy, practice, and research. An additional research brief will combine the findings from the interviews with findings from a survey of caregivers.

Our interviews with kin caregivers provide insight into ways in which kin and fictive kin caregivers develop a preference for adoption or guardianship. The interviews also illuminate caregivers' experience of the permanency process and permanency professionals. Eight of the caregivers we interviewed made an informed choice between guardianship and adoption. Three of the caregivers said they had never been told about the option of permanent guardianship. Of those caregivers who made an informed choice, three preferred adoption, and four preferred guardianship. One caregiver worked with her caseworker to provide information on both options to the three adolescents in her care and let them choose which was best for them. Two of these teens chose guardianship, and the eldest chose adoption.

Choosing Between Adoption and Guardianship

Those caregivers who made a choice between adoption and guardianship, did so on the basis of the specific circumstances of the child(ren) they cared for, thinking carefully and lovingly about what was in the child's or children's best interest. A grandmother chose to adopt her 18-year-old granddaughter because her granddaughter had witnessed her parents in court voluntarily relinquish their parental rights. The grandmother believed it was of the utmost importance to her granddaughter to feel she was fully wanted by the grandmother as a daughter. A grandfather wanted to close the door on the possibility of reunification because the mother, his daughter, had repeatedly abandoned the children, and he did not want the children to experience the turbulence of a

reunification which he believed would not be permanent. An aunt chose adoption because she believed that would provide more clarity and a sense of belonging to her niece. The niece had, for a long time, called her aunt “Mom,” her birthmother had been inconsistently involved with her, and then was no longer involved. Two of the caregivers who chose permanent guardianship did so because they believed that adopting the children they cared for would damage relationships within the family, and two chose guardianship because they wanted to leave open the possibility that the birthparent might be able to successfully petition the court for reunification in the future.

However, three caregivers we interviewed did not realize that there was a choice between adoption and guardianship. This is one of the most important findings of this study. The seven children they cared for did not have the benefit of having their options fully considered by the relatives and friends who loved them and were unconditionally committed to providing the parenting they needed on a permanent basis. The two great-aunts with adoption goals for the two children they each cared for were going to adopt the children because they wanted them out of the foster care system and with their extended families. Both objectives could have been accomplished with guardianship. The adult friend fictive kin caregiver who cared for the three teens removed from their mother was not given the option of adoption or guardianship. This happened even though the mother was deemed unsafe for her sons to visit, and the adult friend loved them, respected their love for their mother, and had every intention of providing them with long-term parenting.

There were no patterns that distinguished caregivers who chose adoption from those who chose guardianship, either in their own relationships with the birthparents of the children they cared for or the ways in which they approached these children’s relationships with their birthparents. The majority of caregivers we interviewed were willing to have some level of ongoing relationship or communication with the birthparents of the children they cared for. Only one caregiver, who had a guardianship goal, felt she could have no contact with the birthparent because of the birthparent’s mental illness and homelessness. Other caregivers ranged between having only minimally necessary contact to being open to broader contact with the children’s birthparents. Most of the caregivers expressed willingness to support a relationship between the children in their care and the children’s birthparents. The exception was the caregiver becoming a permanent guardian who made no plans for her cousin and her cousin’s mother to interact. She, her cousin, and the cousin’s birthmother would encounter each other “on the street,” but these meetings were never “scheduled or coordinated.” Some caregivers shared that, despite their openness to a relationship between the child(ren) they cared for and the children’s birthparents, the children and their parents did not actually see one another. This was either because of reluctance or inability on the part of the child, the birthparent, or both. Three caregivers reported having to protect the children they cared for in the children’s interactions with the birthparents.

Caregivers opting for adoption and guardianship did not differ in what they identified as the highs and lows of their experience as a caregiver. Caregivers identified as “highs” the joy of the loving, caregiving relationship and seeing the children beginning to flourish in their care. When they discussed the future, caregivers planned to support the children they cared for with transitions to adult life including identifying career interests and attending college. Both those who opted for adoption and guardianship had such plans. None of the caregivers who opted for guardianship were at all tentative about their ongoing commitment to the children in their care; and none were planning to cease their caregiving support when the child(ren) turned 18. Aspects of caregiving our interviewees identified as lows included their child(ren)’s trauma (including suicidal ideation) and difficulties with birthparents.

Caregivers’ Experience of Substitute Care, Permanency Professionals, and the Permanency Process

Some caregivers spoke well of professionals who worked with them, such as the great grandmother whose caseworker assisted in processing a back-up guardian for her great grandson, or the fictive kin caregiver whose caseworker worked with her to help the adolescents she cared for make informed choices between adoption and guardianship. However, most caregivers expressed concerns about the permanency process and the professionals who worked with them. Some of the concerns that participants shared were:

- having to advocate to have relative children placed with them instead of in non-family foster care;
- not being informed of the option of permanent guardianship;
- lengthy processing of both adoption and guardianship;
- overburdened caseworkers and agencies;
- staff deciding not to plan for any form of permanence for older children (14 and up);
- frequent turnover of caseworkers;
- caseworkers lacking knowledge of agency processes and procedures;
- caseworkers not providing updates to caregivers on progress towards permanency;
- caseworkers not providing adequate information or support around subsidies;
- having to covertly allow contact between children and their birthparent; and
- poor interagency cross-state coordination in the case involving an interstate compact.

