

Supporting Kinship Caregivers Part 1

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Serita Cox, iFoster; Michelle Rosenthal, Program Evaluator

[00:00:00]: [Music Introduction]

**FEMALE NARRATOR** [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

**TOM OATES** [00:00:33]: This episode of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast Series is the first of a two-part series on supporting Kinship Caregivers. Specifically, innovation partnerships, tools and actions developed that improve how Kinship families access services and resources they're eligible for.

[00:00:51]: Hello everyone, Tom Oates from Child Welfare Information Gateway here, approximately one quarter of children in out of home care are living with relatives. While this is a preferred form of care, as it helps maintain family connections and can offer a more familiar situation and environment for the child, there is a gap between some Kinship Caregivers and accessing myriad resources that are available. The causes of this vary, and can range from bureaucratic hurdles a misunderstanding of eligibility or even just plain awareness that services and resources are available. Compounding this is the fact that there are many Kinship families that operate informally; they don't have a social worker connecting with them on a routine basis.

[00:01:33]: So in a two-part series, we're going to share conversations with grantees of the Children's Bureau Family Connection Grants and we're going to talk to these grantees on how they're using Kinship Navigator programs to take on the challenge of collaborating across multiple agencies to improve outcomes for Kinship families in their community.

[00:01:53]: Here in part one, we're going to focus on a project from California, the 211 iFoster Kinship Navigator Collaborative. It's a self-serve online portal for Kinship families, which was a collaborative between iFoster, a national non-profit providing resources for those currently involved in, or emancipated from foster, adoptive and Kinship communities. 211 California is part of this, as well, they connect citizens of California with a comprehensive source of non-emergency services and also the United Ways of California; so these three groups partnered together to create the Kinship Navigator Collaborative.

[00:02:30]: Now, we talk with Serita Cox, she's the co-founder and executive director of iFoster and she helps break down how the program was implemented, including how they located many of the informal Kinship families. We also chatted with Michelle Rosenthal, who led the evaluation of the project, and you'll be able to see from what she provides about how the program was delivered and what the keys successes, surprises and feedback were from those families who took advantage.

[00:02:56]: I encourage you to listen to the end as Michelle breaks down the findings, including high rate

of reunification that they pointed to this effort. There are also some great tips and takeaways for other agencies and professionals to connect Kinship families to services in their local areas. Now, in part two, we're going to take a look at a project from Florida, which also leveraged some technology, so you'll want to look out for that episode, as well. For now, the 211 iFoster Kinship Navigator Collaborative with Michelle Rosenthal and Serita Cox.

**TOM OATES** [00:03:30]: So, Serita Cox, I want to start with you, and, in California there are more than 300,000 children in Kinship Care, so with the counties that were participating, what was the big situation that you were trying to address?

**SERITA COX** [00:03:46]: Uh, there were a couple of situations, actually. So, of the 300,000 children in Kinship Care, in the state of California, the vast majority are actually in informal care, meaning that they currently do not have an open child protective services (CPS) case, so they are not necessarily getting the visits from social workers as one would expect and getting access to the typical suite of child welfare resources. That said, there are 60,000 kids in foster care in California and sixty percent of them that are in placements are with Kinship, so we also have a good chunk of open CPS cases that are with Kinship.

[00:04:29]: They have it a little bit better off, in that they are seeing a social worker and they have access to some resources, but at the end of the day, resources available under child welfare are limited. They tend to be basic needs resources and they tend to be your usual kind of government benefit resources and when you think about how you raise a child and all the variety of resources that are needed to raise a child, you only get a small sliver of it through Kin-gap as we call it here in the state of California and nothing at all, essentially, if you are in that larger group of 280,000 or so children that are in informal care.

