

Q&A for Relatives Considering Fostering a Family Member

When children are in the custody of the Office of Children's Services (OCS) and out-of-home placement is needed to keep the child safe, OCS will make diligent efforts to identify, evaluate and consider relatives, family friends and those culturally tied to the family as the primary placement option.

Q: Do relatives have to be licensed?

A: No. Relatives do not need to be licensed foster care providers. Relative caregivers have a right to apply for licensure as an OCS foster home, but OCS policy does allow for relatives to be unlicensed caregivers. Relative caregivers must decide if they will apply for licensure or not. If a relative chooses to submit a licensing application, they will work with licensing staff to determine if they can be licensed; this is not the decision of the placing worker. For the purpose of foster care licensing, "relative" means an individual who is related to another by blood, adoption, marriage, or tribal custom.

Q: Do relatives undergo the same assessment process as licensed foster homes?

A: No. Licensed foster homes must comply with the licensing process as outlined in 7 AAC 50. This includes fingerprint-based background checks for all household members over age 16, reference checks, and a home inspection called the standard by standard. In a licensed foster home, if the Background Check Unit identifies a barring condition related to their background check, the home may not be licensed unless a background variance is approved by the department.

Unlicensed relative homes must comply with the process outlined in OCS policy 3.5.1 and 3.5.2. This includes fingerprint-based background checks for all household members over age 16 and a relative home assessment. OCS must be able to document that the child will have their needs met and will be safe in the home. In an unlicensed relative home, if the Background Check Unit identifies a barring condition related to their background check, OCS may still place in the home if they identify that the child's needs will be met and the child will be safe. An unlicensed relative with a barring condition does not need to seek a background variance unless the child's goal changes to adoption or guardianship and the relative would like to become the adoptive parent or the long-term legal guardian after OCS closes its case.

Q: Do foster parents receive financial support or payment?

A: Yes. Licensed foster care providers do receive a monthly foster care stipend. The amount of this payment varies by the community they reside in and the age and needs of the child. The placing worker or OCS licensing staff can provide you with specific rate information for the community in which you reside.

Unlicensed relatives do **NOT** receive a foster care payment. However, a caretaker relative that is within the fifth degree of kinship to an eligible dependent child can receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Family (TANF) cash assistance through either the State of Alaska's Division of Public Assistance or an approved Native Family Assistance Provider (NFAP):

1. Division of Public Assistance (DPA) Support - A relative caregiver within the fifth degree of kinship, may apply for a child only (Adult Not Included) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grant through the Division of Public Assistance (DPA) or tribal partners who offer this program.

- a. If a child is eligible and if the family is not already receiving TANF, the relative caregiver can receive assistance. The current benefit amount for the first child is \$452 per month, and increases by \$102 per month for each additional eligible child.
 - b. OCS does not determine eligibility for this program, relative caregivers must contact DPA. Local offices can be located on the DPA website: <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dpa/Pages/features/org/dpado.aspx>; contact information for NFAP's can be found here (pages 7 through 14): <http://dpaweb.hss.state.ak.us/main/manual/nfap/NFAPguide>.
2. OCS Support – The Office of Children’s Services has authority to provide assistance and payment of specific costs related to caring for relative children. Some examples include: childcare due to employment of foster parent, initial clothing, food and dry goods, etc. The Protective Service Specialist or assigned worker is responsible for initiating these payments through the “Request For Funds” process. Please talk to the assigned worker for more information about these options.
 3. Other – Some tribal social service programs offer additional short-term or one-time reimbursement to families. Please check with the child’s tribe to find out if this is an option.

Q: What kind of emotional support and training do foster parents receive?

A: Foster parents are critical to the safety and well-being of children in the custody of OCS. Whether you are a relative or non-relative, being a foster parent can be a very difficult job. Support services and training are available to both licensed and unlicensed foster care providers. Here are some of the ways you can learn more about your role or get support:

1. OCS Protective Service Specialist (PSS) or assigned worker will be meeting with the child every month, and some of those times they will meet in your home. This is a great time to talk with them about the child and how things are going in your home. There are also court hearings, team decision meetings, and administrative review meetings scheduled regularly where you can gather information. You may also contact your worker by phone or e-mail when needed. The PSS is a resource for you and can refer you to other services as needed.
2. If you are a licensed foster parent in Alaska, you are assigned a Community Care Licensing Specialist to assist you with the foster care licensing process. They may also be a resource for you and can refer you to other services as needed.
3. The Alaska Center for Resource Families (ACRF) is an OCS grantee that provides training and support services to resource families. The ACRF provides trainings and learning opportunities in a variety of ways to licensed and unlicensed foster parents with OCS. They can be contacted at 1-866-478-7307, or you may visit their website at www.acrf.org.
4. Other – There are many people involved with the child placed in your home who may also be able to provide support and training. Some of these people may include medical personnel, tribal social services staff, the Guardian ad litem, school staff, or counselors. Many of the support services are listed in the Resource Family Handbook.

Do you have other questions about the differences in licensed foster homes and unlicensed relative caregivers? Please contact KariLee Pietz at 907-465-2145 or karilee.pietz@alaska.gov.