Department of Children & Youth

Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator (OhioKAN)



Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator (OhioKAN)

PROGRAM MANUAL

Navigating the OhioKAN Manual

The Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator (OhioKAN) manual is designed to provide individuals with information needed to successfully implement the OhioKAN model as it was designed and tested. The manual includes foundational information about how the OhioKAN model was developed, the core components of the OhioKAN model, and the underlying theory of change about how OhioKAN practices yield positive outcomes for children, families, and communities in Part One. Readers interested in more detailed information will find practice procedures based on OhioKAN's implementation in Ohio in Part Two.

Readers can click on the headings to navigate to the relevant section of the manual or follow along from beginning to end.

Part One: Roadmap and Compass

Part One of the OhioKAN manual introduces foundational information about the model and outlines the practices that are required for successful implementation of OhioKAN.

1. **Background.** Provides a historical overview of OhioKAN's development. Includes information on the OhioKAN effectiveness trial.
2. **Theory of Change.** Describes the roadmap for how the activities of the OhioKAN program are expected to lead to positive outcomes for families and communities. The theory of change is intended to support understanding of the overall design of the program and as a quick desk reference of how activities contribute to the program's goals.
3. **OhioKAN Values.** Describes the CARES values that are at the core of OhioKAN theory and practice.
4. **Core Components.** Lists the core components of the OhioKAN model. Implementing agencies have flexibility in how core components are operationalized in practice; these sections outline requirements for all implementing sites.

Part Two: Details and Procedures *[Under Revision: Coming Soon!]*

Part Two details how the core components outlined in Part One have been operationalized in Ohio and offers specific guidance for sites implementing in Ohio. The chapters in Part Two integrate lessons learned over the course of implementation to date while staying true to the core components of the model that was designed and tested in collaboration with lived and professional experts. Replication sites in jurisdictions outside of Ohio may find these additional details helpful to illustrate Ohio's strategies for bringing OhioKAN into practice, but the details outlined in Part Two are not intended to be prescriptive for all replicating sites.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Family Engagement Framework



BACKGROUND

Background

Beginning in 2019, Ohio Department of Children and Youth (DCY) partnered with Kinnect, a Cleveland-based non-profit organization that specializes in kin first practices, to develop the framework for the Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator Program (OhioKAN). Collaboration with lived and professional experts across the state was a central feature throughout multi-phase development process, described below.

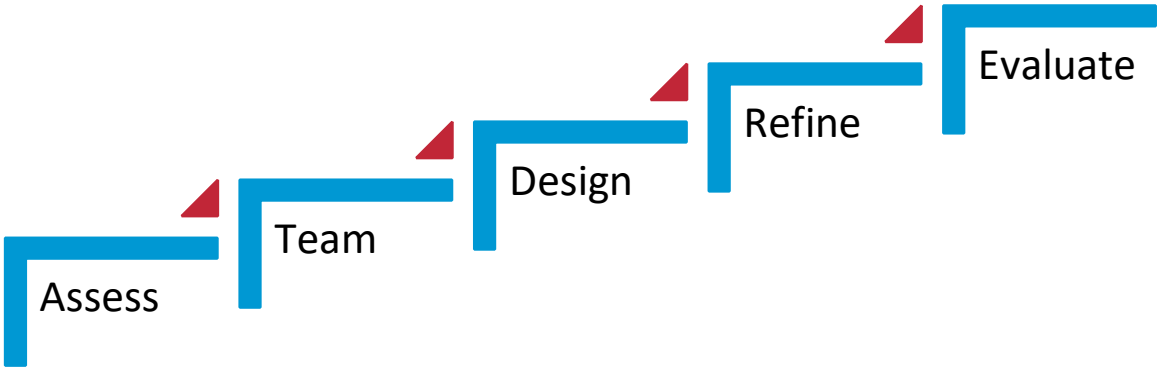


Figure 1. Collaboration with lived and professional experts was a central feature throughout the OhioKAN development and testing process

Assess

During **Assessment**, Kinnect and partners reviewed research evidence and facilitated conversations with subject matter experts to identify effective program components. Kinnect conducted a survey, meetings, and phone calls with subject matter experts to better understand the needs of kinship and adoptive families in the state. Subject matter experts included kinship caregivers, adoptive parents, leadership of the Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition, and professionals administering kinship support services. Using an appreciative inquiry approach, subject matter experts reflected on the impacts and successes of existing programs serving kinship and adoptive families, visions for the future of a statewide program, what would be needed to ensure its success and sustainability, and wishes for desired outcomes for families.