**TOM OATES** [00:05:17]: So, how are you able to identify those informal care situations?

**SERITA COX** [00:05:22]: That's a great question, and in actual fact, that was one of the biggest issues, was how do you reach out to these unknowns? And we used a variety of different ways of doing it. We worked in every county to figure out who were the likely candidates, with who were these both formal and informal Kinship Caregivers and where might we find them. And that's how we actually did our outreach, going to fairs, going to supermarkets, going to hear support groups, going to churches, that sort of thing. So, outreach was one of the big issues that we had to deal with and then obviously the other big issue was well what resources exist that we can provide to them, especially if they were not eligible for resources through Child Welfare.

**TOM OATES** [00:06:11]: So, then, if you were able to connect with these folks, what were the biggest barriers that you had to overcome to kind of start to bridge that gap, you know, what was the big problem, you were really identifying and trying to solve for these families?

**SERITA COX** [00:06:26]: Access to resources that were in their ability to utilize; so free, low cost and those above basic needs. Yes, it's great to have discounts for groceries and access to food banks if you really need that, but that's just surviving. What everybody wants to do is have their kids thrive and that means educational supports for our kids that are doing, that need help at school; it means recreational activities and in fact, all of the Kinship evaluations came back with, on the family needs scale, very high that every Kinship family was looking for time and experience to have fun and extracurricular activities

with their family, because that's so important, yet you don't think about it when you think about your typical government benefits and what government benefits pay for.

**TOM OATES** [00:07:21]: Yeah, what does a family look like and what does a family do?

**SERITA COX** [00:07:24]: Exactly.

**TOM OATES** [00:07:25]: So, you partner with United Ways of California and 211 of California, so what was the initial solution to try to address this issue and create this greater awareness and then application of those resources?

**SERITA COX** [00:07:40]: Well, the wonderful thing about 211 and iFoster, is both of us have huge databases of resources, that is kind of what we do. 211 is the go-to place for any kind of social service that you might want to have, but they extend beyond that, they extend to non-profits that provide tutoring, non-profits that have after school programs. So, it's a much broader sweep that they have; and then where iFoster plays, is we work very closely with corporations and non-profits that and government agencies that sit outside of, completely outside of social services, that could also bring to bear resources.

[00:08:24]: And between the two of us, we could come together and create a very robust suite of solutions where if one family is looking, let's say, for tutoring, there might be three or four different options they're eligible for, and there could also be a few options they aren't eligible for, just because their very nature; but the idea was to get a robust suite of services across, essentially, seven different major categories of resources K-12 education, post-high going to college, and jobs for youth, um, technology, technology is always a huge issue, so access to technology, um, health and wellness, obviously, beyond just physical health, your daily living expenses, so those basic sort of things like groceries and furniture and clothing, things like that, your advisors and support groups, this goes beyond just having mental help, but legal help, a lot of our Kinship families are having issues legally, getting the right level of guardianship that they need to be able to take care of their kids.

[00:09:36]: So, all of that, we brought together and then we worked with every county, we formed a county collaborative that was made up of service providers who worked with a variety of different types of Kinship families, as well as Kinship families themselves and we actually filtered and curated all of these resources to the point that it became super personalized through the web portal; so if you were a family in Riverside and you had a specific age of kids that you had, if you had specific things you were eligible for or not eligible for, the resources you saw in the portal matched your need, matched who your family was and matched what you were eligible for and that's really what made it a very easy tool for any Kinship family to use and be able to get the kind of services they needed immediately without, you know, getting a list of services only to find out that ten out of the fifteen of them, they weren't even eligible for.

**TOM OATES** [00:10:39]: Sure, lets pull on that a little while if I can, you mentioned the portal, from the user perspective, from the family perspective, because you may have, you know, grandparents who aren't tech-savvy, you may have folks who don't have constant access to technology or the Internet; what does that portal look like, what does that solution look like to families on that service delivery end?

**SERITA COX** [00:11:01]: It's an excellent question, and it was one, quite frankly, I think at the very beginning and there were many people who were skeptical about whether an online resource portal would be utilized by a wide variety of Kinship families, given the exact reasons you just mentioned; access to technology and comfort with technology.

