

Kinship Navigator Programs in Virginia

What are Kinship Navigator Programs?

Kinship care is the full-time care and nurturing of a child by a relative or someone who has a significant emotional relationship with a child not born to them. Kinship navigator programs provide information, referral, education, support, and advocacy for kinship families with the goal of preventing unnecessary entries into foster care. Specifically, kinship navigator programs are designed to help kinship caregivers navigate the systems that impacts them, including child welfare, housing, education, and health care. Kinship navigator programs are not intended to provide the services needed by kinship families; rather they are designed to help improve caregivers' knowledge of available resources and assist them in being able to access the services they need.

Importance of Kinship Navigator Programs

Decades of research has shown that family connections are critical to healthy child development and a sense of belonging. Kinship navigator programs provide much-needed support to help foster and nurture these critical family connections. Kinship care provides many benefits, including:

- Reduces trauma that children may experience when they are placed with strangers, and enables children to live with people they know and trust
- Improves child well-being due to increased stability and fewer placement changes
- Decreases likelihood of major disruptions such as school changes
- Increases permanency and reduces reentry into foster care
- Improves behavioral and mental health outcomes
- Increases the likelihood that children will maintain connections to extended family, siblings, and community
- Better outcomes for older youth through relationships that help them achieve self-sufficiency

Kinship Navigator Programs in Virginia

The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 amended title IV-E of the Social Security Act to allow title IV-E agencies to receive funding for kinship navigator programs that meet certain criteria. Requirements include that kinship navigator programs operate in accordance with promising, supported, or well-supported practices as defined by the [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#). To help title IV-E agencies prepare to

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participate in the new title IV-E kinship navigator funding option, congress set aside \$20 million in funding in FYs 2018, 2019 and 2020 through grants to develop, enhance or evaluate kinship navigator programs.

In 2018, the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) received a grant from the Children’s Bureau which was used to develop six pilot Kinship Navigator programs involving 40 localities. The Kinship Navigator programs provide information, referral, education, and advocacy for kinship families. The purpose of services is to provide supports that strengthen the kinship caregivers’ capacity to provide a safe, nurturing home for the child and to help achieve permanency for the child. Additionally, supports and services assist the kinship caregiver in addressing any effects of trauma and maltreatment the child may have experienced. VDSS also used the funds to support a partnership with 2-1-1 Virginia, which provides a dedicated, toll-free number specifically for kinship families to receive 24-hour information and referral services across the state. 2-1-1 is available for all kinship caregivers throughout the state.

Challenges for Kinship Caregivers

Kinship caregivers often experience challenges and barriers to maintaining their caretaking role. Financial difficulties and lack of knowledge and/or challenges navigating public and private assistance and eligibility requirements are consistently cited as major challenges for kinship caregivers. Inadequate access to legal assistance and barriers to accessing supportive services such as affordable childcare and educational support are also major hurdles. In addition, strained family relationships often take an emotional toll on kinship caregivers, yet it can be difficult to access mental health services, support groups or training to address these critical issues. Kinship navigator programs are designed specifically to help families overcome these significant challenges.

Program Strengths & Key Activities

Virginia’s Kinship Navigator programs help families stabilize more quickly and help prevent unnecessary entries into foster care by reaching families early in the caregiving process with support and resources. Kinship Caregivers develop a personal relationship with the families they serve and provide individualized assessments so referrals can be personalized to meet the unique needs of each family. Each of Virginia’s six pilot programs also have strong and meaningful relationships with partners in their community, particularly local school systems.

While Virginia’s six pilot kinship navigator programs are reflective of the unique geographic and demographic nature of each area, there are commonalities reflected in the key program activities:

- Programs rely on self-referral and referrals from community partners
- Eligibility is extended to caregivers, both formal and informal, who are caring for a child who is not biologically their own and under the age of 18
- Programs assess family need and inventory community resources on an on-going basis
- Information and referral for legal assistance, medical and mental health services, food banks, financial assistance and other important services are provided to kinship families through tools including informational brochures, website, social media, and participation in community events and presentations
- Programs have developed formal resource guides and/or use the state’s 2-1-1 system to help connect families with services
- Programs have a formalized system in place for referring families for federal, state and/or local benefits and assist families in applying for those benefits as needed
- Kinship navigators provide much-needed case management support for kinship caregivers

- Programs provide support and encouragement through programming including support groups, training programs and social / supportive events

A summary of each of the six pilot kinship navigator programs can be found later in this report.

