

Grant Approval Memo



Grantee: Kin Support Program HAA Yaitxu Saiani
Request Amount: \$150,000.00
Project Title: Building the Evidence Base for a Culturally-Grounded Kinship Navigator Model
Grant Term: 10/1/2026 to 9/30/2027
Trust Staff: Tina Voelker-Ross

Staff Analysis:

- What does this project do?
Trust funds will support the first year of a formal program evaluation (contracts) for the Kin Support Program – Haa Yátx’u Sáani, as well as assist in sustaining core program operations (personnel) during the evaluation period. This is the first step in pursuit of becoming a *culturally based kinship support model*. Trust funds will pay for contracted evaluation work to document and strengthen the program model and for continued delivery of essential services to families, including navigation support, legal guidance, caregiver education, and cultural activities. This investment allows the program to continue serving kinship families while building the evidence needed to pursue long-term funding and improve the quality of services provided.
- Who is receiving the funds?
Kin Support Program – Haa Yátx’u Sáani is a non-profit organization that was founded in 2023 and established in 2024 to help “families build and maintain healthy intergenerational relationships that keep children and youth safe, stable, and out of the system.” It is in Juneau, Alaska, and serves Southeast Alaska kin families outside the foster care system. This culturally based program is Indigenous-led, grounded in Tlingit and Haida cultural practices, and provides voluntary, family-directed services including case management, in-house legal representation for kinship caregivers, independent legal representation for parents, caregiver education, and cultural activities. The program has established strong partnerships with tribal organizations, health systems, schools, courts, and community agencies throughout the region.
- Why is staff recommending this project?
Staff recommend this project because it directly supports Trust beneficiaries and strengthens an Indigenous, community-led prevention model that keeps children safely with family and out of the formal foster care system. Every participating kinship family includes at least one Trust beneficiary—caregivers experiencing mental illness, parents struggling with substance use disorders or untreated mental health conditions, and children facing trauma-related mental health needs or developmental challenges. The program has demonstrated exceptional early outcomes, with **99 percent** of families avoiding foster care involvement and strong community support across Southeast Alaska. Trust investment will help build the evidence needed to unlock future federal funding and sustain a culturally grounded model that stabilizes families, reduces trauma, and increases long-term well-being for beneficiaries across generations.
- Will this be a multi-year project?
This proposal is for a single-year grant project. Any future funding would require a new application and Board approval.

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Trust Five Year Funding History

<u>Fiscal Year</u>	<u>Project Title</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>Final Expended</u>
2026	Southeast Alaska Kin Support Pilot	\$50,000	Active	Grant ends 9/30/2026

<u>Comp Plan - Area of Focus</u>	<u>Strategic Priority Area</u>
Area of Focus 1: Early Childhood & Youth	Priority 1: Prevention & Early Intervention

Project Description (from grant application)

The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority's prior investment in the Kin Support Program – Haa Yatxu Saani has built something worth scaling. With help from the Trust's 2025-26 Partnership Grant, we are on the cusp of serving our 100th kin family, with 99% of those families avoiding state foster care involvement. We secured a national Exemplary Practice designation for our balanced legal representation model. We have also built referral relationships with every major child- and family-serving system in the Southeast region. We are currently the only culturally-based kinship navigator program in Alaska, and the only culturally-based program in the nation with in-house legal supports.

The Trust has also invested in our long-term sustainability. The attached 2026 Stellar Group Sustainability Planning Report, funded through the Trust's technical assistance, identifies Title IV-E reimbursement under the federal Family First Prevention Services Act as a meaningful long-term funding pathway. Access to that consistent operational funding stream could be through multiple doors, but all require rigorous, independent program evaluation. The strongest evaluation standard would be obtaining a Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse rating, which is our goal. Even without a Clearinghouse rating, building the evidence base for our model could open up federal funding for Tribally-sponsored prevention services. From the perspective of the families we serve, program evaluation also would improve the quality of our model and services, producing results that they could see immediately, on a daily basis.