[00:11:24]: What we actually found, and Michelle can definitely go into the details of the results there, is that a wide swath of the Kinship families use the portal, whether they were elderly or not elderly, we actually have a greater spectrum of kinship families, just in demographics, than one typically sees, so we actually pulled Kinship families out of the woodwork, if you will, because the portal was so easy to use, accessible 24/7. I will tell you the majority of our kinship families tended to be online at around two in the morning just that seems to be when they found the breathing room to go find the resources that they needed.

[00:12:06]: So, it definitely helped, there were absolutely instance where we had people who were not connected, could not connect or did not want to connect, for whatever reason, and we would do it for them. So they would just have to call in, we would actually do the searches for them, find resources they want, print it off and snail mail it to them. So, we've done that, we did that before, we have 211 operators who are fantastic at being able to do warm hand-offs to specific service providers and that combination of being able to go offline, as well as having the online, I think allowed us to be able to serve as many Kinship families as possible.

**TOM OATES** [00:12:49]: So, Michelle Rosenthal, Serita just kind of set you up about what the expectations were, talk to me about what you learned once you evaluated this, how effective is this being, how effective was this, in terms of not only reaching families, but then having families actually take advantage of the services available.

**MICHELLE ROSENTHAL** [00:13:09]: Yeah, okay, so let's talk for a minute about the question you posed before about Kinship Caregivers actually utilizing the portal. So, one of the questions that we started with was really, how is the portal useful to them and how are, what's their experience like when they use it? So, it was a mixed method study, so there was, there were qualitative, there was a qualitative component to the study and in that qualitative component, we conducted qualitative interviews with Kinship Caregivers, twenty-eight of them, and we really tried to dig deep and spend some significant time with Kinship Caregivers that had signed onto the portal to ask them about their experience.

[00:13:57]: So, what we found overall, was that the top two resources searched by Caregivers across all three counties were mental health resources for themselves and their children, and recreational activities for their family. But when we asked them about what the benefits were for this mode of what we began to call in our project, we saw it as a self-service delivery model; so really the opportunity for Kinship Caregivers to go online and look for what they and their family, their Kinship children needed.

[00:14:36]: So the things, the top three benefits that they reported were, saves time for them, by having an abundance of resources in a single, searchable location. Also, that the accessibility of needed resources puts Caregivers in the drivers seat to navigate local resources in their community. So, I think this gets, this piece about accessibility really gets to the formal Kinship Caregiver-informal Kinship Caregiver piece, because by having all of these resources in one searchable location, even Kinship families that weren't part of formal Child Welfare, could find needed resources for themselves online.

[00:15:25]: The third top portal benefit reported by the Caregivers was that new information and resources were discovered during their navigation search process; in other words, they found things that they weren't initially looking for, but were helpful. Overall, twenty-three out of the twenty-five repeat program portal users would recommend the online portal to other Kinship Caregivers. And these are folks, we interviewed folks, I think the youngest person was in her late twenties and the eldest Caregiver was in her early seventies, so there was quite a range of Caregivers interviewed that found it useful, so I think that answers the first question of will they use it.

[00:16:19]: The other piece, though, that I just wanted to echo what Serita had already mentioned is that the model was intended to provide searchable resources online to Kinship families; so, it was a resource and referral model. When we discovered that some Kinship Caregivers who registered were actually needing more intensive services, those folks were navigated to a resource hub or a resource service center whereby they could receive a more comprehensive suite of services. So, it also had the ability to filter level of service and direct Kinship families that needed more intensive services to the right community based resource.

**TOM OATES** [00:17:19]: Was that a benefit that you guys expected to see, or was that just a residual effect of folks coming to the portal and making themselves aware of the resources, but actually making the service providers aware of their need, was that something you expected?

**SERITA COX** [00:17:35]: Yes and no. I would say that we, because we formed these community collaboratives, we knew that there were Kinship centers and resource centers existing in the community and we knew that they would spend a lot of one on one time with individual families and really helped them through their issues, because it's not just about 'I'm going to the grocery store to buy groceries'; these can be very intense emotional issues that people are working through, that is far more than transactional in nature in order to be able to help them and because our portal is essentially transactional, we needed to be able to identify who we could send people to when they needed more than a transactional interaction to define it that way.