Families Served

Pilot kinship navigator programs in Virginia are positively impacting children and kinship caregivers across the state. Since the program began in 2018, 861 youth and 790 kinship caregivers have received services. For children and youth, the programs have served 69% ages 0-12 and 22% ages 13-17. Caregivers served range in age from 18-60+, with 23% in the 60+ range. Grandparents and aunts represent the majority of caregivers, at 52% and 16% respectively. Detailed charts showing the demographic breakdown of youth and caregivers served can be found at the end of this report.



*“I SO APPRECIATE THAT OUR KINSHIP NAVIGATOR SENDS ME INFORMATION OR CALLS TO TALK WITH ME . . . SO MANY PEOPLE DO NOT UNDERSTAND”
–KINSHIP CAREGIVER*

Lessons Learned

While the pilot kinship navigator programs in Virginia are providing tremendous services to children and caregivers across the state, challenges remain. A foundational challenge is recruitment of participants into the program. While programs are promoting their services through a variety of vehicles, it is still challenging to raise awareness and to attract families into the program. The large geographic footprint of many of the pilot programs is also a challenge, particularly with limited staff. Transportation is also major hurdle for clients trying to access services, particularly in rural areas. Some rural areas also have limited or no wireless connectivity in their area, which presents a major hurdle in applying for services or participating in support groups or training. All of these challenges have been exacerbated by the global pandemic of COVID-19. As is often the case with pilot programs, another challenge has been the lack of standardized policies and procedures and no centralized database of resources or method for tracking outcomes. Finally, local budget limitations have negatively impacted kinship navigator programs, limiting staff’s ability to carry out key program activities such as outreach to kinship caregivers, identification of community resources and advocacy efforts such as accompanying caregivers to court dates.

Challenges at the national level also impact local kinship navigator programs. As of September 2020, the federal [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#) has yet to approve any kinship navigator program as meeting the evidence-based threshold. Therefore, in Virginia and across the country, kinship navigator programs remain unsure on how best to build-out their programs and what specific outcomes and measures they should evaluate in order to maximize results and ultimately secure federal funding. While they await federal guidance, Virginia’s kinship navigator programs have formed peer support networks and are sharing information and best practice through these networks as well as through technical assistance offered by the state office.

The plan in Virginia is to expand the kinship navigator program statewide once a model is approved through the federal clearinghouse, allowing Virginia to draw down federal funds to match state general funds to expand the current program beyond the 40 localities where it is currently available. Statewide access to kinship navigators would allow for case management for caregivers who need assistance navigating their local communities as well as benefits available through federal and state resources.

How Can the Community Support Kinship Navigator Programs?

Immediate support from local and state government is needed to ensure the viability and sustainability of kinship navigator programs in Virginia. The top priorities at the community and state level are outlined below:

Community Call to Action

- Prioritize services to support kinship caregivers in order to reduce the likelihood families will need to be served in the formal child welfare system
- Regularly inventory and review available services for kinship caregivers, ensuring there are no gaps in resources or services
- Prioritize funding for kinship navigator positions to ensure families have a consistent person to reach out to when looking for support and services

State Call to Action

- Prioritize funding to maintain the existing 6 kinship navigator programs (serving 40 localities) once federal funds ends in September 2021 (\$350,000 general funds for state fiscal year 22)
- Allocate funding so every locality can establish a kinship navigator program (\$6,999,960 general funds) and allocate funding for each program to provide community-specific resources and supports for kinship caregivers in the amount of \$2,400,000 general funds or,
 - At a minimum, allocate and/or prioritize funding to establish five kinship navigator programs in each region (\$1,458,325 general funds) and allocate funding for each regional Kinship Navigator Program to provide community-specific resources and supports for kinship caregivers in the amount of (\$500,000 general funds).