Team

During **Teaming**, Kinnect convened almost 90 collaborators to develop a program recommendation. OhioKAN collaborators represented 90% of OhioKAN's regions, included 16

individuals with lived experience (9 kinship/7 adoption), 18 Public Children Service Agencies, and 30 community organizations. Collaborators discussed program research findings, considered federal and state program requirements, and provided insight about the needs of kinship and adoptive families in their community. The workgroup was vital to informing the direction of OhioKAN and ensuring the needs of both rural and urban social landscapes throughout Ohio were considered.

In the second major phase of Teaming, town hall meetings provided an opportunity for any kinship caregiver, adoptive parent, community organization, service provider, or other interested party to be involved in the discussion of OhioKAN. At each session, Kinnect presented the program recommendations. Each community town hall meeting included an hour of open floor time for the community to ask questions, provide public feedback, or submit anonymous feedback via paper surveys.

Design

During **Design**, Kinnect integrated stakeholder recommendations with requirements defined in Ohio Revised Code for the navigator program. The design conceptualized multiple tiers of services designed to support a broad population of kinship and adoptive families. It also promoted a statewide infrastructure of community supports and services. The framework of information, service/support linkages and resources includes ongoing Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) to promote program adaptability.

Refine

The development of OhioKAN extended beyond the initial design recommendation to include a phase of continued program **Refinement** comprised of multiple rounds of usability testing and an evaluability assessment. Usability testing activities included broad general inquires and specific focused testing opportunities.

- **Learning and Reflection** focus groups with navigators and coaches offered an open-ended forum for implementing staff to celebrate what was going well, discuss challenges, and brainstorm strategies to improve.
- **Online surveys** of families who were served by OhioKAN within the first few months of implementation gathered feedback about families' initial impressions of OhioKAN's usefulness, ease of use, and areas for improvement.

- **OhioKAN Support Plan** testing through focus groups with OhioKAN staff, cognitive interviews with families served during the initial implementation of OhioKAN, and a content analysis of completed plans.
- **Family Decision Making** testing through observation of a simulated intake call between a navigator and a family, paired with individual interviews with the caregiver and with the navigator following the observation.

In addition, an evaluability assessment systematically evaluated the OhioKAN intervention, implementation supports, and evaluation plan based on document review and interviews with key stakeholders.

OhioKAN leadership and program partners used learnings from usability testing and the evaluability assessment to affirm the program structure and make some important data-informed programmatic adjustments and refine the OhioKAN model and its implementation strategies and supports.

Evaluate

The final OhioKAN model was evaluated through a statewide cluster randomized trial evaluating outcomes for children and caregivers compared to a control group. More than 1,728 caregivers served by OhioKAN between February 2022 and January 2023 participated in a year-long study and shared their experiences in up to four surveys of caregivers at multiple points in time. Results confirmed that kinship and adoptive families who received the full services and supports provided through OhioKAN achieved significant favorable outcomes in multiple areas when compared to kinship and adoptive families who received information and referral. Results of the evaluation were published in the Journal of Evidence Based Social Work, and are available on Open Science Framework. In 2026, the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse reviewed the study and concluded that OhioKAN meets criteria for a rating of “supported”.



THEORY OF CHANGE

Theory of Change

The OhioKAN Theory of Change was developed in partnership with stakeholders representing both public and private service providers and advocates who serve kinship and adoptive families in urban, rural, and suburban settings across Ohio. It provides a high-level overview of how OhioKAN activities are expected to lead to positive outcomes for communities and families.

The Challenge

OhioKAN seeks to address several challenges identified during OhioKAN development:

- Communities and systems don't consistently have awareness of the unique needs of kinship caregivers and adoptive parents or the capacity to appropriately serve them.
- There are insufficient human services and material resources to meet the needs of kinship caregivers and adoptive parents.
- Stigma for seeking resources, services, and supports prevents families from asking for and receiving what they need.
- Insufficient dissemination of information to kinship caregivers and adoptive parents about existing resources their family could benefit from and programs they may be eligible for.
- Kinship caregivers and adoptive parents are adapting to new roles and expectations while coping with trauma, changing family dynamics, or may simply need additional resources, services, and supports to meet the needs of their children, themselves, and their families.

