

## Department of Economic Security Kinship Foster Care Kinship Care Pilot Program (Report Highlights)

June 2002

When a child's parents cannot provide care, parenting by relatives is an important option because it helps preserve the integrity of families in need. We reviewed two areas within the Department of Economic Security (DES) that are designed to encourage relatives to care for children by providing financial support and other services. In *kinship foster care*, DES has taken custody of the child, but places the child with a relative for foster care. In the *kinship care pilot program*, DES is not involved in the placement of the child with his or her relative, but makes financial support available to them and provides referrals for other services.

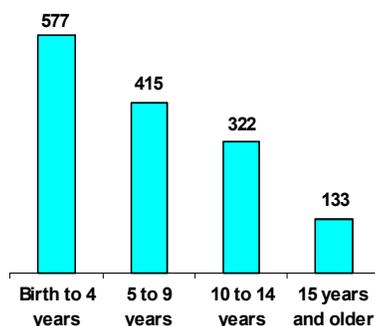
### Our Conclusions:

Related to *kinship foster care*, DES lacks complete documentation of its efforts to fully implement procedures developed to meet legislative requirements for assessing a relative's ability to provide foster care, and for informing relatives of the available financial benefits and services. Likewise, DES' new *kinship care* processes designed to streamline the application process to make it more convenient for relatives to apply for financial assistance are not being consistently used.

### Kinship Foster Care

Relatives acted as foster parents to almost a quarter of the children in Arizona's foster care program in 2001. At the end of December 2001, there were 1,450 children in kinship foster care.

**Children in Kinship Foster Care  
by Age Group<sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> Age information was missing on three children.

The overwhelming majority (94 percent) of kinship foster care children are placed with unlicensed relatives. Relatives who become licensed foster parents must comply with DES licensing requirements involving age, income, health, criminal history, character references, home space, and equipment. Unlicensed relatives are not held to the same standards but are still subject to DES' and the Court's approval and must pass criminal background checks and a home study.

**Half of the children in kinship foster care lived with grandparents or great-grandparents.**

Financial support available:

- + Licensed relatives may receive from \$358 to \$834 a month per foster child based on the child's age and special needs.

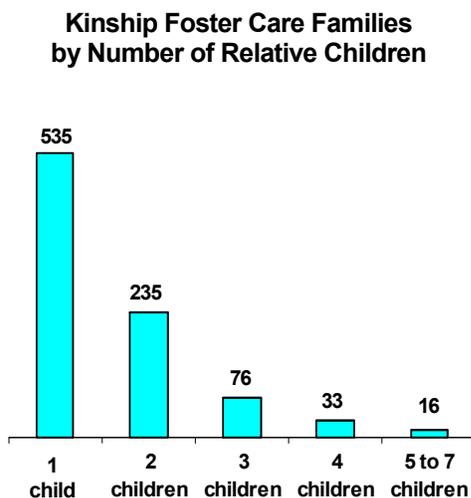
- Unlicensed relatives may receive a monthly child-only Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grant of \$204 for the first child and approximately \$71 for each additional child.

In addition, each child is eligible for a small daily clothing and personal allowance, and special payments may be made for such things as books and diapers based on need.

Examples of nonfinancial services available:

- Medical and dental services for the child;
- Counseling, including individual and family counseling; and
- Parenting skills training.

In 60 percent of the cases, a kinship foster care family cares for one relative child. In about one-fourth of the cases, a kinship foster care family cares for two relative children.



### DES Should Better Implement Kinship Foster Care Requirements

In 2000, the Legislature made changes to the procedures for assessing the placement of

children with relatives and to provide relatives with more information about financial support and services.

**2000 statutory changes require that DES:**

- Implement specific procedures to conduct background assessments on prospective unlicensed relative caregivers;
- Implement procedures for notifying relatives when they are denied the placement of a relative child; and
- Inform families about available financial and nonfinancial services.

### DES documentation to meet all legislative requirements is incomplete

—DES has three forms to help ensure that legislative requirements are met. However, according to files we reviewed, these forms were not used between 68 percent and 80 percent of the time.

Further, seven caseworkers told us they do not use the Department’s form letter to inform relatives when a placement is denied. This letter is important because it not only informs the relatives why placement was denied, but also of their opportunity to appeal the decision.

DES can ensure new policies and procedures are implemented by enhancing training and monitoring, and developing goals and performance measures.

- Training**—DES should ensure that the new kinship foster care policies are covered and that staff are required to attend training.
- Monitoring**—DES should establish monitoring mechanisms for kinship foster care cases to ensure that legislative requirements are followed. One option would be to monitor compliance through the new Continuous Quality Improvement case review process DES is developing.