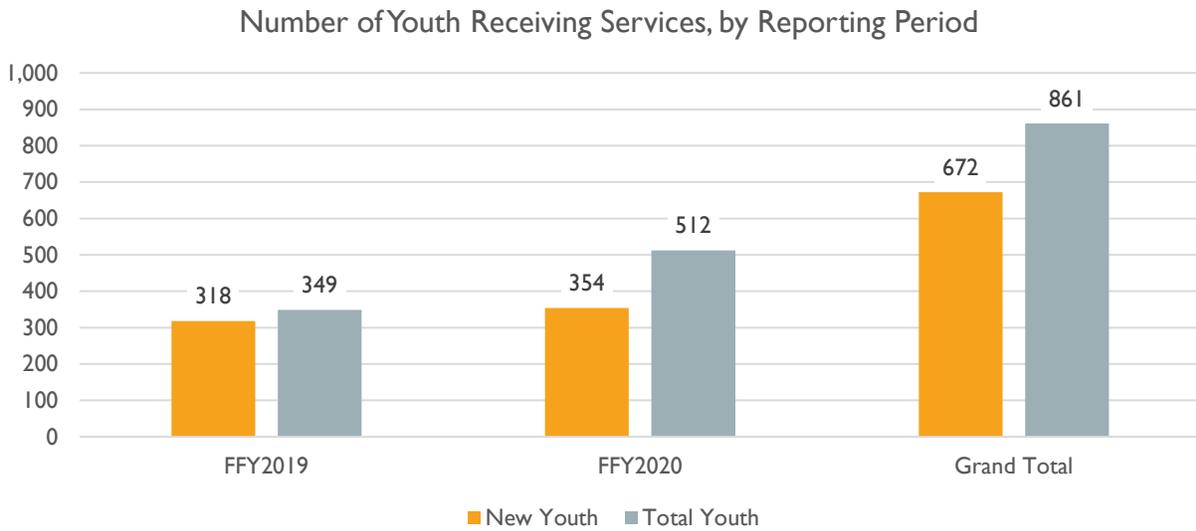
Pilot Program Summaries

Fiscal Agent	Collaborating LDSSs	Major Activities
Arlington Department of Social Services	Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services to kinship caregivers having trouble finding assistance for their unique needs and who may need help navigating the county's service system. • Connecting kinship families and forming a network of kinship caregivers who can support each other and their changing families. • Assistance to kinship families who need a connection to services, such as childcare, education, health care, and financial help, and are seeking support from professionals or peers. • Seminars, trainings, and workshops focused on kinship families' needs, as well as support groups for these families. • Conducting an evaluation of kinship care engagement to assess, best practices, communication, and information sharing. Results will assist the program in making needed improvements to assist kinship caregivers in all jurisdictions.
Bedford Department of Social Services	Amherst, Appomattox, Bedford, Campbell, Lynchburg, and Nelson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kinship Resource Family Training provided regionally three times yearly using established evidence-based curriculums (Pride, Traditions of Caring, and Foster Parent College) with a focus on the unique needs and concerns of kinship families. The training results in the kinship families' certification as resource parents, provided that they meet the other requirements for licensure. • Facilitation of a support group to provide ongoing support and encouragement to the families participating in the Kinship Resource Family training. • A part-time Regional Kinship Navigator works with kinship families to ensure that they are connected with the resources available to them, including benefits (TANF, SNAP, Medicaid) and services (including a variety of counseling and respite options, educational support, legal support, mental health support, etc.)
Dickenson Department of Social Services	Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, Wise, City of Norton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information and referral to federal and state benefits such as TANF, SNAP, WIC, legal aid, school systems enrollment, and health care including mental health, medical and dental services. • One on one and group education tailored to the needs of the individual family to enhance family functioning and prevent foster care placement. • Assist families in navigating the court system, school system or health care systems, • Targeted case management for those that require intensive assistance to keep the family stabilized within the community. • Presence in the community through social media, flyers, newsletters, radio spots and participation in local community events.
James City County Department of Social Services	James City County, Williamsburg, and York-Poquoson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A part-time Kinship Navigator helps ensure kinship caregivers and youth are connected with needed resources including federal, state, and local benefits. • Collaboration and coordination with the local Community Action Agency, Williamsburg-James City County Schools, Child Development Resources, Colonial Behavioral Health, Peninsula