The Change

OhioKAN partners with families and systems to:

Develop collaborative strategies to address awareness and capacity gaps for serving kinship and adoptive families within systems like education, health, mental health, housing, legal and judicial.

OhioKAN co-creates solutions with families through:

- Individualized information and referrals, to meet all kinship and adoptive families' needs,
- Family driven, trauma responsive navigation services, benefits coordination, and advocacy to address the unique situations families experience,
- Access to material resources to care for their children, themselves, and their families.

Communities and systems build capacity:

- Develop awareness of kinship and adoptive families' experiences and build strategies and capacity to better support them,
- Promote awareness of available and accessible connections and resources to meet the needs of all kinship and adoptive families across Ohio,
- Increase the service array and develop sustainable solutions to support all kinship and adoptive families.

Families build confidence and connection:

- Build awareness of and access to the resources, services, and supports they identify to improve,
- Understand all of their options and feel confident, supported, and committed to providing a stable home,
- Connect and build community with other kinship and adoptive families, make sure they have the continuous support they need.

Roadmap for Change

OhioKAN's theory of change is grounded in two distinct, complementary practices driving family- and community-level change. These practices include (1) direct services with families to build confidence and connections and (2) capacity building support for communities and systems. The OhioKAN theory of change outlines key milestones and activities expected to contribute to the program's overall impact. The higher-level milestones are associated with key activities that contribute to achieving the next milestone. This chain can be best understood in an if-then sequence.

Supporting Communities

For example, if OhioKAN promotes community knowledge by launching a statewide public awareness campaign with targeted regional/county level campaigns and educates public system partners about the unique needs of kinship and adoptive families and how they can be best supported, then local human service systems become more knowledgeable and better equipped to serve kinship and adoptive families. If local human service systems become more knowledgeable and better equipped to serve kinship and adoptive families and OhioKAN assesses and monitors the extent to which the available services and supports meet kinship and adoptive families' needs, then OhioKAN will build community level awareness and develop connections with places families already are.



Figure 2. The roadmap to support communities demonstrates the activities and desired outcomes of OhioKAN service delivery in support of communities.

Macro-level systems change is designed to support and reinforce family-level practice because a better connected system that is aware of the unique needs of kinship and adoptive families will be better equipped to meet families' needs. A more cohesive network of partnerships involved in systems change efforts are expected to benefit families.

Supporting Families

OhioKAN is a flexible and responsive kinship and adoption navigator program designed to support children, youth, and their families. OhioKAN partners with families to strengthen their networks and connect them with programs and services that meet their unique needs. Building on the premise that families are inherently capable of finding solutions to the circumstances and challenges they face, the OhioKAN program takes an individualized, engaging, and genuine approach to strengthening families and their networks.

Outcomes for families served are expected to improve through OhioKAN's direct service activities. Service provision includes information and referrals to meet kinship and adoptive family's individual needs, trauma-informed navigation services, and access to material resources to care for the child. If kinship caregivers and adoptive parents are informed about publicly available resources and connected with programs and services that meet their needs through referrals and individual advocacy and support, then caregivers will feel supported and able to care for their families, and children will experience positive outcomes.

