

# Creative Supports for Kinship Placements



## *Including Flex Funds In Your Kinship Firewall Policy*



### Introduction

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services recently released Administrative Directive [20-OCFS-ADM-18](#). The purpose of this Administrative Directive (ADM) is to inform local departments of social services (LDSSs) and voluntary agencies (VAs) of the requirement to establish a kin-first firewall practice to increase safe and appropriate kinship placements for children. The kin-first firewall practice must address both instances of initial removal and of children being moved while in care. Kin-first firewalls are intended to make kinship placements the presumptive placement for children and youth, thereby expanding family-based care and helping LDSSs and VAs prepare for Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) implementation.

In preparation for counties' and voluntary agencies' compliance with this directive, it is imperative that plans address the unique and individualized supports that are needed for kin. Supports should focus on a wide range of needs, be flexible and quickly obtained and should support kin throughout the life of the placement until formalized supports are in place (examples include: child-only grant payments, child care, foster care subsidy, etc.). The use of flexible dollars for these supports should be included in a kinship firewall policy.

### Successfully Implementing Flex Funds into Your Kinship Firewall Policy

There are many key decisions that LDSSs and voluntary agencies need to consider before implementing a flexible funding policy and ensuring its inclusion in their kin-first firewall policy. Counties and agencies are all very different in their financial protocols and what kinship needs they can support when it comes to the use of flex funding, so it is critical to explore the questions below to make sure all impacted parties are aware of and have given feedback on the creation of a new protocol involving the use of flex funds.

**Getting Started:** Convene a focus group that includes removing workers, homefinders, service providers, financial operations personnel and key administrators to review and assess current practice, including:

- 1) **Review the needs and barriers in supporting kinship placements for children:** What are the needs of kin? What are the types of supports you are going to focus on? What types of kinship arrangements will you support?
- 2) **Assess your funding requisition and approval process:** What forms do you currently use to support placements? Who will review and approve requests? Who determines which funds will be used to fulfill the request? How do staff access the funds to make needed purchases?
- 3) **Determine how you will track funds and maximize reimbursement:** How will you record and document requests and approvals? Who will review requests to ensure the correct appropriations were used to ensure potential reimbursement? Who will review the process in six months to make any needed changes?



#### Helpful Hint:

Survey your staff and current and former kin caregivers. Develop a survey that can be sent electronically to gather valuable information about the needs of kin and the issues and concerns faced by each in obtaining supports in a timely manner.

# Keys to a Successful Process to Support Kin through Flex Funds

1

## Make Funds Easy to Request

- Develop a universal request form to support all kinship placement types.
- Develop a one-page informational sheet providing key details of the process: how to complete the form, what can and cannot be requested, and where to send the completed request.
- Use only one portal for requests; create a single shared email address or online shared drive.

2

## Review and Approve Requests Quickly

- Be clear about the approval timelines for each level of funding requested.
- Develop a review protocol that ensures requests do not get held up if someone is off for the day or unavailable.
- Develop a protocol to get requested items into the hands of front-line staff quickly and easily (drive-up options to avoid staff having to park and walk into the building is one example).

3

## Customize Supports Needed by Child(ren) and Kin Family

- Develop a needs assessment form that potential kinship family members can complete along with staff during the 'Voice and Choice' discussion to allow them an opportunity to ask for help.
- Ensure funds, including the use of gift cards or vouchers, can be used at stores and businesses that are convenient for caregivers.
- Make sure that you address barriers that are identified in the safety assessment of the home to ensure funds are available to ameliorate those concerns (to cover the costs of smoke detectors, window screens, lead paint abatement, furniture needs, etc.).

4

## Ensure Adequate Funds and Supports Until Formal Supports Are In Place

- Require that staff document the long-term supports and services that will be provided and when those supports are projected to start. This will allow counties to know that there is a plan to sustain the placement beyond this initial support and that this initial support is a sufficient bridge until formal supports are in place.