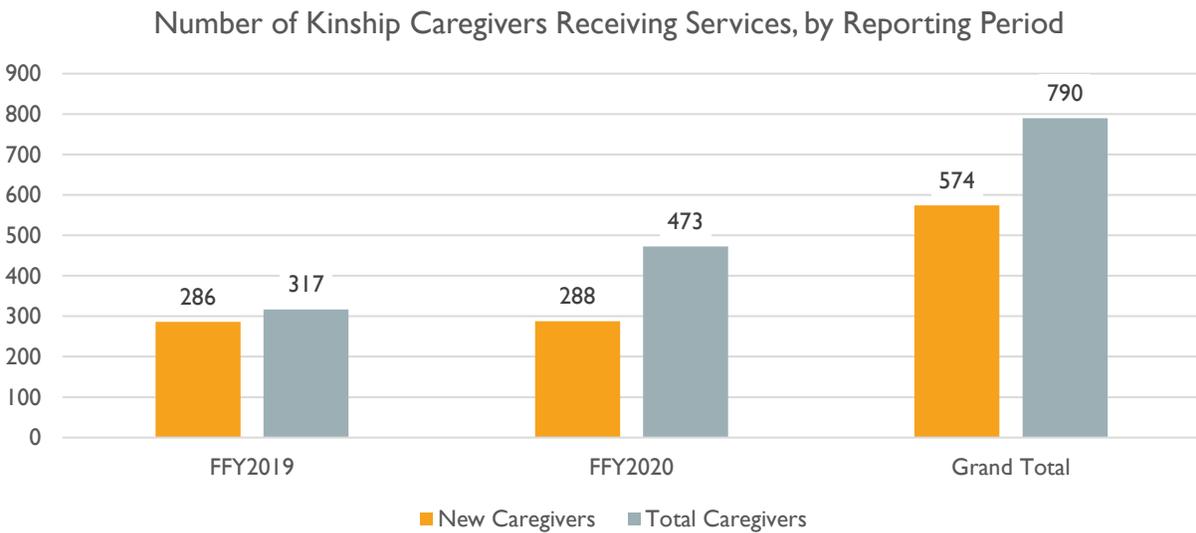
		<p>Agency on Aging, United Way, 9th District Court Services Unit and other private and public agencies to support kinship caregivers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for local community partners on the barriers faced by kinship caregivers and youth. • Linking kinship caregivers and youth to a wide array of services and supports to ensure stability and safety within the home. • Developing an information and referral system to assist kinship caregivers and youth. Developing information packets and referral database to assist in outreach to kinship caregivers and youth. • Establishing a Regional Kinship Council for activities such as community trainings, establishing a newsletter and providing web-based information to Kinship families in the community.
Smyth Department of Social Services	Bland, Bristol, Carroll, Floyd, Galax, Giles, Grayson, Montgomery, Pulaski, Radford, Smyth, Washington, and Wythe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance, information, referral, and face-to-face case management services tailored to each family's unique circumstances. • Collaboration and coordination with local community partners including Legal Aid, public schools, health department, private counseling services, faith-based entities, non-profits, court, community services boards, parent education programs, and child abuse prevention coalitions. • Linking kinship caregivers to a wide array of services and supports to ensure stability and safety within the home. • Establishing a network of support for kinship caregivers and youth.
Virginia Beach Department of Social Services	Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face meetings with kinship caregivers to assess family strengths and challenges. • Assist with the delivery of information, education, resources, and referrals. • Provide short-term case management. • Connect families to mental health support and area food banks and pantries. • Assist with school enrollment as needed. • Assist with family partnership meetings. • Connect kinship families to Relatives Raising Children support groups. • Provide training on kinship care and the navigator program to other professionals and community providers.

