

Center for Excellence
FAMILY PROTECTIVE & ENGAGEMENT

CDSS
CALIFORNIA
DEPARTMENT OF
SOCIAL SERVICES

Kinship Care Makes a Difference

Kin-Centric Compass Unit (KCCU)
Family Permanency and Support Services Branch

April 1, 2026

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Kin-first Culture

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What is a "Kin-first Culture"?

Kin-first culture exists when systems that engage with children and families consistently prioritize and partner with relatives and extended family members.

Adopt policies, practices, trainings, and accountability structures that:

- Require every effort to keep children safely at home.
- If a child must be removed, partner with the family to identify the safest placement with relatives and extended family member

In a kin-first culture, agencies and families work together to keep children connected to their families, communities, culture, and Tribe.

Kin-first culture gives families and communities the opportunity to heal from trauma *together*.

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Our Approach

CDSS in partnership with UC Davis, launched the Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support (CFE), to support counties, Tribes, and community-based organizations in strengthening kinship care practices. This work prioritizes placing children with relatives and maintaining family, community, and cultural connections through training, technical assistance, and resource development. A key component of this initiative is the Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support Program (EFFES).

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Racial Equity

This work is grounded in race equity and builds on the work being done across the state to bring awareness to the need for racial justice; acknowledging that the child welfare system was built on systemic racism and bias, both conscious and unconscious.



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Why This Matters

The purpose is to strengthen systems so relatives can step in earlier and more effectively, reducing trauma and promoting stability for children and families. This includes building capacity, improving engagement practices, and ensuring kin caregivers have access to meaningful support.

- Key indications of these efforts include:
- Increased kinship placements and permanency outcomes
 - Trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches
 - Children and youth remain connected to family, community, and culture



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When did it start and when does it end?

This work has evolved through broader statewide efforts to strengthen kinship care, including the Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support (EFFES) initiative. The Center for Excellence continues to expand its reach and support the scaling of kin-first practices across counties.

Details:

- The Budget Act of 2022 allocated \$150 million in General Fund (One-time funding)
- EFFES funding became available in Fiscal Year 2022–2023
- All funds must be expended by June 30, 2027

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Where We Are

The work is actively underway across multiple counties, with a focus on implementing kin-first practices, strengthening family finding and engagement efforts, and supporting local systems through technical assistance and partnership.

- To date, 47 counties and 36 Tribes are participating in the EFFES Program
- Counties and Tribes are actively:
 - Utilizing funds
 - Participating in trainings and peer collaboratives
 - Advancing kin-first practices

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Child Welfare Counties with Approved EFFES Plans

- | | |
|--------------|----------------|
| Alameda | Riverside |
| Butte | Sacramento |
| Contra Costa | San Bernardino |
| Del Norte | San Diego |
| Fresno | San Joaquin |
| Glenn | San Mateo |
| Imperial | Santa Barbara |
| Kern | Shasta |
| Kings | Solano |
| Los Angeles | Stanislaus |
| Merced | Tulare |
| Mono | Ventura |
| Orange | Yuba |



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Child Welfare & Probation Counties with Approved Joint EFFES Plans


El Dorado	San Francisco
Madera	Santa Cruz
Mariposa	San Luis Obispo
Marin	Sonoma
Monterey	Tehama
Napa	Tuolumne
Placer	Yolo



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Probation Departments with Approved EFFES Plans

Humboldt
Kern
Lassen
Los Angeles
Orange
Riverside
Yuba



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How Counties Are Using EFFES Funds

Strengthening Practice

- **Expanding Family Finding & Engagement Staff**
Hiring dedicated social workers and specialists to identify and engage relatives early
- **Strengthening Training and Practice**
Implementing trauma-informed, culturally responsive family finding models; leveraging training and technical assistance
- **Embedding Kin-First Practices into Casework**
Integrating family finding into case plans, CFT meetings, and ongoing engagement

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How Counties Are Using EFFES Funds