**Goals and performance measures** – DES has goals, objectives, and performance measures for the entire foster care system, but should separately track kinship foster care cases.

**DES should:**

- ✓ Develop and provide additional training and require staff attendance;
- ✓ Develop ways to monitor compliance with requirements; and
- ✓ Use, where appropriate, its current goals, objectives, and performance measures to separately track kinship foster care cases.

**Kinship Care**

Kinship care families are families in which a relative takes on the parenting of a relative child without the involvement of a court or DES. In 2001, there were approximately 6,400 Arizona kinship care families statewide caring for nearly 11,000 relative children.

Examples of support and services available:

- ✚ Monthly child-only TANF grant of \$204 for the first child and approximately \$71 for each additional child.
- ✚ Referrals to other DES or community services.

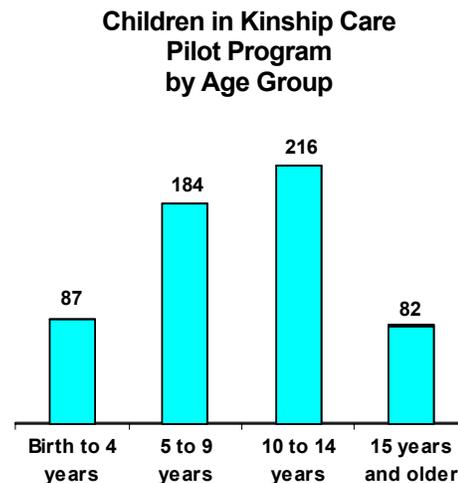
**Additional Steps Needed to Ensure Kinship Care Outcomes Achieved**

The Legislature also made changes in 2000 to enhance assistance to relatives who provide parental care even when not part of the State’s foster care program.

**2000 statutory changes require DES to:**

- ✚ Establish the program as a pilot at two locations in the State (Phoenix and Tucson);
- ✚ Promote community awareness of the program; and
- ✚ Implement an expedited and streamlined application process for child-only TANF grants to relative caregivers.

During 2001, there were 569 children in the kinship care pilot program. Seventy percent of these children were between the ages of 5 and 14.



**Processing was already appropriate and timely** – Although the legislative changes were designed to expedite the application process for relative caregivers and ensure they received the maximum child-only TANF grant amount available, DES was already doing both at the two pilot offices. Prior to the legislation, DES’ goal was to process child-only TANF grant applications within 45 days. Staff typically completed the processing within 15 days, and the new expedited process has since lowered the average time to 13 days. Further, DES revised its policy to automatically make kinship care families eligible for the maximum grant amount, but we found relatives were

already receiving the higher amount before this change.

**Effect of outreach is unclear**—Because most children in the kinship care pilot program live with grandparents, DES has focused outreach efforts on the State’s elderly population. However, because DES does not know how new kinship families hear about the program, it cannot tie the new participants to the success of its outreach efforts.

Seventy-three percent of children in kinship care live with grandparents.

**The referral mechanism is limited**—DES is supposed to help coordinate referrals for services so that families can get the help they need to support their relative children. Although DES put together resource guides, some workers are not handing out the guides because they do not find them useful. However, DES may be able to enhance its referral mechanism by updating its current resource guides and requiring workers to hand them out or helping families learn to use existing community referral and information networks. These networks provide referrals to community services via 24-hour hotlines and the Internet. DES already provides over \$400,000 per year in funding to two such networks, one in Phoenix and one in Tucson.

**Staff not consistently using streamlined processes**—Although DES has established processes to make it more convenient for relative caregivers to apply for financial assistance, DES staff continue to require caregivers to provide unnecessary personal information on their child-only TANF grant applications, such as declaring their income and showing that their relative children

have a shelter/rent obligation. In addition, even though DES received permission from the federal government to waive face-to-face interviews, most still continue to be conducted face-to-face.

**No outcome information**—Finally, DES has not developed performance measures to monitor the program to see if it is achieving the goals established by the Legislature.

**DES should:**

- ✓ Develop a written outreach plan and collect information on its results;
- ✓ Take steps to enhance its referral mechanism;
- ✓ Provide additional training to pilot office staff on the procedures designed to make the application process more convenient for relative caregivers; and
- ✓ Develop performance measures.

**To Obtain More Information**

- A copy of the full report can be obtained by calling (602) 553-0333 or by visiting our Web site at:

[www.auditor.gen.state.az.us](http://www.auditor.gen.state.az.us)

- The contact person for this report is *Dot Reinhard*.