

Background

Most kinship families are not in the foster care system, thus are not entitled to services and financial assistance available through foster care. Research suggests many kinship caregivers are struggling financially and their children have high needs for services. These kinship caregivers are left to navigate the local social service system on their own interacting with both child welfare (CW) workers and public assistance (PA) workers. This paper examines; 1) coordination over kinship cases; 2) the knowledge of policies and services; and 3) perceptions of kinship caregivers between PA and CW workers.

Methods

The study is based on 9 focus groups conducted in 5 different counties in a northeastern state to understand practices related to kinship care after enactment of the 2008 Fostering Connection Act. The 5 counties have similar local government structures in which PA and CW workers are housed within the same department of social services. With the exception of one small county, two focus groups were conducted per county; one group with PA workers and another with CW workers. Two researchers were present at each group, one as observer and note taker and the other as facilitator. All groups were also recorded. After each session, the observer transcribed the notes which were then reviewed by the facilitator. Using the inductive approach, emerging patterns and themes were identified then categorized by topics of the study. Focus group results were augmented by meeting notes with county administrators and supervisors.

Findings

Despite the proximity between PA and CW workers, there was limited coordination regarding kinship cases. There were no established or consistent policies or procedures for CW workers to inform kinship families about PA services or to connect them with PA workers. Instead, coordination is entirely up to the initiative of individual workers. Both groups were knowledgeable about policies specific to their assigned work, yet many PA and CW staff did not possess accurate information on policies and services related to kinship families and were even less familiar with each other's policies. Finally, different views of kinship caregivers emerged between two groups. Compared to CW workers, some of whom expressed reservations or negative sentiments, PA workers had more sympathy and respect toward kinship caregivers.

Discussion and Policy Implications

The 2008 Fostering Connections Act established the mandate for a diligent effort at placing children with kin, but there is still no widespread system of services for kinship families. Our findings suggest that the state and local administrators need to encourage service coordination on kinship cases between PA and CW offices. Concurrent training on kinship custody and service eligibility would lessen the confusion and promote collaboration. Finally, we believe that knowledge reduces skepticism and reservation regarding kinship placement. Translational research on the better outcomes for children in kinship care compared to those in foster care would help change the workers' perceptions and promote their willingness to assist kinship families in providing a safe and nurturing home for children.

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