



The Key to Kinship: Technology Helps Keep Kids Close to Home

There is a story that gets told often at Northwoods. We were testing key features of our software Traverse® with a North Carolina agency. While walking through case discovery, an artificial intelligence feature that extracts key details mentioned in the case, one supervisor abruptly left. Agency staff had recently scanned in a large portion of the file for an ongoing case where they were actively searching for a long-term permanency option. Through Traverse, she had revealed the name of a relative she had never heard before, sourced from a document added to the file years before. Making that call was far more important than testing.

This story sticks because it is a powerful example of how technology can have an immediate and direct impact on social work practice. Imagine the possibilities if every member of the child welfare workforce—especially those responsible for kinship and permanency—had access to these insights.

The field has been moving toward an emphasis on kinship for some time. Research shows the positive impacts on outcomes for children placed in kinship settings,¹ such as minimizing trauma, improving well-being, and setting kids up for success in the future. Kinship placements are also associated with decreased disparities in outcomes between African-American and White youth.² Kinship preference has been further prioritized in state and federal law³ and many newer practice models.

With agencies facing a shortage of traditional foster families, kinship care is even more crucial. Some agencies



have more than doubled the number of children in their care⁴ but do not have enough safe, reliable caregivers available for placements. It is a no-brainer that we should do all we can to support kinship placements.

Yet finding and licensing kinship caregivers can be a process riddled with administrative burdens. This includes sorting through case files, loaded with information, to understand who can help, how they are connected, and their willingness to support the family. When there are thousands of pages in a file, finding the one connection who can provide support can feel impossible.

But it does not have to be this way. Technology that surfaces critical

insights helps caseworkers find and engage relatives or “like kin” supports.

■ **Understanding a family’s support system.** Workers are tasked with quickly uncovering an entire family’s support network. Technology that pulls out every name mentioned in the case file (and points the worker toward the source documentation for context) not only allows workers to quickly identify potential caregivers but also to learn all the details surrounding each option to determine what is best for each family’s unique needs.

■ **Making quick decisions.** Workers are often required to make

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time-sensitive decisions with life-changing impacts. A family-finding worker in Colorado stated it can take upward of 40 hours to mine a huge paper case file for names of possible supports.⁵ This is reduced to minutes with analytic tools that are designed to uncover this exact information.

■ **Supporting kids in care.** Being able to search through a child's entire history—think medical information or history of previous transitions—helps workers validate they are finding the right resources for a child at the right time. A Wendy's Wonderful Kids® recruiter in Ohio said this type of information is especially helpful when finding supports for kids who have been in the system for several years.⁶

■ **Helping caregivers get access to resources.** Once kinship supports are found, the licensing process then begins—which can be quite the burden on both workers and caregivers who have stepped up to care for their relative. A provider portal

can streamline this process, such as getting signatures on W-9 forms or submitting required home-study documentation. A social worker in Minnesota said they can now complete this paperwork in minutes, compared to months previously.⁷ This means caregivers can receive payments more quickly, and the children in their care can receive services faster.

Children do best when they are able to remain connected with people who are already part of their communities and families. Whether a child needs a long-term caregiver or just someone to look after them for a few hours to help stabilize a family in crisis, technology can help inform critical decision making.

Tools to both find kinship supports and minimize the administrative burdens of licensing must be in the hands of staff and caregivers alike, so they can focus on the most important job of caring for children and youth who need them. 📌

Laura Haffield is the Director of Advocacy at Northwoods.

Reference Notes

1. Child Welfare Information Gateway. Impact of kinship care on permanency outcomes. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/relatives/impact/>
2. Lee, D.H.J., Huerta, C., & Farmer, E.M.Z. (2021). Kinship navigation: Facilitating permanency and equity for youth in child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2021.106251>
3. Child Welfare Information Gateway. Placement of children with relatives. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/placement/>
4. Conversations with agency directors in North Carolina
5. Interview with social worker at Adams County Children and Family Services Division
6. Training notes with recruiter at Portage County Child and Adult Protective Services
7. Interview with social worker at Carver County Health and Human Services



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