

The background image shows a city street scene. In the foreground, a large fountain with multiple water jets is active, and several children are running and playing in the water. The children are wearing colorful clothing. In the background, there are tall, multi-story buildings with many windows, typical of an urban environment. The overall scene is bright and lively, suggesting a summer festival or community event.

 **BLOOM WORKS**

# **A Kin-first Culture Approach at Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families**

**Final Presentation**

**April 17, 2023**

## Goals for this presentation

- Review process and approach for data collection
- Highlight key findings
- Share and discuss data-driven plays

# Our team



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# Our research approach

# What we aimed to learn

To answer the question, **What does a kin-first culture for Washington look like and how do we get there?**

We asked about:

- **Obstacles and opportunities** in practices, processes, and service delivery
- **Experiences** around placement, licensing, services and support, and permanency
- **Ideas and visions** for how the child welfare community might better support kinship caregivers

# Our research process

October 2022 – March 2023

## Sprint 1: DCYF Staff

- Interviews with 45 DCYF staff
- Workshops with ~145 DCYF staff

## Sprint 2: Service Providers

- Interviews with 10 community advocates and 20 direct service providers

## Sprint 3: Child Placing Agencies

- Interviews with 32 CPA staff
- Workshops with ~85 DCYF staff, CSPs, and CPAs

## Sprint 4: Kinship Caregivers, Youth

- Interviews and groups with 60 kin caregivers and 2 youth
- Workshop with 64 DCYF staff

## Who we talked to

**400** People across 1-on-1, group engagements, and workshops

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**50%** Kinship caregivers are people of color

**10** Tribal nations represented

**6** Regions represented

**6** DCYF divisions

## Types of caregivers we spoke with

21

**Formal kinship caregivers** who take care of state-dependent children or youth as a result of DCYF initiated and/or state-ordered placement

35

**Informal/Independent kinship caregivers** are taking care of kin children or youth without a formal state-dependency process

4

**Both formal and informal/independent kinship caregivers**



# Reaching validity in qualitative research

- Our main goal was to reach **saturation** – hearing the same findings over and over again
- Generally, we expected to reach saturation around **8-20 participants**
- We were able to reach saturation through:
  - Defining participant groups for breadth
  - Selecting for specific group characteristics
  - Semi-structured interviews

# Limitations

Our research team faced the following constraints:

- Participation was entirely voluntary
- Short timeline limited recruitment reach

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# What we learned

# Key findings

- **Uneven ground:** Kinship caregivers need more support to achieve equity
- **Uphill climb:** Kinship caregivers feel friction when interacting with DCYF systems
- **A Maze:** Kinship caregivers feel abandoned in a complex process

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# How to shift towards a kin-first culture

# Key for slides that follow

## Findings

- In the findings section, you will see that the research findings are the conclusions drawn from the data collected and analyzed during the research process.

## Plays

- In the play section, you will see suggestions that propose a course of action to address the findings identified. They provide guidance on how to improve the situation or implement changes that will lead to positive outcomes.

# Mindsets about kin strengths



## Findings: Mindsets about kin strengths

- The **mentality that “like parent, like kin,” persists** among some social workers and caregivers can feel judged by DCYF staff
- CPA staff sometimes compared kinship caregivers to “good” foster families and had doubts that they could measure up
- An opportunity to learn from the Tribal approach, which emphasizes compassion with kin caregivers



## Plays: Shift mindsets toward kin strengths

- 1.1** Champion practices that center empathy, communication, and trust with kinship caregivers
- 1.2** Host conversations to share best practices
- 1.3** Create a multimedia campaign showing how children and youth have better outcomes when placed with kinship caregivers
- 1.4** Incorporate more anti-racism and anti-discriminatory measures

# DCYF Internal communications



## Findings: DCYF internal communications

- DCYF **staff want more guidance and training when policies are shifted**, with more open communication
- There is a need for added management support, and that workload impact be considered
- Most importantly, **staff communicated they were looking to be fully part of policy design and implementation** with opportunities to share feedback without job repercussions

## Plays: Revamp DCYF internal communications

- 2.1** Work with lived experts throughout policy design and implementation
- 2.2** Communicate policy and program updates broadly via various channels and support with robust trainings
- 2.3** Create feedback loops to assess policy in practice