This proposal asks the Trust to fund the next step in the plan it helped us design: formal program evaluation. The evaluation would take place in multiple phases, lasting a total of 3-5 years. This project would be the initial evidence-building phase of the evaluation. Over the past year, we have assembled a research team that is ready to begin work as soon as funding is secured.

The project budget has two components. The first is \$100,000 for contractual services from our research team consisting of Dr. Jessica Saniguq Ullrich (Iñupiaq, Washington State University) and Dr. Krista Thomas (Chapin Hall, a nonprofit research institute).

Dr. Ullrich has worked alongside our program from the beginning, including a one-year fellowship developing an Intergenerational Wellness Framework, adapted from her published Indigenous Connectedness Framework. The draft framework has helped us develop our program model, and will help us refine family-centered, culturally-relevant program outcomes for our families as we grow.

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Dr. Ullrich and Program Co-Director Vanessa George co-hosted focus groups with Southeast families in 2024 to gain an understanding of what intergenerational wellness means in this particular region, especially for Indigenous families, and they are now preparing to publish an article with the findings from that research. Dr. Ullrich will lead the qualitative work for the program evaluation. Dr. Ullrich is based in Anchorage.

Dr. Thomas, formerly with the federal Administration for Children and Families, is a national authority on kinship navigator program evaluation and leads a team of policy researchers at Chapin Hall. Chapin Hall has worked with our staff to develop a three-part evidence-building plan and has been engaged in fundraising alongside our program. Our staff has already completed several of the initial steps in the plan, and will be ready on day one of the project to begin collaboration with the research team.

Ultimately, the evidence-building project will integrate Indigenous, qualitative measures of intergenerational wellness and Western, quantitative measures aligned with Clearinghouse standards. The Trust's contribution would help launch this first year of work and serve as the catalyst for the foundation funding (for the entire multi-year evaluation) that we are pursuing concurrently through several national foundations, the Alaska Rural Health Transformation Project, Rasmuson Foundation, Native Americans in Philanthropy, and the Administration for Children and Families.

The second budget component would sustain our core program operations at approximately the FY26 service level — targeting fifty kinship families, our balanced legal representation services, Positive Indigenous Parenting classes, intergenerational cultural activities, and the daily referral and case management work that kin families across Southeast seek. This investment of \$50,000 would ensure that the program can continue without cuts during the evidence-building period, and support the staff time needed to partner with the research team.

If this evaluation succeeds, the Kin Support Program would become the first culturally-based kinship navigator model in the federal Clearinghouse evidence base. It would add to the body of evidence-based prevention services in Alaska and promote the viability of Alaska proposing a IV-E Family First Prevention Plan to expand overall funding of prevention in Alaska. It would also support other efforts statewide to transform child welfare by holding up traditional cultural practices of child and family wellbeing that have sustained Alaskan families for thousands of years. What follows describes the problem we exist to address, the program we have built, and what the Trust's continued investment would accomplish.

THE PROBLEM WE ADDRESS

Across Southeast Alaska, roughly one in twenty children is being raised by a relative other than a parent. The vast majority of these children — about 90 percent statewide — live in families who formed independently of OCS and the state foster care system. For every one Alaska child raised by kin inside the foster care system, there are eleven being raised by kin outside it. Among American Indian and Alaska Native children, the rate of grandparent-led caregiving is the highest of any racial or ethnic group in the country and continues to rise. Grandmothers, aunties, uncles, adult siblings, and clan relatives step in because a parent has died, is incarcerated, is in active addiction, is struggling with untreated mental illness, or is otherwise unable to safely care for their child. These caregivers receive no stipend, no caseworker, no Medicaid, no foster care training, and no court-appointed counsel.

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Many are unaware what benefits or legal protections might be available to their family, or where to begin looking.