### Helpful Hint:

When creating a universal request form and approval process, use e-Signature and digital form creators to make the process easier and quicker.

For More Information on Free Software Options you can visit: <https://bit.ly/33fTBrV>

## Flex Funds For Kin Should Be:



Easy to Request



Reviewed and  
Approved Quickly



Customized to Meet  
Immediate Needs



A Bridge Until Formal  
Supports Are In Place

## Examples from the Field

County LDSSs and community agencies are unique in how they budget and are able to access funds. Policies and procedures, auditing requirements, purchasing regulations and financial protocols can vary, and it is critical that county leadership chooses a system that works for them. Here are a few examples that have been successful in other jurisdictions:

### Kinship Specialist/ Triage Team Access to Petty Cash Account

**Details:** Start a petty cash account with a range of \$100 to \$500 that can be accessed by a supervisor or other identified approver. Funds are requested and monies allocated to staff until funds are exhausted and receipts are turned in to replenish funds.

**Strengths of this Model:** Easy access and distribution of funding, funds are not limited to particular vendors

**Limitations of this Model:** Limits on the amount requested to support kin families, tracking of funds (receipts, change, etc.) can be labor-intensive, security (funds must be secured to prevent theft)

**Works Best For:** Systems that have limited funds and need to focus on supports that on average cost less than \$100 per request



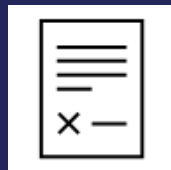
### County/Community Agency Partnership: Adding Flex Funds to Existing Contract

**Details:** Counties with existing contracts and relationships with community partners can add flex funds to the contract and work collaboratively with the agency to develop a process to request and provide funds to kinship families in need.

**Strengths of this Model:** Community agencies can have quicker turnaround times for distribution of funding, requested funds can also support transition into referred programs and supports offered by the community agency, spending flexibility and potential reimbursement advantages of spent funds, often community agencies have other funded programs that may assist your kinship home

**Limitations of this Model:** Delays in contract approval, subject to annual contractual approval, some contracts require an administrative rate

**Works Best For:** Systems that have good working relationships with a community agency and have a wide range of requests in terms of need and range of cost. Also, county's that have limited financial human resources to process and track numerous request.



### Specialized Finance Clerk Who Expedites Purchases and Vouchers

**Details:** Develop a specialized point of contact in the finance department to expedite checks or vouchers or to make purchases on credit cards to meet kinship caregiver needs.

**Strengths of this Model:** Maintains county oversight and review of requests, ensures proper coding of expenses on cases, and allows for effective tracking of expenses

**Limitations of this Model:** Limited hours and availability of finance staff to process requests (normal business hours only)

**Works Best For:** Systems that have well-resourced financial departments and human resources to manage these increased requests with urgency



#### Helpful Hint:

Have expenses reviewed by your finance and eligibility staff to ensure that the process that is adopted maximizes reimbursement opportunities.

## About the Redlich Horwitz Foundation

The Redlich Horwitz Foundation believes that every child who enters foster care should be placed with a family, and that every family who opens its home to a foster child should be well-supported, well- resourced, knowledgeable about the challenges ahead, and prepared to provide the love and stability essential to healthy outcomes for children.

We work to increase and improve family-based care and to reduce time to permanency for all children in the foster care system in NY. We accelerate change by partnering with county and state leaders, nonprofits, foundations, and grassroots advocates for foster youth. We seek to improve practice and policy in support of reducing residential placements, including kin-first placement protocols, targeted recruitment and improved support of foster families, community-based services for children and families, and other strategies proven to expedite the path to permanency.

To that end, we support and work collaboratively with service providers, policy advocates, government agencies, and foster youth to implement thoughtful, data-driven policies and programs directed toward ensuring that every child exits the foster care system into a permanent, loving family and promoting more efficient and effective practices and policies across the systems that impact children and youth in foster care.