Kinship Navigator FFY19 & FFY20 Data

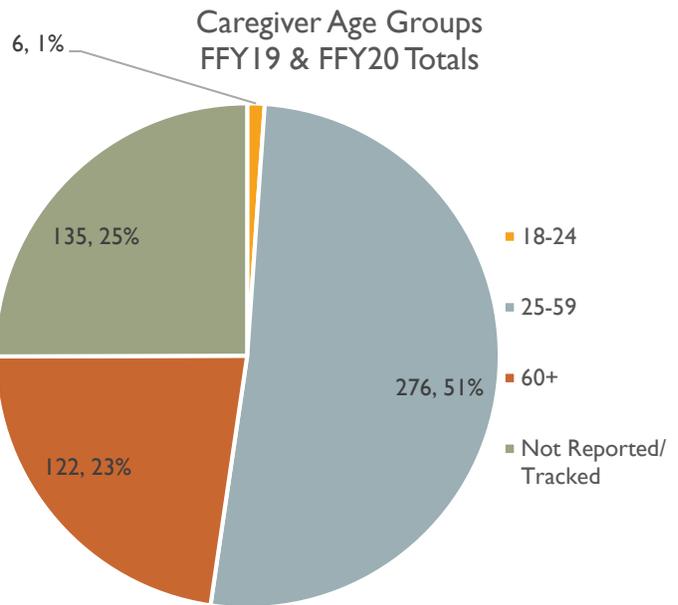
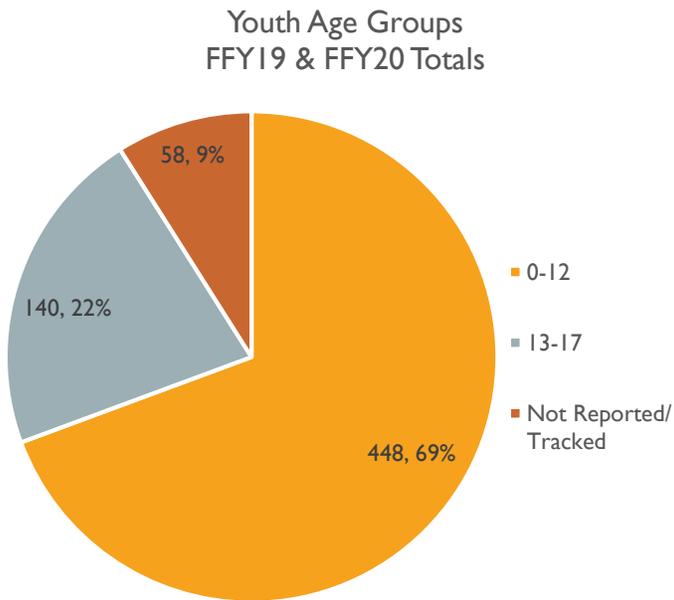
Annual totals of new youth and total youth receiving services, and grand total for period (FFY19 & FFY20)



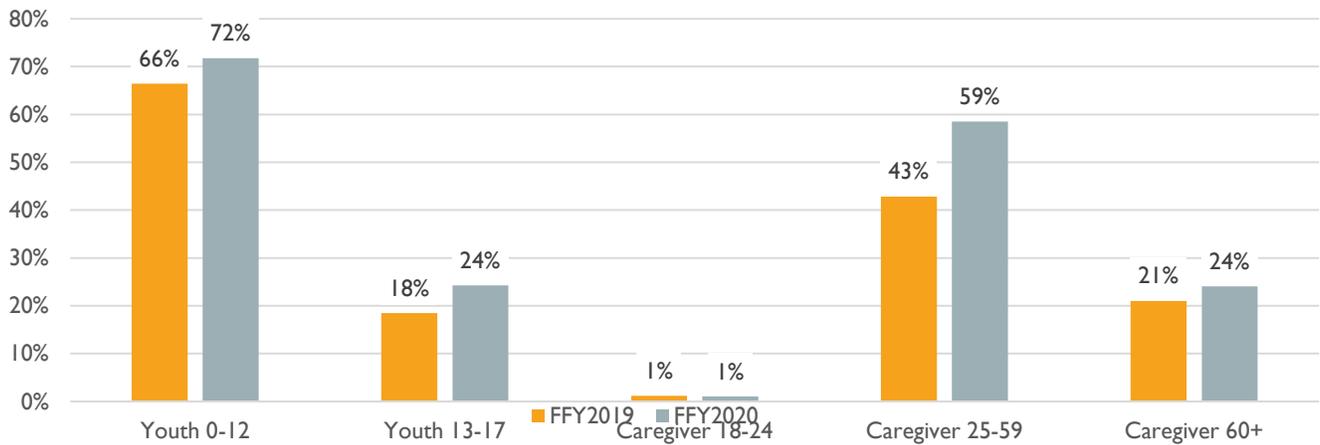
Annual totals of new caregivers and total caregivers receiving services, and grand total for period (FFY19 & FFY20)