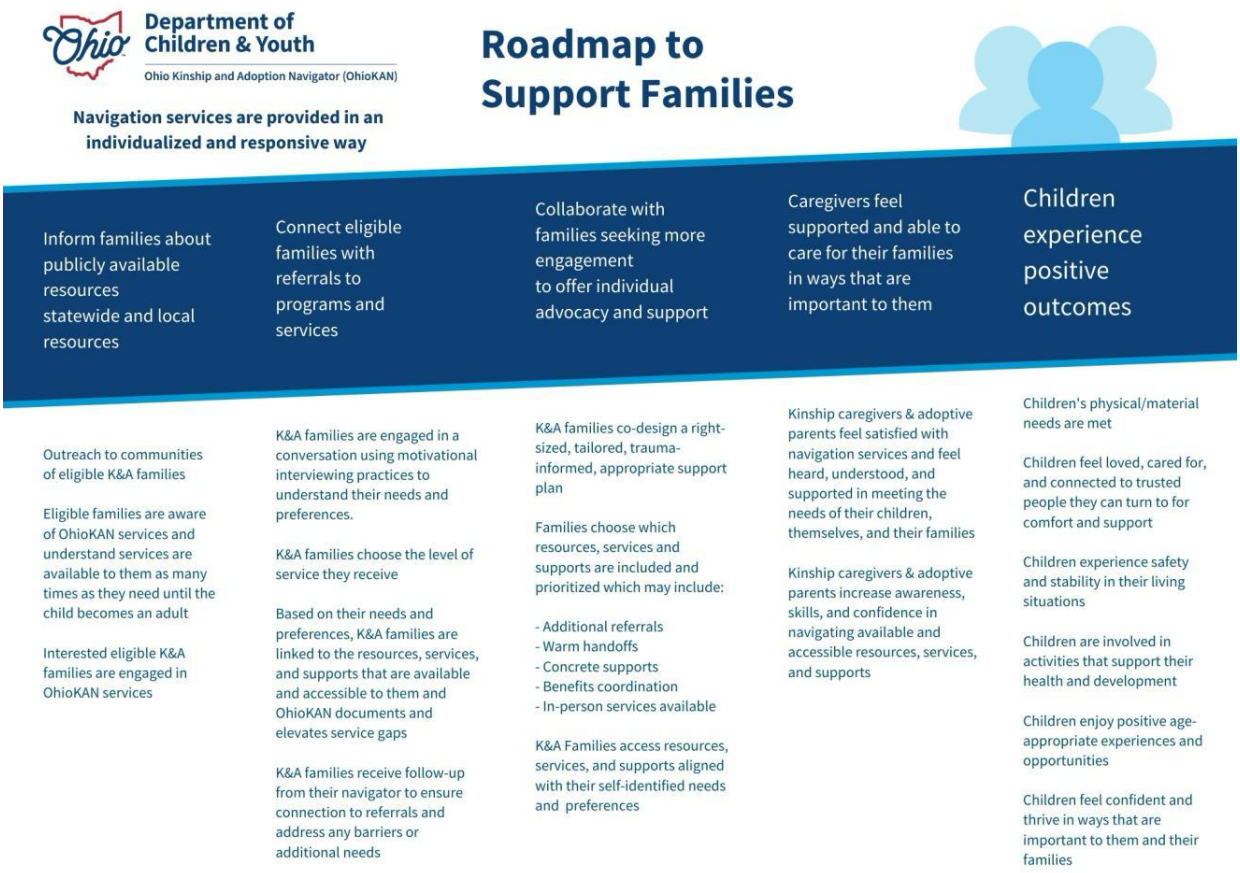


Figure 3. The roadmap to support families demonstrates the activities and desired outcomes of OhioKAN service delivery in support of families.



OHIOKAN VALUES

OhioKAN Values

OhioKAN is grounded in the core belief that families are inherently capable of finding solutions to the circumstances and challenges they face.

OhioKAN CARES

Children: We value Ohio's children and are determined to keep the safety, permanency, and well-being of our children as our primary driver

Accountability: We value integrity and transparency. We do what we say and say what we do.

Respect: We believe everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

Engagement: We value the voices of all kinship and adoptive families and will engage them knowing their perspective is the foundation on which we build our relationship.

Strengths: We value every family's strengths and believe everyone can contribute to the solution.

These values and beliefs provide the foundation for the core components of the OhioKAN model.



CORE COMPONENTS

Core Components

Grounded in OhioKAN's values and theory of change, the core components summarize the essential program elements, functions, and associated activities necessary to implement OhioKAN. The core components highlight the key fidelity requirements necessary to produce the desired outcomes for kinship and adoptive families. OhioKAN's core components provide key landmarks, and there is flexibility for implementing sites in how core components are operationalized in their site. Sites should consider their unique context (e.g., organizational structure, community needs, staffing, and available resources) when making organizational and operational decisions about how to implement the program.

