

CASE STUDY

**Diagnosing Barriers to Kinship Care
with Rapid Qualitative Research**



A SPARK
Consulting

Diagnosing barriers to kinship care with rapid qualitative research

SERVICE: PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

■ WHO WE ARE

A Spark Consulting is a BIPOC-led, strategic consultancy specializing in qualitative research and human-centered design, working with foundations, governments, and mission-driven organizations.

THE STORY

Across the United States, child welfare systems are increasingly shifting toward prioritizing placement of children in foster care with relatives or trusted adults rather than traditional foster homes. Evidence shows that children placed with family members experience stronger emotional stability, maintain cultural connections, and are more likely to achieve long-term permanency. As a result, states and philanthropic funders are investing in programs that strengthen kinship care.

County leaders in California wanted rapid answers to several urgent questions:

- How are youth and families experiencing kinship care and placements?
- Where do county systems enable or hinder kin placements?
- What operational or policy changes could strengthen kin-first practices?

To address these questions, Think of Us, a national organization working to transform the child welfare system, engaged A Spark Consulting to conduct Kinship Sprints across four California counties: Sacramento, San Bernardino, Butte, and Stanislaus.



THE GOAL

To deliver meaningful system insights for each county within three months, allowing leaders to act quickly rather than wait for traditional multi-year research studies, overcoming common barriers such as Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval timelines, complex stakeholder recruitment, and the need to build trust with families, youth, and frontline staff.

WHAT WE DID

We designed and led a three-month Kinship Sprint combining rapid qualitative research, stakeholder engagement, and systems analysis to generate actionable insights for county leaders.

Central to our approach was co-design with county partners. We worked closely with county leadership and staff to shape research questions and develop the “toolkits” used throughout the sprint. These toolkits included interview guides, focus group protocols, workshop facilitation agendas, and recruitment strategies tailored to each county’s context.

The team managed all logistical and operational aspects of the project, including securing IRB approval, coordinating recruitment, venue organization, and scheduling interviews and focus groups across four counties. To ensure equitable participation and recognize the value of lived experience, youth, birth parents, and kin caregivers received a stipend of \$100 as appreciation for their time.



We used our **trauma-informed research approach** to collect the data, recognizing that many participants had experienced family separation, system involvement, or other forms of trauma. Interview and workshop protocols were **designed to create safe, respectful environments** with trained facilitators centering participant agency, and prioritizing dignity, consent, and emotional safety.

Over the course of the sprint, A Spark Consulting conducted extensive qualitative research across the child welfare ecosystem, engaging county leadership and frontline staff, kin caregivers, youth and young adults with lived experience, birth parents, legal professionals such as judges and attorneys, and community-based organizations that support families.

Qualitative analysis then identified patterns emerging across stakeholder groups with system-level themes validated only when they appeared across multiple categories, such as caregivers, youth, and professionals.

The analysis focused on four critical areas of kinship programming:



Kin search and engagement



Kin caregiver supports



Permanency outcomes for youth



Kin placement and licensing processes

In the final stage, insights were synthesized and delivered to county leadership, Think of Us, and philanthropic partners through structured briefings that elevated family voices.



LEARNING AND OUTCOMES

Insights from the research helped counties:

- Identify priority policy and operational reforms
- Improve early kin search and engagement practices
- Strengthen caregiver support and service coordination
- Align staff training with kin-first principles

200+
PARTICIPANTS ENGAGED

The project generated one of the most comprehensive qualitative snapshots of kinship care practices across the participating counties: 200+ participants engaged, representing six key groups across the child welfare ecosystem, and dozens of interviews, focus groups, and workshops conducted.

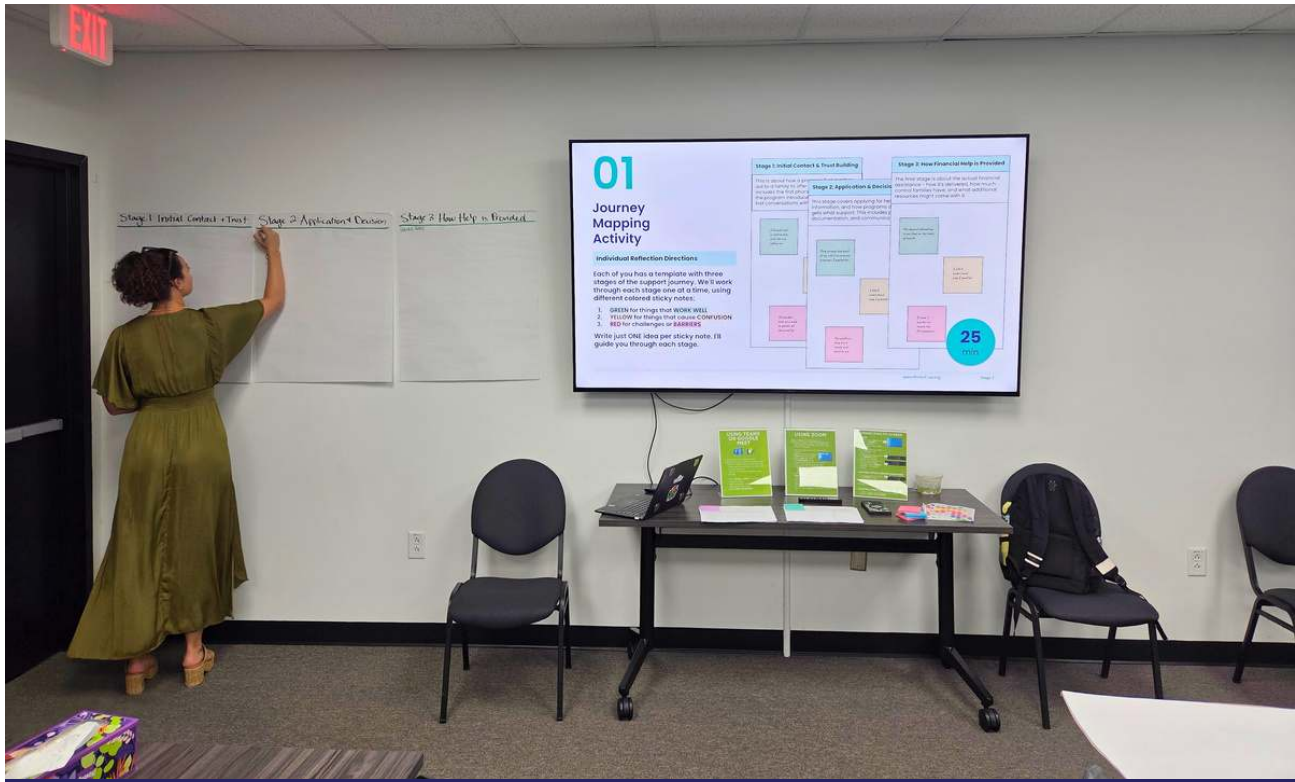
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The sprint identified consistent patterns across counties, such as operational barriers to kin placement, licensing delays impacting placements, financial and service gaps for kin caregivers, and broad consensus on the value of kin placements.



Through the sprint, counties gained actionable insights within three months rather than multi-year research cycles, clarifying opportunities for policy and operational improvement and the ability to request additional funding from policymakers through state, county, or federal routes.

This style of program assessment delivered actionable insights in three months rather than via multi-year research cycles. This reduced the decision-making time and cut assessment costs, enabling counties to secure additional funding and clarify opportunities for improvement without sacrificing depth or analytical rigour.



SPARK A CONVERSATION

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