Youth and Caregiver Age Groups

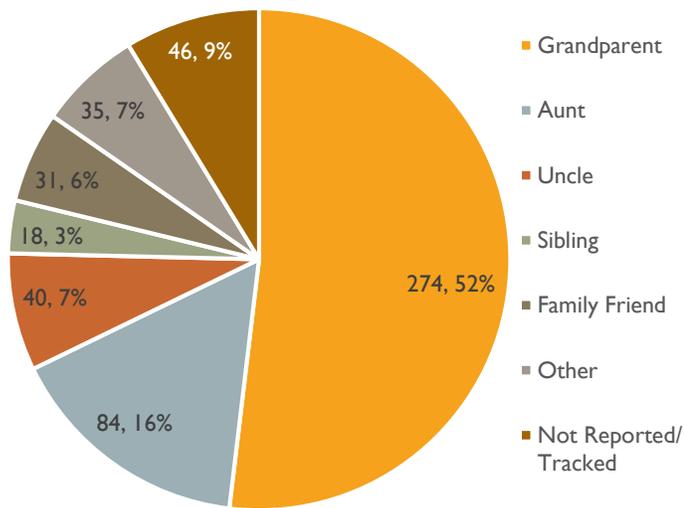


Client Age Groups, by FFY of Program

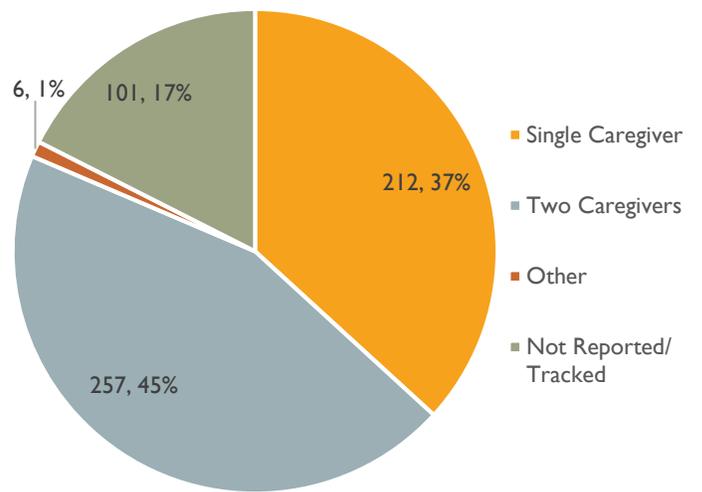


Household Type and Caregiver Relationship to Youth

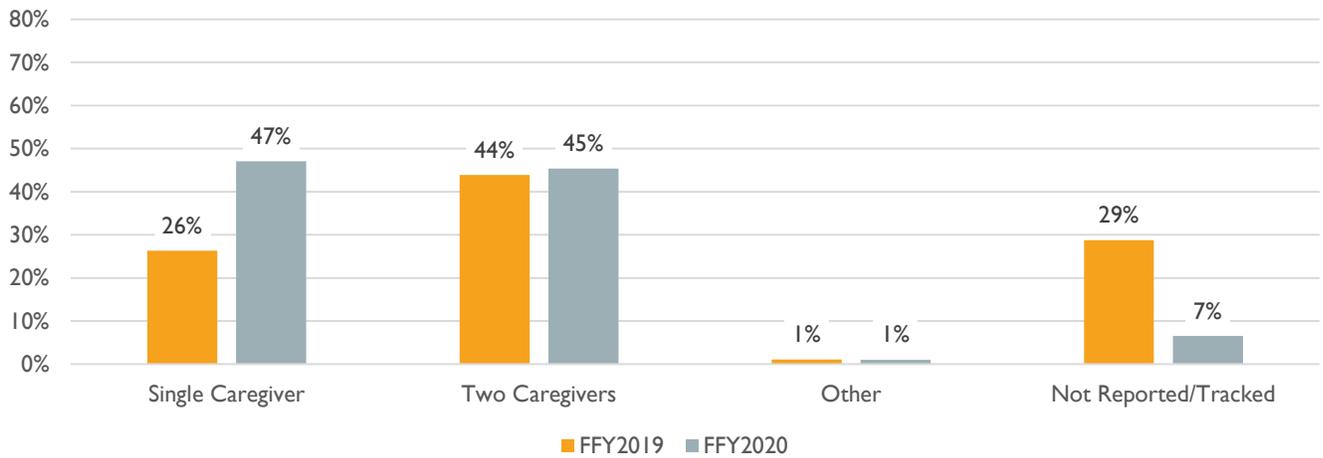
Caregiver Relationship to Youth
FFY19 & FFY20 Totals