Service Population

- OhioKAN was designed to serve formal and informal kinship families and adoptive families formed through public and private, domestic and international adoptions.
- Implementing sites can choose to narrow the population

Community Practice

Meaningful partnerships with community representatives with an emphasis on individuals with lived experience and direct practice experts

- Families add fundamental value to the program by sharing their experiences and insights as a caregiver, family member, or youth. The OhioKAN program invests in leadership skills of families through service and support planning, active participation of families in program development and opportunities for families' perspectives in system-wide capacity building efforts. Families and staff partner together to focus on these key areas to share responsibility, expertise, and accountability.

- Multiple formal opportunities for individuals with lived experience and direct practice experts to inform and engage in decision-making about program implementation and community capacity building efforts

- Formalized councils with local community representatives to build community capacity and foster awareness of best practices in serving kinship and adoptive families

- Intentional engagement with lived experience members who are representative of the community, consistent with the consistent with the **OhioKAN Family Engagement Framework** (see Appendix 1)

Partnerships with public agencies and community organizations

- Relationships with local child protective service agencies that are designed to support system-involved families and reduce entry or re-entry into the formal child-welfare system
- Partnerships with local service providers, community-based organizations, and community stakeholders to facilitate access to services, build community capacity, and prevent duplication of services
- Formalized councils with representatives from multi-disciplinary child and family serving organizations serving local communities

Comprehensive community service and support mapping

- Service and support mapping to generate a list of resources, or utilize an existing list of resources developed by 211 or elsewhere, to refer OhioKAN families to meet the needs they identified during the assessment
- Assessment of the existing service array and ongoing identification of service gaps

Localized community outreach and capacity building activities

- Outreach efforts focused on reducing stigma around support seeking behaviors and serving a variety of family constellations
- Convening multidisciplinary stakeholders to build awareness and knowledge within communities and across disciplines about the unique strengths, challenges, and needs of kinship and adoptive families and best practices for serving them

Family Practice

Modality

- OhioKAN services are delivered with one navigator for each family.
- OhioKAN is typically delivered via phone, text, email, or virtual meeting. OhioKAN can also be delivered in-person in the community or in the home.

Tri-level Continuum of Services

OhioKAN offers a tri-level continuum of services.

Inform Publicly available statewide and local resources	**Publicly available website** with resources, events, and content, curated for kinship and adoptive families
Connect Navigation and family referral to programs and services	**Universal standard needs assessment** relying on parent or caregiver's self-reported needs, grounded in the value that "we believe families," and conducted in a semi-structured conversational style **Individualized referrals** to available local and statewide services and programs **Follow-up** to ensure connection to referrals and address any barriers or additional needs
Collaborate Individual advocacy and enhanced supports for families seeking more engagement and support	**Individualized Support Planning** that is family driven, includes opportunity for youth voice, and offers families the full range of support from first contact and ongoing **Warm handoffs** directly connecting parents and caregivers with referrals **Collaboration with a caseworker, state, or local agencies** to coordinate support efforts between the OhioKAN Navigator and others with whom a family is already working **Benefits Support** offered by Navigators to provide direct assistance and resources to help kinship caregivers and adoptive parents apply for benefits. Navigators provide answers to basic questions, high-level explanations of common benefits, and application assistance. This includes application assistance for common benefits including those on the Ohio Benefits Self Service Portal, such as SNAP, Ohio Works First, Medicaid, and early care and education services. **Concrete supports** including stability supports to offer families direct financial support and provision of hard goods to meet families' needs **Benefits coordination** is a specialized service provided by trained Benefits Coordinators to assist families with complex

	benefits applications, formal appeals, advocacy, and other complex benefits matters. Navigators refer families to Benefits Coordinators when the family needs specialty benefits coordination and consultation beyond benefits support. In addition, Navigators may consult with Benefits Coordinators to support their own understanding or on behalf of families.
Services are additive, so families receiving Collaborate Service Levels also receive all the services at the Inform and Connect Service Levels.	

Family-Driven Service Delivery

- OhioKAN is a voluntary program available to families as many times as they need until the child reaches adulthood or no longer resides in the home.
- Service content, duration, and dosage are individually determined in partnership with families based on their needs and desires. All families receive at least three touchpoints (below). Beyond this minimum, families choose which additional Collaborate-level supports to receive with guidance from navigators. On average, families during the OhioKAN evaluation period had a median service duration of 44 days and 8.1 contacts.