In Southeast Alaska, the legal vulnerability of these families is acute. According to a recent Pew study, only three percent of children in informal kinship care in Alaska are protected by any kind of custody, guardianship, or adoption order. The other 97 percent are in legal limbo — the caregiver cannot consent to their mental health care, cannot enroll the child in school without difficulty, cannot access Social Security benefits, and have no guarantee of safety if a parent suddenly appears demanding their child be returned. Hiring a private attorney for a guardianship or adoption typically costs upwards of \$10,000, and for low-income families, Alaska Legal Services has extremely limited capacity to meet family law demands.

While modern challenges and historical trauma make kinship caregiving especially hard in current times, longstanding kinship care traditions in the region provide an invaluable prevention model. Across Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures, raising children within an extended family network is a foundational practice — grandparents, aunts, uncles, and clan relatives play specific roles in nurturing a child's development and connection to family, clan, land, and spirit. Extended families across the region continue to step in when needed but are doing so with depleted resources, without legal protection, and largely without a support network.

WHAT WE DO

The Kin Support Program – Haa Yátx'u Sáani (Lingít for "our precious children") offers culturally-based kinship navigation to Southeast families. We were founded in October 2023 and opened our doors to families in August 2024. Our staff and board are predominantly of Tlingit or Haida heritage. Program staff includes three Family Specialists, an in-house Kin Attorney, an Administrative Program Coordinator, a part-time Finance Specialist, and a contracted Parent Attorney. One of our Family Specialists and our Kin Attorney double as Co-Directors.

We provide voluntary, family-directed services to relatives raising children outside the OCS foster care system (aka informal kin caregivers). Our services include application-free intake, hotline information and referrals, ongoing case management, in-house legal representation through our Kin Attorney, and independent legal representation for parents through a contracted Parent Attorney. Our caregiver education component centers around NICWA's Positive Indigenous Parenting curriculum adapted for Southeast Alaska, intergenerational cultural activities including devil's club harvesting and salve-making, and cultural arts activities. We connect families to Tribal TANF, SEARHC and Tribal health resources, state benefits, school-based services, behavioral health supports, housing and food assistance, and tangible items like beds and household goods.

Two elements of our work set this program apart from any other kinship navigator in the country. First, through our balanced legal representation model, we provide independent legal representation for both kinship caregivers and parents. Most kinship navigator programs offer caregivers help filing for guardianship or adoption — a service that, when offered alone, can contribute to "Hidden Foster Care," the practice through which a parent is informally pressured to give up their child without due process. In our Program, both sides of a family have counsel. This encourages a sense of equity and fairness in the family, and opens up greater opportunity for negotiated agreements. Most cases resolve without adversarial litigation, which benefits both the adults and the children who are attuned to adult

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conflict. Relative caregivers consistently tell us they are relieved that the parent can get their own lawyer, because they want the process to be fair and they want the parents to have someone trustworthy in their corner. The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network recognized this approach as an Exemplary Legal Practice in Spring 2026. As far as we are aware, no other kinship navigator program in the country offers this combination.

We also weave culture into our everyday practice whenever practical. Our Families Specialists are all Indigenous and well-versed in the tribal and cultural resources available in our communities, including the ins and outs of tribal health systems. Family Specialists also share knowledge of other kinds of cultural resources for non-tribal citizens in our communities. Case management is focused not just on expanding resources, but connecting to resources that are culturally relevant to the family. Our caregiver education also centers cultural and cultural values. Internally, our staff are permitted to use up to ten paid hours per pay period to attend significant community cultural events — Ku.éex', clan conferences, culture camps, and Celebration. This helps our staff remain embedded in the community, fosters community trust, and also combats staff burnout.