[00:18:30]: I think it worked a lot better than we had thought it would because you always worry when you do those handoffs, would there be that flow of information from us to the service provider, who would provide more of a holistic support system, and then back to us so that we can continue to provide the transactional services that they needed; and you can see a family goes through ebbs and flows, they might be fine with transactional services for a period of time, they're looking for clothing, they're looking for tutoring, they're looking for whatever, then something happens and they need far more comprehensive, holistic support, you send them to a resource center, they get that kind of support and then that resource center allows them to come back and works with them, with the portal for the transactional part.

[00:19:25]: That part I don't think we understood how that would work, we learned over time and we evolved it over time so it actually became a very good relationship and we saw people flow between the two systems, if you will, and in actual fact, what ended up happening is a lot of organizations, a lot of those organizations used the portal continuously for their clients, so it really created an integrated network of supports; your transactional supports and then your deeper, more one on one counseling like supports. Did that answer your question?

**TOM OATES** [00:20:03]: Yeah, in fact, what it leads me to is asking those other agencies, those other communities across the country that are seeing this gap between the services that are available for Kinship Caregivers and the actual access and using of those to help the kids that are involved.

[00:20:21]: So, two things here that are both for you, Serita, and Michelle; Serita, first off, what was the key in identifying and gathering all of those resources and multiple partners all in one place? Because we know collaboration is difficult when folks are busy and folks have, you know, various hierarchies that they need to report to, how did you get all of that together and get that collaboration between your groups and all the services available?

**SERITA COX** [00:20:52]: So, it does start with leadership and having leadership understand what we're trying to do, so our node of leadership involvement started with the County Child Welfare, so the highest decision maker, if you will, in the county for child welfare, and getting their buy-in and once we had their buy-in, that we would bring around the table Kinship Caregiver providers and ancillary providers who may serve Kinship Caregivers but they don't self-identify as that's what they do; and then we would bring them together with a common goal and purpose and that is to better serve formal and informal Kinship families in their county.

[00:21:33]: Once we had that buy-in and we brought together this collaborative, the collaborative itself was self-sustaining, because they saw value in what was being created. At every single meeting, there were resources being shared just between the organizations that one organization didn't know another organization provided. That they saw value in us doing the due-diligence of finding all of these resources; being tasked with 'here are the top needs of my community for Kinship Caregivers' and us going out and trying to find resources, curate them, do due-diligence on them, and put them in the portal.

[00:22:16]: Once they started seeing that there was value there and that the portal actually helped them as much as it helped their clients, the idea of having a collaborative, it became self-sustaining and in actual fact, our collaborative still exists even though these, the Kinship Navigator Project is, well it's still, the Kinship Navigator still exists even though, technically our project is done, and we've actually used that collaborative model and replicated it with other programs that we use for transition aged youth and our jobs program and that model works very well and Michelle actually researched the, evaluated the model, as well as the portal itself.

**TOM OATES** [00:23:07]: So then, for Michelle, for you, on then the flipside, kind of the service delivery end, what have been, from what you have gathered in your findings, what's the key, then, to connecting something like the portal that we're talking about down to those families, how do you get those families to be engaged, to be trusting of the system and then to utilize the portal itself?

**MICHELLE ROSENTHAL** [00:23:31]: Yeah, well wanting to go back, if I may, to some of the findings that we have from the evaluation, because I think that will help inform this discussion, is that okay with you, Tom?

**TOM OATES** [00:23:43]: Absolutely!

**MICHELLE ROSENTHAL** [00:23:44]: Okay, so, I think one of the most important findings that we had was around the family needs scale, the scale that we use to measure changes in Kinship family needs from pre- to post-, and that was over a year, a period of twelve months, that families were engaged in portal use and registered and looking for resources and we administered that at three different data points, there were 102 people that completed all three sets of the measures over that twelve months but interestingly, what we saw was that Kinship Caregivers that used the portal showed a statistically significant reduction in their family needs from baseline to twelve months in the following eight areas.