    1. BASICS assessment to explore needs. Replication sites have flexibility about which assessment is used if the assessment intentionally gathers information about (a) the needs of caregivers, (b) the needs of all the children in the home, and (c) addresses all areas of need identified in the BASICS.
    2. Individualized referrals to meet identified needs.
    3. Follow-up from navigation staff to check in and inquire whether caregivers could use any additional support.

Engagement Practices

- Throughout the OhioKAN service experience, staff authentically engage and partner with caregivers and young people as experts on their own experience, circumstances, and community. The partnership with families is embedded at every level of the organization with a sustained, targeted, and ongoing focus. OhioKAN is dedicated to the practice of meaningful engagement with families at their request and pace.
- Navigators' practice is consistent with the **OhioKAN Family Engagement Framework** (see Appendix 1)

Navigator Education and Experience

- No minimum education or certification requirements
- Preferred experience include:
    - Associate's or Bachelor's degree in social work, public health, education or related field
    - Experience working directly with families and/or case management experience
    - Lived experience as an adoptee or raised in a kinship family, kinship caregiver, adoptive parent, or foster parent

Training and Coaching for Navigators

OhioKAN uses a supportive workforce development framework that includes three components:

- Initial training consists of general sessions common to all OhioKAN positions as well as role-specific sessions that are typically completed within the first three months after starting a role. Training topics for navigators include the topics listed below, and additional trainings may be added to meet local needs, respond to local priorities, and better serve families in the community.
    - Motivational interviewing best practices
    - Strength-based approach
    - Trauma-responsive engagement skills
    - Individualized engagement, assessment and service
- Ongoing training and professional development is aligned with professional goals or Key Performance Indicators.
- Navigator coaching includes collaborative goal setting, opportunities for action and practice, observation, reflection, and feedback about performance.

Data-Informed Feedback Loops

- Promotion of a culture of learning and engagement of staff in making programmatic and practice improvements to achieve outcomes for kinship and adoptive families
- Regular review of services provided and families served

- Intentional feedback loops with partnering sites, public agencies and programs, and local child and family serving organizations to ensure program implementation is responsive to the unique needs of kinship and adoptive families in the local context

Together, these core components of OhioKAN provide the foundation of the program. Implementing sites have flexibility in how they operationalize these components in ways that align with existing structures and supports that are already in place. Part two of this manual provides additional details about how OhioKAN is operationalized in Ohio.



APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Family Engagement Framework

The OhioKAN Family Engagement Framework is a guiding approach and includes a set of core principles that describe how the OhioKAN program and staff partner with kinship and adoptive families. Since the beginning of the process to design OhioKAN, kinship and adoptive families have played an important role in envisioning and identifying the services and supports they want and need. OhioKAN actively and intentionally partners with families through direct services and capacity building engagements. Both efforts build families' confidence, connections, and equip community systems to better support the unique needs of kinship and adoptive families. In partnership with families, the OhioKAN program advocates for services and systems that are responsive and accountable to kinship and adoptive families and communities.

Guiding Approach

OhioKAN's Family Engagement Framework is based on the Parent Leadership model developed by the FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (2025). Families and staff work together as partners to make decisions about the OhioKAN program, policies, and practices that affect families, all while sharing responsibility, expertise, and leadership. The Parent Leadership model is a strengths-based approach built on the belief that parents and caregivers are the most knowledgeable about their families and communities.

Collaborative leadership, an aspect of the Parent Leadership model, is a decision-making process that is open to all, built on general agreement and uplifts the points of view of all people involved. Staff seek out, listen, and respect family voice, and recognize that parents, caregivers, and youth are experts on their family's strengths, experiences and needs. Through collaborative leadership, OhioKAN staff and families develop a true partnership to make the best decisions for both families served by the OhioKAN program and the broader kinship and adoptive community. The OhioKAN program and staff also value the individual and unique circumstances of families and operate with humility, as staff listen carefully to families to learn about their unique circumstances and preferences for support.

