



# Montgomery County DSS Finding Family Desk Guide

This guide was developed to serve as a reference tool for caseworkers and supervisors on steps and strategies for finding and engaging family resources.

Montgomery County DSS aims to strengthen families and keep children safely at home. When children cannot live safely with their parents, placement with kinship caregivers can minimize the trauma of removal. Kin are the first choice of placement.

Kinship placements are given priority both in instances of initial removal and when children are moved in care. Our agency prioritizes kinship foster care over other options, such as custody (Article 6 or 1017) because the outcomes for children are better.

The Commissioner must approve all placements into non-kin foster homes and congregate care settings using the Commissioner's Approval Process (CAP). Caseworkers need to include documentation on the CAP form showing that all kinship options have been exhausted. The CAP aligns with our agency's Family First goal of keeping children safely at home, and when that is not possible, placing with relatives.

Berkshire Farms' Homefinders certifies, trains and supports our agency's kinship foster homes. Referrals may be sent to: \_\_\_\_\_.

## Steps for Finding and Engaging Family

- ▶ **Identify and locate parents and kin, especially fathers, at first contact with family.** Start at initial engagement, implementing effective search and engagement strategies before children enter care.
- ▶ **Prioritize identifying non-custodial parents and relatives,** such as grandparents, aunts or uncles on the *paternal* side.
- ▶ **Search beyond the closest grandparent.** Include grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings or older cousins that are further afield.

Family search and engagement is based on the core belief that capable family members can be located and engaged to meet the needs of youth in care. Current practice models focus on the strengths of family networks, recognizing that while some family members may be less functional and less capable of helping family members, most family networks have members with functional strengths.<sup>i</sup>

- ▶ **Remember to identify fictive kin,** adults with a positive relationship to the child or child's family such as: a child's godparent, neighbors, family friends, parents of friends, teachers, coaches, maintenance staff, friends who are now adults, church members, social workers, employers, counselors, etc.

- ▶ **Document all potential relatives and caring adults** in the Family Resource Information Sheet. Keeping this sheet updated assures that if removal is necessary, there will be a current list of potential kinship caregivers.
- ▶ **If removal is necessary, implement family search and engagement strategies urgently and diligently until all possibilities are exhausted.** The goal is to make the kin placement the *first* placement.
- ▶ **Even if out-of-home placement with kin is not possible, help build and maintain children’s ongoing connection with extended family and fictive kin.** All children deserve lifelong family connections. Children thrive when they have caring relationships with supportive adults they can turn to in times of trouble, and with whom they can celebrate positive achievements and milestones.<sup>ii</sup>

## Strategies for Searching for and Engaging Kin

### STRATEGY 1: Asking family — and then asking family again

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At first contact, explore the family’s supports. During ongoing contacts, ask the family again and continue to gather potential kinship resources.

Ask parents:

- Who do you ask to watch your children in an emergency?
- If your car broke down, who would you call for a ride?
- If you are stressed and need to talk to someone, who would you talk to?

Children and youth are important sources of information to find potential kin. Older youth often have much of the information necessary to find a placement.<sup>iii</sup>

Ask younger children:

- Who do you spend holidays with?
- Who visits the house?
- Who is your favorite babysitter?

Speaking with collateral contacts, such as school staff, health care providers, and neighbors may also assist you in identifying potential kin resources.<sup>iv</sup> Reviewing the child’s file may also uncover significant people in their life.

Ask older children<sup>v</sup>:

- Who would you call at 2 a.m. if you were in serious trouble (in the emergency room, etc.)?
- Who is programmed into your phone?
- Who do you call for advice or to just talk?
- When something great happens to you, who do you feel like calling?
- When something bad happens, is there an adult that seems to understand you better than other people do?
- With what person or people do you feel most comfortable?
- Who cared for you when your parents could not in the past or helped your parents care for you?
- Have you ever lived with anyone other than your parents?
- Who spends time with you and cares about what happens to you? Who can you count on?
- Who do you share holidays and/or special occasions with?
- Are there teachers, coaches, anyone at your place of worship, neighbors or parents of any of your friends that you are close to?

## STRATEGY 2: Internet, database and social media searches

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### *LexisNexis database*

Use Montgomery County's LexisNexis account to search for relatives. The account may be accessed by contacting \_\_\_\_\_.

### *Government databases and registers*

These sources may be especially helpful in locating non-custodial parents.

- Check your county's child support records
- Contact the Prison Locator Service System (518-457-0034) to find out whether the father is incarcerated in New York State
- Contact the Putative Father Registry (800-345-5437)
- Check the Welfare Management System (WMS) for information, including the names of people the father may have lived with in the past who may also be contacted for help locating the father and other resources.
- Contact resources identified in previous child protective, preventive, and foster care case records, including available databases (i.e., CONNECTIONS, Juvenile Justice Information System for Child Welfare).<sup>vi</sup>

Facebook and other social media platforms may be used to locate relatives.

General search engines may also be useful: [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) [www.bing.com](http://www.bing.com) [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)

## STRATEGY 3: Genograms and family mapping

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Utilize genograms, family mapping, or mobility mapping to facilitate discussion and identification of kin.

One process, a Mobility Map, is a child's memory of his or her life put to paper. The mobility mapping process allows the child to rediscover the important people and places from his or her past. The process can reveal a child's daily activities and significant relationships, as well as distinctive community or neighborhood features, structures, or geographic characteristics. It is likely the child will share personal stories of family and friends, places frequently visited, and favorite memories. These connections can lead to potential placement resources.

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Supervisors can ask these questions to assure that all possible efforts are being made to locate and engage non-custodial parents and relatives:

- 👉 What tools have been used to identify relatives and what was the impact?
- 👉 What efforts have been taken in locating and engaging relatives?
- 👉 Has there been any follow-up in locating and engaging non-custodial parents?
- 👉 Have fictive kin been explored?

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- i Hillside Institute for Family Connections. (2014). *Family Finding: Six Steps to Finding Permanence and Lifetime Connections for Disconnected Youth*. Rochester, NY: Hillside Family of Agencies.
  - ii Casey Family Programs. (2018). *Strategy Brief: What are some examples of effective family search and engagement*. Retrieved 11/1/20: [https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/SF\\_Family-search-engagement\\_fnl.pdf](https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/SF_Family-search-engagement_fnl.pdf)
  - iii New York State Office of Children and Family Services (2018). *Revitalizing Recruitment: Practical strategies for finding and keeping kinship, foster, and adoptive homes*. Retrieved 11/1/20: <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/fostercare/recruitment/strategies.html>
  - iv See [20-OCFS-ADM-18](#), *Kin-First Firewall FAQ*
  - v New York State Office of Children and Family Services (2018). *Revitalizing Recruitment: Practical strategies for finding and keeping kinship, foster, and adoptive homes*. Retrieved 11/1/20: <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/fostercare/recruitment/strategies.html>
  - vi See [05-OCFS-INF-05](#), *Locating Absent Fathers and Extended Family Guidance Paper*