Supporting Kin Placements

- **Removing Barriers to Kin Placement**
Addressing financial, logistical, and relational barriers; utilizing flexible funds and supports
- **Building Lifelong Family Connections**
Identifying permanent connections when placement with kin is not possible; creating ongoing support networks
- **Partnering with Community-Based Organizations**
Collaborating with providers (e.g., Seneca, Wayfinder Services, community agencies) to expand capacity

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How Counties Are Using EFFES Funds


Driving System Change

- **Developing System-Level Change**
Advancing a kin-first culture through policy, training, and practice changes
- **Exploring New Approaches**
Implementing strategies such as Kinship Navigator programs

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Kin-first Accelerator Program

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Alameda
Butte
Kern
Riverside
Sacramento
San Bernardino
San Diego
Stanislaus

"Statewide, we only have 30-40% of youth initially placed with kin, only 50-60% of kids predominantly placed with relatives and only 60-70% of kids have stability. We can do so much better. This is how the Accelerator idea was born. Let's talk about a way to improve these outcomes that is very intentional!"
Angie Schwartz, CDS Deputy Director of Children and Family Services

The KIN Accelerator Pilot advances California's kin-first vision by empowering local county teams to co-design, test and scale solutions that keep children connected to those who know and love them.

- Eight California counties supported by Think of Us; the California Department of Social Services (CDSS); the UC Davis Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement and Support (CFE); and Casey Family Programs are embarking on this shared journey.
- Modeled after proven approaches from the technology and social impact fields, the Accelerator blends customized support, data-driven learning and local insight to move faster and smarter toward a kin-first child welfare system.

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Accelerator Impact Areas & Outcomes

Counties participating in the Accelerator identified key focus areas to strengthen kin first practices, with targeted outcomes to drive measurable change.


Impact Areas:

- Prevention: Fewer children enter or remain in non-relative care
- Practice Change: Earlier, proactive family finding and engagement
- Equity: More culturally connected placements for impacted communities
- Systems Change: Policies and workflows support kin-first placement

Intended Outcomes:

- Increase first placement with kin from day one
- Improve early identification and engagement of relatives
- Reduce delays and barriers to kinship placement
- Strengthen consistent, kin-first decision-making at intake

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Prevention in Action

This work supports prevention by engaging relatives early and intentionally, helping children remain connected to their families and communities whenever possible. By strengthening these connections and supports, it reduces the likelihood of placement disruptions and deeper system involvement.

What does prevention in action look like?

- Keeping children safely with family, reducing the need for foster care entry
- Promoting early family engagement and identification of kin
- Strengthening family networks to prevent placement disruptions
- Addressing barriers before they escalate into system involvement

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What This Means for Families

By prioritizing family connections and strengthening support for kin caregivers, this work helps create stable, nurturing environments where children and families can thrive. It recognizes that strong relationships and trusted support systems are key to long-term safety and well-being.

- What does creating a safe future look like?
 - Promoting family unity and healing from trauma
 - Ensuring children maintain lifelong connections
 - Supporting equity, especially for disproportionately impacted communities
 - Building systems that partner with families rather than separate them

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How You Can Take Action

- Take a closer look at how relatives are currently identified and engaged
- Strengthen relationship-based engagement practices
- Partner with community-based organizations to build trust with families
- Identify opportunities to embed kin-first approaches into everyday practice
- Connect with CFE for support, tools, and technical assistance

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How Kin-first Culture Helps Families Thrive

Harmony's Story

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Tools and Resources

Center for Excellence:
[Family Finding, Engagement and Support](#) | [Continuing and Professional Education](#)
[Human Services](#)


Toolkits:
[Kin-first Policy Guide Toolkit](#)
[Bench and Bar Toolkit](#)
[Tribal Resource Guide](#)

CDSS All County Letter 23-12:
[All County Letter 23-12 Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement and Support Program](#)

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Stay Connected

Please connect with the Center for Excellence team to learn more about available supports, resources, and partnership opportunities.



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Questions



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