

“Kinship Diversion Qualitative Research: Virginia Findings” (Co-PIs: Karin Malm and Tiffany Allen, Child Trends). The study period was December 22, 2010 through December 21, 2011. These findings were presented on September 22, 2011 to the Virginia Department of Social Services.

**Description:** With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, this study looks at the current practices and philosophies around using kinship diversion (i.e., facilitated placement of the child with relatives when the child cannot remain safely in the biological parent’s home) to prevent children from coming into the state’s foster care system. The study sought to examine the practices in detail and determine any differences among six local DSS agencies.

The study looked specifically at: current practices in regard to safety and stability of the child; ongoing services and support for children, birth parents, and kin; kin awareness of options; birth parents’ roles and rights when making the decision to place children with kin; sources for data to track outcomes and performance measures; and cultural sensitivity, families’ cultural beliefs about government involvement, and local DSS workers’ beliefs about kinship care. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with CPS investigators, prevention and foster care caseworkers, their agency supervisors, judges/judicial personnel, attorneys, CASA representatives, and kin caregivers. Information was gathered from a total of 162 participants, across the six localities.

**Key findings:**

- In all localities, kin diversion practice is always considered first (if an appropriate relative is available) and does not differ due to the severity of abuse/neglect, age of the child, or any other factors. In some sites, kin are allowed to become licensed foster parents. However, kin becoming foster parents is viewed as a least desirable option.
- There are shared underlying values for use of kinship diversion: prevention services should be first option, agencies should support families staying together, foster care is seen as a last resort, and kin should receive some support (if needed) from local agencies.
- There are various factors impacting practice of kinship diversion that are related to the biological parents, the relatives, and the agency staff and leadership.
- In practice, kinship is not used unless the parent (or parents) agrees to the placement with other relatives. In some localities, the local agency collaborates with the parents in making that decision.
- Family Placement Meetings (FPMs) is viewed as playing a major positive role in facilitating placement of the child with other relatives.
- There are no formal agency guidelines for when or how to assess relatives as potential custodians.
- Agency services provided to the child and kin vary by agency.
- There are many challenges and barriers to use of kinship diversion.

**Key Recommendations:**

- Develop and adopt clear state-level policy guidelines.
- Develop training for caseworkers and tools that will help inform and advise clients on available benefits and options.
- Build a system for tracking diversion data statewide through OASIS (state foster care data system).
- Provide subsidized guardianship for relatives who obtain custody.

Specific findings and recommendations are in the PowerPoint presentation (select from main IRB Project Results web page).