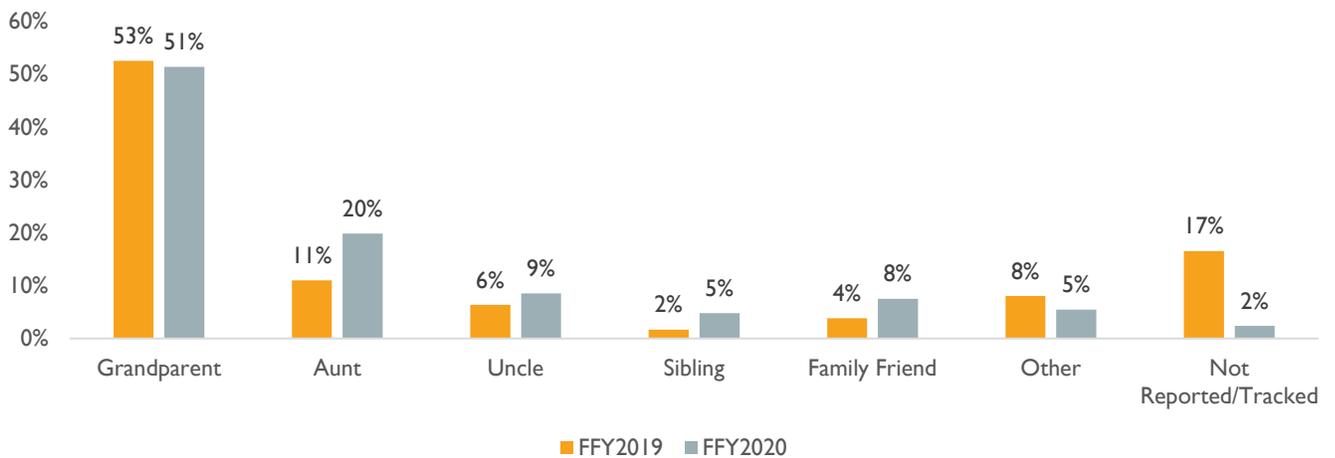
Household Type
FFY19 & FFY20 Totals



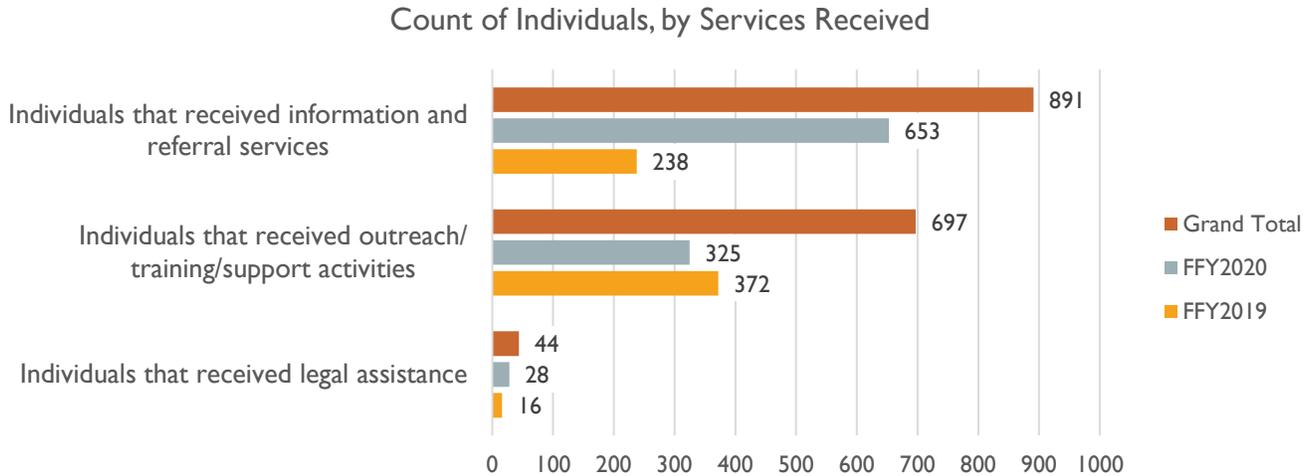
Household Type, by FFY of Program



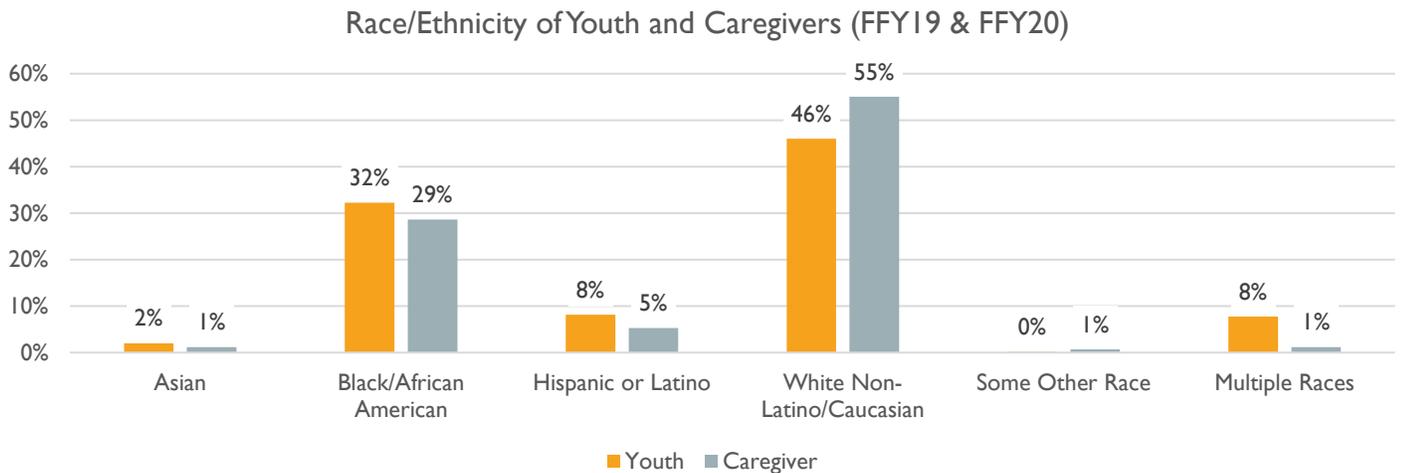
Caregiver Relationship to Youth, by FFY of Program



Number of Individuals Receiving Services by FFY, and grand total for period (FFY19 & FFY20)



Race/Ethnicity of Youth and Caregivers, grand total for period (FFY19 & FFY20)



Note: Racial categories of 'American Indian/Alaska Native' and 'Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander' had zero children and caregivers reported for the period.

Gender Identity of Youth and Caregivers, grand total for period (FFY19 & FFY20)