BENEFICIARY GROUPS AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Every family we serve contains a Trust beneficiary — whether the kinship caregiver themselves is experiencing severe anxiety or depression as a result of taking on full-time caregiving in midlife or later, whether a biological parent is unable to parent due to addiction or untreated mental illness, or whether a child is at risk of foster care entry. Approximately 90 percent of the families we serve are Alaska Native. About half of caregivers are elders, and just under half live in rural Southeast.

Our work has community support across the region. We have formal Memorandums of Understanding with AWARE (domestic violence shelter and advocacy services), SEARHC, Bartlett Regional Hospital, and the Childhood Collective. We have resolutions of support from Douglas Indian Association, Sitka Tribe of Alaska, Chilkoot Indian Association, and the Tlingit & Haida Juneau Community Council. We receive referrals from the Office of Children's Services Initial Assessment Units in Southeast (and support from OCS leadership), Tlingit & Haida Tribal Court, Sitka Tribal Court, the Juneau School District, JAMHI, REACH, NAMI, SAIL, Spruce Root, the Shéiyi Xaat Hít Youth Shelter, and Tlingit & Haida Wayfinders. We are members of the Alaska Impact Alliance, the Alaska Family Resource Center Network, the National Coalition to End Hidden Foster Care, and the Barton Child Law & Policy Center's Pre-Petition Advocacy Cohort.

The state's only other kinship navigator program is operated by Volunteers of America Alaska and serves families statewide from its Anchorage base. We have a solid working relationship with VOA, share resources, and co-present at statewide events. VOA offers telehealth mental health services to our clients, and we offer legal workshops to theirs. There is mutual appreciation for us to be able to provide a culturally-based regional service that is distinct from VOA services, and we both make efforts to complement and not duplicate services.

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Grantee Proposed Evaluation Measures (from grant application)

How much did we do?

For operations, we will continue to track the number of kinship families served (target: 50 families with an estimated 100 children); the number of biological parents engaged with our Parent Attorney; the number of hotline calls; the number of case management cases; the number of intergenerational activities held and total participants; the number of Positive Indigenous Parenting sessions and participants; the number of court orders and other legal documents secured; and the number of community education events and trainings provided to partner agencies.

For the evaluation, we will track quarterly progress with our Chapin Hall evidence-building project plan, ensuring that we are completing deliverables on time.

How well did we do it?

For operations, we will collect satisfaction surveys from program participants assessing their comfort with staff, the extent to which they felt seen and heard, how effectively the program met their identified needs, and their self-assessment of how program services affected their personal and family wellness. The Positive Indigenous Parenting curriculum has its own client feedback instrument required for fidelity to the model.

The evaluation we will be launching is itself the most ambitious "how well" measurement we could undertake. Phase 1 (months 1-6) will produce a refined logic model, theory of change visual, and a literature-grounded summary report on observed strengths and opportunities for improvement. It will also include a review of our program manual to ensure there is a defined set of core program components, and add a fidelity monitoring methodology, and a business process map. Phase 2 (months 7-12) will produce an evaluability assessment with findings and recommendations, a culturally responsive evaluation design aligned with Title IV-E Prevention Clearinghouse standards, and a data collection and storage plan for the subsequent outcome evaluation.

Is anyone better off?

We will track three measures of family-level change. First, the percentage of children in our families who remain independent of the state foster care and juvenile justice systems during the grant period. To date, this figure is 99%, and the single family that did come into contact with OCS was successful in keeping the child with their caregiver, in part because of the services available through our program. Second, we will track the percentage of biological parents struggling with addiction or untreated mental illness who, while their children are safe with relatives, are able to engage with treatment and recovery resources. Third, we will track the percentage of families who report increased family connection, decreased stress, and stronger cultural connection through participation in Positive Indigenous Parenting classes and intergenerational activities. We will collect direct participant statements as part of our satisfaction survey process.