[00:24:44]: So, it was in legal assistance; in assistance related to benefits, dental care for the family; needs around belonging to Caregiver groups or clubs; concrete resources like help getting furniture; importantly someone to talk to about how things are going for you; time to do fun things with your family, which I think is three dimension and someone to talk to about your children and if you remember before I mentioned the top two resources searched were mental health resources and you can see that in the reduction in needs of someone to talk to about how things are going for you and also your children.

[00:25:25]: So, I think looking at that reduction in needs in eight areas is significant because, as caregivers increase their use of the portal and program contact, we actually saw this reduction. Another really important finding is the stability of placement findings, so almost all the caregivers in the study reported that their identified Kinship child was still living in their home after twelve months. So we had a 97 percent rate of placement stability.

[00:26:01]: And this was an issue that service providers who serve Kinship families in the three demonstration counties and those counties were Riverside, Monterey and San Bernadino. Many of those county collaborative members expressed that the best thing they could do as providers, was to provide supportive services and be able to inform and educate and link their caregivers that they serve to these resources, because they felt like that was the best way to help support the stability of placement. And the data suggests that the portal really does contribute to that stability of placement.

[00:26:47]: I have some more findings that I would love to share, if we have time, about the county collaboratives in particular. One of the things about the county collaboratives is that they actually, they were the part of the model, real people that had a lot of contact and knowledge and expertise with Kinship Caregivers, would come together and meet regularly and talk about what, in many cases, were their shared families; and these were folks from local community organizations, as well as Child Welfare staff from the county, would really come together and talk about what they knew about the families in their counties and the resources that they need.

[00:27:38]: Now, we did focus groups, virtual focus groups, with members across all three counties and we also did a survey at a couple of points in time to measure, like, what the benefits were for members who participated. We know that what Sertia mentioned, one of the clear benefits was that service providers, and perhaps one of those surprises, was how much service providers used the online portals themselves, because the online portal has the ability to be updated in real-time, as soon as there was a resource.

[00:28:17]: So the providers were utilizing the portal frequently to provide service and to help caregivers; but these were some of the ways in which focus group participants reported the benefits for

them as being part of the county collaborative. They could reach previously underserved Kinship families, such as informal Kinship families in their county; they could help support Kinship child stability by helping to keep families together; they could incorporate the feedback of Kinship families as part of what we called in the project a “localization process”; and what that means is that county collaborative members would get together with our 211 partner and our iFoster partner, led by Serita Cox, as well as our Child Welfare partners in specific counties and really identify and curate and prioritize the types of resources that Kinship families in that county needed, and then make sure that they got on the portal, as available.

[00:29:24]: The other one of, the other benefits reported by focus groups participants, was their ability to collaborate with other partners by creating this forum for resource sharing. And I think one of the interesting points about the collaboratives is that when we asked them if they planned to continue after the demonstration project was over, they said yes, and I think this piece of the model is a very sustainable and cost-effective piece, because these are folks that will continue to meet and come together and share resources and also apply for future grants together and really see a commonality of purpose around serving families.

[00:30:11]: So, overall the number and quality of local agency partnerships increased, that was how we were measuring collaboration in the survey. They also reported that they were really increasing their opportunities to network with other community agencies and partners, and increased, they felt like they increased their capacity to serve Kinship families overall through this learning of new resources and sharing knowledge about resources in these meetings.

**TOM OATES** [00:30:47]: Wow, and to wrap things up, I want to ask the same question to both Michelle and Serita, and Michelle, we’ll start with you. If you two were advised another community, another agency group, another set of partners throughout the country; what would be the one key to success that they must have to implement something like this, where you get not only this resource for Kinship Caregivers, but what turns out to be a resource for providers, as well?

[00:31:16]: Michelle, what’s the one thing you would stress that’s kind of a must have for something like this?