Core Principles

The OhioKAN Family Engagement Framework includes a set of core principles which are considered best practices to effectively engage, inspire, and uplift the voices of kinship and

adoptive families in both service delivery and broader capacity building efforts, which include but are not limited to:

Foster mutual respect and trusting relationships with strong reciprocal communication.

OhioKAN team members develop positive relationships with families through authentic interactions over time that are meaningful to everyone involved. All staff seek out, listen, and respect family voice, and recognize that parents, caregivers, and youth are experts on their own family's strengths, experiences, and needs. Navigators apply their knowledge of the OhioKAN core practice skills to have open, on-going, and two-way communication with families, emphasizing families' strengths, interests, and perspectives. OhioKAN values that families and communities know their children, and community. OhioKAN honors the set of skills, expertise, and experience that equip families with unique strengths and perspective. OhioKAN team members are continuously in the process of building strong relationships with families (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2020).

Partner with families through shared decision-making, responsibility, and leadership.

Grounded in a decision-making process, OhioKAN embraces collaborative leadership that is open to all, built on consensus, and uplifts the points of view of kinship and adoptive families. OhioKAN intentionally creates space for families to bring their unique expertise and knowledge to decision-making about the services they receive and the priorities they address in their communities. Families' deep knowledge and skills are complementary to those of OhioKAN staff and other stakeholders, an essential perspective to meeting the needs of kinship and adoptive families in Ohio.

Engage families where they are.

The OhioKAN program effectively engages with families in ways that are responsive to the unique circumstances and preferences of each family. Navigators ask families for their communication preferences, and use a variety of options such as phone, email, text, virtual meetings, or in-person meetings to ensure families are connecting with the program in the ways that work best for them. OhioKAN honors the time that families dedicate to engaging with the OhioKAN program by providing stipends to kinship and adoptive families who work as advisors (Spencer & Casau, 2021).

Practice of Engagement

OhioKAN is dedicated to the practice of meaningful engagement with families at their request and pace. At every level of the program, staff authentically engage and partner with young people and families as experts on their own experience, circumstances, and community. The partnership with families is embedded at every level of the organization with a sustained, targeted, and ongoing focus. Families add fundamental value to the program by sharing their experiences and insights as a caregiver, family member, or youth. The OhioKAN program invests in leadership skills of families through service and support planning, active participation of families in program development and opportunities for families' perspectives in system-wide capacity building efforts. Families and staff partner together to focus on these key areas to share responsibility, expertise, and accountability.

Family Engagement in Direct Services

Services are focused on a family-centered, trauma responsive, and strengths-based approach. Navigators partner with families to make decisions, set goals and achieve desired outcomes throughout service delivery. Caregivers are the drivers of decision-making, determining the direction, type and level of services received from OhioKAN Navigators. In every aspect of the service episode, we work to ensure families feel heard, honored, and respected (Capacity Building Center for States, 2019). A family-centered and strengths-based approach of family engagement leads to an improved and shared understanding of family needs and thus leads to positive outcomes for children, families, and caregivers (Berrick et al., 2011).

Family Engagement in Program Improvement

At the program level, family members share their knowledge to improve program outcomes and enhance agency operations. Family members share their unique experiences to improve the effectiveness of the OhioKAN program. Families support program improvement through their participation in focus groups, surveys, interviews, and membership on Regional Advisory Councils (Capacity Building Center for States, 2019).

Family Engagement in Systems Change

Families who engage with OhioKAN at the systems level have experience across and within a range of systems and have a desire to use that experience and the power of their voices to improve outcomes for children and families within the community. The voices of those with lived experience as kinship caregivers and adoptive parents can highlight system and practice strengths, as well as necessary improvements. Areas of improvement can include inconsistent processes, community gaps, and unmet service needs. In addition, families

provide innovative solutions that reflect their experience and community perspective to policy and program development. To inform system level enhancements, families participate in activities such as Regional or State Advisory Councils, training staff, contributing expertise in public forums, and membership on planning committees or implementation workgroups (Capacity Building Center for States, 2019).

The OhioKAN Family Engagement Framework embodies the dedication of the OhioKAN program to effectively engage, inspire, respond to, and amplify the voices of kinship and adoptive families. OhioKAN values the importance of working in partnership with families. OhioKAN staff partner with kinship and adoptive families through direct services, program development and system-wide capacity building efforts.

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