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We can offer a recent example. A grandmother in our program brought her grandchild to our button vest making class in April, to make the grandchild a vest for Celebration. She was nervous about her lack of skills and being able to help her grandchild, but quickly settled in with the other grandparents, kids, staff, and instructor. By the end, she told us: "I've never done anything like this before and your guidance gave me the courage to start [my grandchild's] vest." Our outcome measures will continue to track whether families reached through our program remain stable, whether children stay safely with relatives, whether parents are supported in recovery, and whether intergenerational cultural connection deepens.

Proposed Project Performance Measures (developed by the Trust)

How much did you do?

- a. Number (#) of unduplicated Trust beneficiaries served during the reporting period, broken down by primary Trust beneficiary category.
- b. Number (#) of unduplicated secondary (family members or caregivers) Trust beneficiaries served during the reporting period.
- c. Number (#) of kin family units served during the reporting period by relative type (grandparent, aunt/uncle, adult sibling, etc.).
- d. Number (#) of kin families who worked with a Family Specialist on a care plan.
- e. Number (#) of children who are in the care of the kin family.
- f. Number (#) of parents contacted by the program after kin caregivers initiate services.
- g. Number (#) of services provided for the families during the reporting period, by type (hotline calls, case management, Positive Indigenous Parenting classes, Intergenerational Activities, groups, kin legal services, parent legal services).
- h. Number (#) of intergenerational activities held during the reporting period. For each activity or event, please indicate the number (#) of participants.
- i. Number (#) of community partners outreached. Be sure to provide a list of partners.

How well did you do it?

- a. Provide a brief narrative describing the timeline, activities, successes, challenges, and any lessons learned during the project. Be sure to describe the services that were offered for the caregiver and children (as well as their family members) during the reporting period.
- b. Provide a narrative detailing the contracted evaluation services from the research team of Dr. Ullrich and Dr. Thomas. The narrative should include information related to the timeline and activities of the evaluation, as well as an electronic copy of the evaluation itself.
- c. Number (#) and percentage (%) of participant relatives/guardians who were satisfied with the services received while participating in the project.
- d. Number (#) and percentage (%) of participant relatives/guardians who felt services were delivered in a respectful manner.

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Is anyone better off?

- a. Number (#) and percentage (%) of relatives/guardians reporting an increase in their family's quality of life as a result of participating in the project.
- b. Number (#) and percentage (%) of children in kin households served who remain independent of the State foster care and juvenile justice systems.
- c. Two statements from participant relatives describing (in their own words) how participation in the project has impacted their or their family's life.

Sustainability (from grant application)

This proposal is itself a sustainability investment. The evaluation is the gateway to long-term federal funding under the Family First Prevention Services Act, and potentially other funding streams as well.

The evidence-building phase of our evaluation will take approximately one year, and Trust funding would carry this phase to completion. The phase has standalone value beyond what follows it. By the end of the year, our program will have refined its processes, documented its model with the rigor a formal evaluation requires, and prepared the foundation for the full outcome evaluation that follows.

We are ready to begin immediately. Our staff has already drafted a program logic model, a theory of change, and a program manual. We have built a forms library, and by late May 2026, we will complete training on our new custom-designed Client Data Management system from Handel IT. We have nearly 100 client families tracked through our existing data systems and will track future families more efficiently and systematically through the CDM. These steps have positioned us to complete the evidence-building phase within a year of grant start.

A full program evaluation will take an additional two to four years beyond this evidence-building phase. Chapin Hall has been engaged in fundraising alongside our staff, and we are confident in our ability to raise the funds the full evaluation will require. The William T. Grant Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the National Institutes of Health all maintain funding streams specifically for Indigenous wellbeing research. This summer, the federal Administration for Children and Families will publish two Notices of Funding Opportunity, one for Kinship Navigator Program operations and one for Kinship Navigator evaluation. We will pursue these opportunities with the support of our community partners.

Until federal funding becomes available, we are operating through diversified foundation and contract funding, with no single funder representing more than approximately 22 percent of our total budget.

