

[BLOG] When Love Isn't Funded: The Injustice of Unpaid Kin Care in Ontario's Child Welfare system

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In May, Laidlaw Foundation staff attended the Kinship Care Symposium, hosted by the Sonor Foundation in Alton, Ontario, where the urgent issue of funding for kin caregivers was brought to light. Attendees shared powerful stories of extended family members, including grandparents, aunts, and older siblings, who stepped in to care for children removed from their parents' homes, only to be denied financial support by the system. These stories are not outliers; they reflect a broader systemic failure in Ontario's child welfare system, one that continues to rely on the unpaid labour of kin, while offering little to no compensation or support in return.

This begs the question: what happens when kinship care, despite being the most culturally grounded and relationship-based form of caregiving is undervalued? The result is immense financial and emotional strain on caregivers, harm to children's well-being, and the deepening of inequities across the province. Drawing on discussions at the Symposium and reflections from our grantees' work supporting youth and families, we highlight community-rooted approaches Ontario must adopt to better support children where they thrive most: with family and in community..

The Gathering also underscored that these challenges extend beyond Ontario. Canada lacks a coordinated national approach to kinship and customary care, particularly around financial support, training, respite, and culturally safe placements. Speakers called for broader definitions of family (including chosen family and step-parents) and highlighted how kin caregivers, especially those from Black, Indigenous, racialized, Muslim, refugee, and immigrant communities, are routinely under-supported. Barriers also persist for queer and trans youth, and for children with complex needs, reinforcing the urgency for systemic reform that reflects the full diversity of caregiving relationships.

What is kinship care?

To understand the depth of this inequity, we must first understand what kinship care is, and how it's treated differently within Ontario's child welfare system. Every day, people who already know and love the children in their lives, open their homes often with little notice or preparation for their new responsibility, in order to ensure the children remain connected to their culture, community, and identity. This is kinship care, the oldest and most natural form of caregiving, but here's the painful truth; many of these kin caregivers are not being paid. In Ontario's child welfare system, there's an unjust distinction between foster parents and kin. When children are placed with non-relatives through foster care, those caregivers receive regular financial compensation and ongoing support. But when those same children are placed with family members or close family friends, that support is often withheld. Kinship caregivers are left to navigate the system and meet the child's needs with little to no financial assistance.

Is this just policy oversight or systemic discrimination?

Consequences for caregivers

This double standard raises a pressing question: what happens when kin are expected to care for children without being properly supported? Unpaid kin care places an enormous financial burden on families, many of whom are already living on the edge. Kin caregivers are disproportionately racialized women, often elders or single parents, taking on these responsibilities without financial security. Love alone doesn't pay for food, housing, school supplies, or counseling. The system relies on the unpaid labour of kin, while denying them the resources it freely offers to others.

Proposed solutions at the symposium included:

- Prioritize family and community-based placements over licensed caregivers in funding models - including post-custody financial supports like adoption subsidies to prevent children from having to come into care;
- Standardizing kin financial support and timely access to financial supports;
- Providing kin with access to legal, mental health, and wraparound supports, especially for those caring for children with complex needs;
- Remove barriers to accessing supports through policies, such as removing the need for receipts in order to be reimbursed, or ensuring that Temporary Care assistance is not terminated by Ontario Works once custody is obtained by the kin;
- Respecting kin caregivers as partners, not placeholders, in a child's life.

Consequences for children

The lack of support for kin doesn't just strain caregivers. It directly undermines children's stability and well-being. Children thrive in familiar environments, surrounded by those who know and love them. Kin caregivers should not be penalized for stepping up. Until they are supported, Ontario's child welfare system will continue to exploit kinship care and undervalue the very people holding it together.

Through our work with grantees, many of whom support youth impacted by the child welfare system, we've seen the long-term effects of family separation. These organizations are doing more than responding to urgent needs. They are helping to rebuild cultural connection, identity, and belonging, through land-based education, cultural programs, language revitalization, and mentorship. Their work helps young people reclaim their roots and heal.

Conclusion

Ontario's failure to support kin caregivers is not just a policy gap. It's a reflection of whose care is valued, and whose is taken for granted. By continuing to deny kin families the same resources granted to foster parents, the system reinforces cycles of poverty, racial inequity, and instability.

The solutions are clear and community-endorsed. What's needed now is political will. Ontario must move beyond token gestures toward structural reforms that recognizes kin caregivers as equal partners and invests in them accordingly. If we truly believe in keeping children safe, connected, and thriving, then we must stand with the people who have always done that work quietly, lovingly, and far too often, unpaid.

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