Most of the caregivers we interviewed said they were not aware that they, the children they cared for, or their birthparents had been treated unfairly due to their race. However, two Black caregivers did say they may have encountered racism. One suspected her race was the reason she had not been given either information about permanent guardianship or a stipend to help with financial support of the children she cared for. The other believed racism may have contributed to the inappropriate, unprofessional behavior she described on the part of caseworkers towards her and her family. Her sister believed her child had been initially placed in non-family foster care because the family was Black.

Caregivers made two suggestions for improving permanency processes. One caregiver suggested providing more supports to caregivers on how to promote the well-being and development of the children in their care, and another suggested funding organizations to provide peer supports to kin caregivers.

Conclusion

This qualitative study with semi-structured interviews was administered to inform the development of a survey designed to generalize to the population of Illinois long-term kin/fictive kin caregivers of Black children and to obtain information that might not be available in a survey. A forthcoming research brief combines the findings from the interviews and survey of caregivers. A forthcoming report on policy, program, and research implications draws on the findings of all four components of the overall study, which includes interviews and surveys of permanency professionals and caregivers.

The interviews with the caregivers provide counterexamples that challenge the prevalent idea that guardianship is less stable for children than adoption. When informed by their caseworkers, interviewees chose adoption or guardianship for the children they cared for based on what they believed was the better option for each of the children they cared for. Those who chose guardianship seemed no less committed than those who chose adoption to provide love, care, and parenting not only through the age of 18, but beyond. This finding is consistent with the need to provide comprehensive and accurate information on both permanency options to kin and fictive kin caregivers instead of prioritizing adoption.

The caregiver interviews revealed several administrative shortcomings that point to a need to build more systemic and professional capacity to administer substitute care and permanency planning. This would facilitate informed communication with caregivers and timely action to serve each child's best interest. The interviews suggest that kin and fictive kin caregivers also need more support from child welfare agencies, including additional attention to providing subsidies, help in responding to children's experiences of trauma, and support for parenting and interacting with birthparents. The interviews indicate that kin and fictive kin caregivers may need to know they can contact the Illinois Advocacy Office for Children and Families if they feel they are not well-served.

This study suggests several areas for future research. These areas include a) whether the preference for placing children with kin is optimally and equitably administered, b) factors contributing to the length of the permanency process, c) the impact of lengthy permanency processes on the foster care outcomes of older children, and d) factors contributing to the turnover of permanency caseworkers.

Appendix A

Understanding Racial Disproportionality in Finding Permanent Homes for African American Children in Out-of-Home Care: Study of Subsidized Guardianship Kin Caregiver Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello! My name is ___ and I work at the University of Illinois. Thank you for meeting with us today. We are doing a study about how permanent plans are made for children who are in DCFS custody. We also want to find out whether racism affects the process of making permanent plans. We are interviewing both family members and professionals who are involved in making permanent plans for children. Part of our study is to interview relatives who are taking care of a child in DCFS custody, and we'd like to interview you today. First we need to make sure you understand what this research involves for you and you consent to it. Did you receive the informed consent form we sent to you? [Review consent form & obtain verbal informed consent]

Now we would like to know more about you and the situation with your child.

Confirming Basic Information

- Could we first ask about what city or town that you live in?
- Are you taking care of a child who is in DCFS custody? What is your relation to the child? What is your relation to the child's birthparents? How long have you been taking care of the child? What agency is working with you?

Experience as a Kin Caregiver

What made you decide to become a caregiver for the child? How did it happen?

What have been the highs and lows of this care arrangement for you?

Licensing

- Do you have a license as a caregiver?
 - *(if yes)* When did you get the license? What made you decide to become licensed? What was the process of getting licensed like? Did the agency help you get licensed?
 - *(if no)* What is your plan about licensing? How did you decide on this plan? Is licensing affecting planning for a permanent home for the child?

Permanency Planning History

- Has the agency been planning for a permanent home for the child? How have you been involved in planning? Has anyone else been involved? What options and plans have been discussed with you? What has that been like for you?
- Has the agency discussed your adopting the child? When was this first discussed with you? How? What was this like?-
- Has the agency discussed your becoming a guardian for the child permanently, which means that you take care of the child permanently, but the birthparents keep a lot of their parental rights. When was this first discussed with you? How? What was your reaction?-
- What do you think will be the best permanent home for your child? Can you explain how you are thinking about this?
- Do you feel you have been given enough information on the options? Have you felt supported in making a decision?
- Do you plan to get a subsidy -- money from DCFS to help support your becoming an adoptive parent or a guardian? Can you describe the plan for this? If you do not plan to get a subsidy, why not?

Role of Race

- Were you, your family, the child, or the child's birthparents treated unfairly due to race by anyone involved with the child's placement with you? Could you explain more?

Demographics

Can we ask you some information about your background?

How do you identify your gender?

- Man
- Non-binary
- Woman

What is your age?

- Less than 20
- 20 to 30
- 31 to 40
- 41 to 50

You prefer to self-identify (write description) _____

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Yes (e.g., Mexican, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban)

How would you describe your race?

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Other Please specify _____

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