



BRIGHT SPOT

# STRONG FAMILIES

## How did A Second Chance, Inc. transform kinship care in Allegheny County?

Kiara's story<sup>1</sup> begins with a crisis: A traumatic car accident led to the 11-month-old being taken into the custody of Allegheny County's Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF). Her mother, Pam, had been driving while under the influence with Kiara in the back seat; her father was already in prison. By 6:00 that evening Kiara's story was headlining the news, and she might have been headed for a stranger's foster home. But one phone call to a family member changed everything.

A kinship navigator, employed by [A Second Chance, Inc.](#) (ASCI) and co-located at CYF, reached out to Pam's sister, Debra Taylor. ASCI supports the county by using early and intensive family finding efforts to **identify no fewer than three family supports for each child** and to give birth families a choice in their child's placement whenever possible. Debra and her family had never met Kiara, but they agreed to take her in almost immediately.

With the family's consent, the navigator leapt into action, running background checks and conducting an initial visit to ensure the Taylors' home was safe. "Quick was an understatement," Debra says of the timeline. By 9:30 p.m., Kiara was with Debra's family, where she has lived ever since.



## ASCI BY THE NUMBERS

Since opening its doors in 1994, A Second Chance, Inc. has served:

- **28,000** children
- **30,000** birth parents
- **10,000** kinship caregivers

The agency currently serves **1,800 children every day** in Allegheny and Philadelphia counties.

Its transportation department provides up to 3,000 trips per month for school, visitation, and other appointments.

Through support from its partnership with A Second Chance, Inc., Allegheny County has a **65% kin placement rate**.

Data provided by ASCI, March 20, 2019.

Kiara's story — and those of thousands of other children — have happier endings because of ASCI, which was founded to provide safe, secure, and nurturing environments for children in kinship care. A 25-year partnership between founder, president, and CEO Sharon McDaniel, Ed.D. — a Casey Family Programs trustee — and Marc Cherna, director of Allegheny County's Department of Human Services, has helped the county achieve a **65% kin placement rate for children and youth in foster care**.<sup>2</sup> In addition to serving the Pittsburgh area, ASCI provides similar services in Philadelphia and offers training and consultation to jurisdictions around the country to support all members of the kinship triad — the child, birth family, and caregivers — in determining and achieving their own best outcomes.

## Getting started: Concrete needs and licensing

When Kiara arrived at the Taylors' home, she was sick and traumatized. A toxic amount of Fentanyl dusted her clothing and few belongings, including her pacifier. Debra described her as having “no hair and a bloated stomach.” When Debra placed Kiara in a playpen, she noticed the baby reacted differently than other children likely would at that age. “No crying, no screaming, nothing. I thought, ‘This is not normal,’” Debra says. “Kids cry. Kids want out.”

For the first few weeks, the whole family slept together in the living room. “Couches, chairs ... we all huddled up,” Debra recalls. Every hour or so, Kiara would awaken, pull herself to stand, and peek over the sides of her portable crib. “She just wanted to make sure we were all here.”

The family didn't need any help loving Kiara, but they did need some immediate practical support. The Taylors are an active crew. Debra is a teacher during the day who also tutors students in the evening. Her husband, Paul, works in manufacturing, on a swing shift that changes every seven days. The Taylors have four children, all with active schedules of their own. The couple had long since parted with cribs and strollers to make room for backpacks, bicycles, and band instruments, but ASCI was there to give the family what it needed for Kiara.

When children are placed in kinship homes, the ASCI caseworker has ready **access to concrete supports**, such as diapers and formula. The agency's informal “kinship closet” offers families free access to clothing in all sizes. A financial team works quickly to get families advances on room and board payments, if needed, as well as providing a form letter that paves the way to Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits. If CYF doesn't immediately provide for urgent items, such as bedroom

## LICENSING TOOLS AND RESOURCES

ASCI has developed its own strengths-based licensing process uniquely suited to kinship families:

- The **Kinship Strengths Assessment** helps build capacity while maintaining the view that kin are assets.
- **Standards for Assessing and Recognizing Kinship Strengths** is the agency's licensing curriculum, which is compliant with Title IV-E and informed by the needs of caregivers, caseworkers, and trainers.