Who We Serve (from grant application)

Our project focuses on prevention and early intervention services for individuals at risk of becoming beneficiaries. In addition, in every kin family we serve, there is at least one family member experiencing mental illness. Over half the families we serve formed in the wake of parental substance abuse.

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Across our caregivers, we regularly see grandparents and other relatives who experience clinically significant anxiety, depression, and grief as a result of the family circumstances that brought a young relative into their care. These caregivers are often raising grandchildren after their adult children have died from overdose or suicide. The mental health burden of grief plus full-time parenting in midlife or later is heavy, and it is often invisible. Many caregivers struggle to navigate healthy boundaries with parents, wanting to maintain important family bonds while also needing to stay safe and avoid enabling.

Among the parents we serve, the dominant Trust beneficiary categories are substance use disorder and untreated mental illness — frequently both. Southeast Alaska has been disproportionately affected by the opioid crisis, in part because of historical prescribing practices in the region. Our Parent Attorney, Jessie Archibald, works with parents who are navigating recovery, OCS investigations, and the legal complexity of their children's living arrangements. The path to reunification, when possible, is often slow and bumpy. Our program is designed to encourage and hold space for that path.

Among the children we serve, the dominant beneficiary risks are mental illness, post-traumatic stress, and developmental delays. Many of our children have witnessed parental substance use and family violence. Some experienced their mother's substance use and/or victimization in utero. Their trauma is real, even when undiagnosed.

For every family we serve, we have dual aims of increasing family wellness and keeping families out of the state foster care system. By intervening before formal child welfare involvement, foster care entry, and the trauma of removal — we can support family integrity, keeping kids with family while supporting parents needing time and help to find recovery.

Estimated Numbers of Beneficiaries Served Experiencing (from grant application)

Mental Illness:	50
Developmental Disabilities:	5
Substance Abuse	30
Secondary Beneficiaries (family members or caregivers providing support to primary beneficiaries):	125

Project Budget (from grant application)

Personnel Services Costs	\$50,000.00
Personnel Services Costs (Other Sources)	\$387,099.00
Personnel Services Narrative	2 FTE Family Specialists (\$84,747 each), 1 FTE Co-Director/Family Specialist (\$84,747), 1 FTE Co-Director/Kin Attorney (\$84,747); Personnel costs also include 15% indirect costs that support 1 FTE Administrative Program Coordinator (\$84,747) and 1 PT Finance Assistant (\$13,364)
Travel Costs	\$0.00

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Travel Costs (Other Sources)	\$5,400.00
Travel Costs Narrative	Rural Southeast Alaska outreach travel and Positive Indigenous Parenting sessions for 2 Family Specialists; Opioid Settlement In-Person Grantee Meeting

Other Costs	\$100,000.00
Other Costs (Other Sources)	\$219,538.00
Other Costs Narrative	Contracts with Dr. Jessica Sanigaq Ullrich (Washington State University Institute for Research and Education to Advance Community Health) and Chapin Hall (team led by Dr. Krista Thomas) for joint Formal Program Evaluation. Other Program operational costs include contracts for Parent Legal Advisor, IT Services, CPA & Payroll Services, Communications, Software, WC & Cyber Insurance and expenses for the Positive Indigenous Parent/Cultural Education Program.

Other Funding Sources (from grant application)

Alaska Opioid Settlement Grant (Secured year 3 of 3 year grant)	\$107,142.00
Admin. for Children and Families CDS (Secured)	\$100,000.00
Juneau Community Foundation (Secured)	\$27,000.00
May & Stanley Smith Charitable Trust (Pending)	\$35,000.00
Casey Family Programs (Secured for 2026)	\$18,750.00
Casey Family Programs (Pending for 2027)	\$56,000.00
State of Alaska Family Support (Secured)	\$68,750.00
Chicago Beyond (Secured)	\$129,254.00
Carryforward unrestricted funds from private donations	\$70,141.00
Total Leveraged Funds	\$612,037