# Kin identification practices

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## Findings: Kin identification practices

- **Non-kin placements are seen as quicker and easier**, and case workers may overlook kin families in favor of non-kin resource families ready for placement
- The kinship search process does not begin early enough and can overlook existing support networks, like paternal family
- Staff shared that **they want to better understand who a child's or youth's trusted adults are**, and suggested various means to engage children, youth, and supportive families

## Plays: Update kin identification practices

- 3.1** Communicate early and often with children, youth, families, and potential kinship caregivers
- 3.2** Modernize kin identification practices
- 3.3** Integrate kin identification across DCYF's regions and divisions
- 3.4** Map family trees and record in case files
- 3.5** Identify and cultivate non-placement supports within kin families

# Placement transitions

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## Findings: Placement transitions

- Placing with kin has a unique set of challenges – kin caregivers are often grieving family and role changes and **haven't had time to prepare their homes or finances**
- Kin caregivers feel scrutinized during background checks and home studies, and kin with non-violent criminal records may be overlooked
- Kin families want assistance to fulfill requirements they lack, like adequate housing

## Plays: Improve placement transitions

- 4.1** Equip social workers to better meet kin emotional needs during placement transitions
- 4.2** Communicate openly about placement decisions, and a child's or youth's needs and preferences
- 4.3** Review and update placement standards for equity and inclusion on an ongoing basis

# Case management for kin



## Findings: Case management for kin

- Kin caregivers shared how critical kinship navigators were
- Kin caregivers want **more support navigating processes and knowing where to turn**
- Kin caregivers said they felt pressured to oblige caseworkers' plans, even when plans are at odds with the child or youth's needs

## Plays: Improve case management for kin

- 5.1** Centralize kin-specific support at DCYF
- 5.2** Offer kin a dedicated CPA case aide

# Kin-specific support and services



## Findings: Kin-specific support and services

- Kinship caregivers face financial challenges as they assume caregiving responsibilities later in life – **they feel like they are playing catch up**
- Funding stabilizes placements, but **kin caregivers wait longer to get funds** and it's hard to qualify for TANF Good Cause Waivers
- Kin caregivers shared how critical support groups were to their emotional health, but they are not accessible to everyone

## Plays: Update kin-specific support and services

- 6.1** Offer kin the same financial and material supports as foster families, starting at placement
- 6.2** Expand kinship support groups, mentorship, and kin-to-foster networks
- 6.3** Create clear feedback loops to capture and relay child and youth preferences
- 6.4** Explore ways to expand access to mental and behavioral health services for kin caregivers and children/youth
- 6.5** Level the field for informal/independent kin caregivers
- 6.6** Build strong partnerships with housing authorities and organizations to increase housing access and affordability



# Information and communication for kin caregivers



## Findings: Information and communication for kin caregivers

- Kinship caregivers felt **overwhelmed and confused facing the multiple, complex processes**
- They lacked a consistent point of contact and some feared asking for help, worried that doing so would trigger DCYF removing the child or youth from their care
- Lack of access to technology remains a significant obstacle

## Plays: Improve access to information and communication for kin caregivers

- 7.1** Create an interactive website for kinship caregivers and children and youth to access information and support services
- 7.2** Ensure services and materials are written in plain language, accessible in multiple ways, and culturally responsive

# Legal and permanency support



## Findings: Legal and permanency support

- Kin caregivers said they were **often in the dark trying to figure out how to navigate permanency processes**
- Some kinship caregivers feel pressured to consider guardianship over adoption
- Those that had legal support expressed how much of a positive difference this made

## Plays: Increase legal and permanency support

- 8.1** Develop partnerships to provide independent, free or affordable legal support to kin families
- 8.2** Provide clear options for potential legal arrangements tailored to families' needs

## In conclusion

- After 6 months of research, engaging key stakeholders, Tribal partners, and persons with lived experiences, we are confident **we achieved qualitative data saturation**
- Lot's of work to be done – now, with **data-driven recommendations to get there**
- Unique opportunity for WA DCYF to be a **thought leader** in how to **support kin caregivers**

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# Questions & Discussion





**BLOOM WORKS**

**Thank you!**