For more strategies for licensing kin, see: [How can we prioritize kin caregivers in the home study and licensure process?](#)

furniture, the ASCI caseworker can help arrange for those, too.

ASCI and CYF caseworkers collaborate closely to ensure that kinship families have everything they need to be successful. This **close working partnership**, stemming in part from the longstanding relationship between Dr. McDaniel and Cherna, as well as CYF's commitment to ASCI as its sole provider of kinship care, is critical to making the resources of both agencies stretch further. It is common for the two agencies' caseworkers to coordinate visits to the family's home, to facilitate information sharing and minimize the inevitable intrusions on family life. Regular communication ensures that everyone is kept informed. The CYF caseworker tracks the legal aspects of the family's case, while the ASCI caseworker helps inform CYF and the courts about how the child and family are doing day to day.

Once the family's immediate needs are met, the next order of business is licensing. The county has a compressed deadline of 60 days to get a family licensed, from start to finish. ASCI achieves that ambitious standard 96% of the time — in an average of

46 days — through a **culturally appropriate approach that works to license families in, not rule them out**. Physical limitations of the home, for example, are rarely seen as a reason to exclude a willing family member, and ASCI regularly provides smoke detectors, additional beds, and other needed items to facilitate the licensing process.

Training is another critical aspect of developing kinship caregivers. "We work with families where they are," Dr. McDaniel says. That includes providing training on weekends or evenings, even one-on-one if needed. Recognizing that most kinship caregivers already have years of parenting experience, ASCI refers to its offerings as "caregiver enrichment." This simple change of language has made some caregivers more willing to participate.

It is not unusual for two family members to be licensed simultaneously to support the goal of children never having to go to a stranger's home. Licensing both a primary and secondary kinship resource helps to prevent the need for foster care, even in the event of a caregiver's medical crisis or other emergency.

## Supporting the whole family: Permanency planning and visitation

ASCI knows that children can't wait for permanency. Caseworkers start talking with families about permanency plans within 24 hours of meeting them.

**The first plan is always reunification.** According to Dr. McDaniel, **60% of ASCI children return home within six months.**

Opportunities for **family conferencing** early in the case create an empowering setting for families to have these critical conversations. Families have a say in all aspects of the meeting — from its location in a familiar, community setting, to the meal that ASCI may provide. During the conference, at least five family members come together to share strengths and discuss the issues that brought them together. Once the family has established a plan, follow-up meetings are scheduled to keep it on track.

## “CALM HOUSE, CALM LIFE:” A REUNIFICATION STORY

When Sandra came to ASCI, all she wanted was a parenting class certificate. What she got was so much more.

CYF referred Sandra to ASCI after she left her two children, ages 6 and 2, home alone while she went to wash clothes at a nearby laundromat. When she first met Lily, a Families and Children Together program caseworker, Sandra was overwhelmed and confused. The young single mother felt she was already doing the best she could with limited support and didn't see how she could make things better. She was also frustrated with her mother, in whose custody Sandra's children were temporarily placed, for not letting her see her children more frequently.

Lily invited Sandra to join ASCI's weekly class for parents who, like her, were involved with CYF. She helped Sandra recognize the importance of following CYF's rules regarding contact with her children so that they could stay with her mother and out of foster care. Sandra's relationship with her mother quickly improved, and Lily soon saw other changes, too.

“Toward the end of class, she was able to understand why she was there and start to put together a support system,” Lily says. “She realized that she had more support than she thought she did.” Lily helped Sandra compile a list of people she could reach out to for help with child care, including her mother, other family members, and friends.

At the same time, Lily encouraged Sandra to identify and work toward personal goals: “We offer parents shared power: What are your goals, your needs, what do you want help with? And then we help with that.” Sandra's priority was finding a job that would

better support her family. ASCI had many services to help with that, including the Kinship Closet, resume building, and help identifying job opportunities. Lily also connected Sandra to community-based resources for additional child care while she searched for a job.