**MICHELLE ROSENTHAL** [00:31:23]: I think it’s vitally important that any program folks that are developing this type of service, talk to Kinship families in the area served and Kinship providers, in order to understand the specific needs in that county and set up a feedback group for feedback and really checking to see how relevant the resources offered are and what the top needs and priorities are.

**TOM OATES** [00:32:03]: And Serita, for you, the one key in terms of, you know, creating this collaboration and getting it from idea to conception and hopefully with some success on the other end.

**SERITA COX** [00:32:16]: I think the biggest thing is that the collaborative, those agencies and Kinship representatives that you have around the table all put the, have the same goal, and that is to improve the well-being and the outcomes of children in Kinship Care in their community. And that trumps everything, that trumps organizational goals, that trumps, you know, that is the ultimate. And when you can put that front and center, and you agree as a collaborative that that’s what we’re focused on, then you get the kind of sharing of information; the kind of due-diligence; the kind of, everything that



Michelle just said, which is, you know, knowing what the needs are; finding resources that meet those needs; agreeing on what resources are good or not; doing the due-diligence; that all comes from having a common goal, and that is the main thing, and I will tell you this, that applying for grants together is a great way to tie yourself to common goals.

**MICHELLE ROSENTHAL** [00:33:29]: Well, and I also think, if I could please add, that conceptually, this is a very interesting thought experiment and demonstration project for the Children’s Bureau to think about innovative ways to engage Kinship families through technology. So, will Kinship families use an online self-service delivery option? It would appear that they would, a range of families. We have over a thousand families register specifically as Kinship Caregivers and identify that way, but we also had two thousand additional families register and identify as foster parents and legal guardians, many of which are Kinship families, as well.

[00:34:26]: So, I think, really thinking about innovative service delivery options for Kinship families, some of which we can’t track through Child Welfare and the ways we usually find them; and also, that the other piece that still continues to be really exciting for me, is about how we work with data sets, large data sets of resources that iFoster and 211 California, together with United Ways of California brought to the table and were saying, like, we have all of this, how do we best prioritize, filter and search this to be a benefits and match it to a specific population’s needs, like Kinship families, in a specific California county? That’s an interesting project for how we might move forward in Kinship navigation as a field, and in Kinship studies more broadly.

**TOM OATES** [00:35:27]: Michelle Rosenthal, Serita Cox, I thank you guys so much for your time.

**MICHELLE ROSENTHAL, SERITA COX** [00:35:31]: Thank you!

**TOM OATES** [00:35:34]: There were a number of aspects that came out of that conversation that I really liked; how the families embraced the portal and took advantage of the services. Now, two in the morning for a high level of activity, well, that may take some more evaluation to find out why. Also, how the portal became a tool for the professionals. They were able to link their Kinship family clients to resources and services. I’d encourage you to visit the webpage for this podcast, just go to the Children’s Bureau website, that’s [acf.hhs.gov/cb](http://acf.hhs.gov/cb) and just search ‘podcasts’. We’ve posted some other information that might help, including the Information Gateway web section on funding Kinship Caregivers and our publication on Kinship Caregivers and the Child Welfare System.

[00:36:17]: We are so glad you are a part of this and can join us in presenting this information, so I encourage you to go to the Children’s Bureau website and listen to the other podcasts that we’ve launched, including our conversation on inter-agency collaboration to address human trafficking and our three-part series on engaging fathers. Of course, be on the lookout for part two of this series on supporting Kinship Caregivers; we’ll hear about a project in the Tampa area in Florida, including how the team overcame some barriers to connect Kinship families to resources and supports.

[00:36:49]: As always, you can visit Information Gateway at [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov) to find helpful information you can share with families; resources to help you improve your practice; everything from management and supervision, training, to working with your sister agencies; you can also grab contact information for support groups and other state and local agencies, those in your area and those all across the country.

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[00:37:28]: For now, we appreciate you joining us so much for this and all the episodes in the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast Series, I'm Tom Oates from Information Gateway, and we'll talk to you later.

**FEMALE NARRATOR** [00:37:41]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov) and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.

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