Sandra was able to reunify with her children by the end of the class. However, like many parents court-ordered to work with ASCI, Sandra has chosen to stay connected with the agency through its voluntary parent support group. She continues to develop her parenting skills: “I'm learning more patience,” she says. “Nobody's ever really angry. Calm house, calm life.”

Sandra also keeps in touch with Lily. “You don't have to have a problem to be connected to ASCI,” Lily points out. “We want to offer support before there's an issue.”

Sandra says her personal turning point came when the support group offered a professionalism class. The group talked about how to establish a personal “brand” and made business cards together. Then they took a field trip to a community networking event. At first Sandra didn't want to go: “I don't fit in here,” she thought. But she surprised both Lily and herself with her natural networking skills.

“Her entire countenance changed the day we left that event,” Lily says. “She became more bold, more confident in who she is ... and she pours that into her children. She's more calm, more understanding. I'm proud of her because she grew as a woman, and as a mom.”

# How did A Second Chance, Inc. transform kinship care in Allegheny County?

The agency's **Families and Children Together program** supports birth parents to take the steps needed to reunify with their children. Reunification specialists provide classes, support groups, outings, and other short-term, intensive services to birth parents and their children, in close coordination with CYF. The model, based on the HOMEBUILDERS® family preservation program, focuses on concrete needs, kinship care/family dynamics, and educational and vocational goals. A high value is placed on sharing power with parents, who are encouraged to problem-solve with increasing independence as they progress through the program.

ASCI also supports **frequent visits between children and their parents** in as normal a setting as possible. "Going to a room where you are overseen by strangers is not natural," Dr. McDaniel points out. "What's natural is families coming together and spending time together." From the beginning, the Taylors' caseworker encouraged them to plan family dinners that included Kiara's mother and father, share outings to the park, and host them at their home.

When less formal family get-togethers are not possible, ASCI's bustling **Family Service Transportation** program can be called on. In addition to visitation support, this 30-member team helps children get to court, medical appointments, and school — a major reason why only 5% of school-age children have to change schools when entering care with ASCI (as compared to the national rate of 56%). The agency coordinates nearly 3,000 rides per month.

## **"A no-brainer:" Personalized support for kinship families**

The family's caseworker went out of her way to transport Kiara to visits with her mother so that the little girl could be in a car with someone familiar to her. This would have left the Taylors, whose work schedules often conflicted with Kiara's need to get to appointments or visits, in a bind if not for ASCI's commitment to individualized, wraparound support for kinship families. Kiara's caseworker, Lisa, began transporting the little girl to visits with her mother, even though it often meant driving an extra hour each way. Lisa viewed this as an opportunity, not a burden: "For me, it was a no-brainer. I'm seeing the family, I'm spending time with the child, and I'm engaging with the parent. At A Second Chance, we work with the triad; we want to keep that line of communication open."

Caring for a relative's child, especially on a moment's notice as Debra's family did, is not always easy. It can require caregivers to quickly adapt to the new demands of caring for a young child for the first time, or long after they thought they were done with that phase of caregiving. It also can result in disruption to complex family dynamics. ASCI's support for kinship caregivers is tailored to each family's individual needs. It includes concrete supports (such as stipends and the Kinship Closet), a free legal clinic, enrichment, support groups, and social events where kinship families can meet others in similar circumstances. Informal kinship caregivers (those not involved with the child welfare system), although not supported by the county, are included in all agency services except for the per diem.

We look at each caregiver as an individual. If in-home training is what you need, we're coming to you.

— SHARON MCDANIEL,  
FOUNDER, PRESIDENT, AND CEO, A SECOND CHANCE, INC.

## How did A Second Chance, Inc. transform kinship care in Allegheny County?

For families who need additional support, ASCI offers in-home clinical services. Four critical incident caseworkers provide crisis intervention and other mental health services to stabilize families. Because the clinicians are not tied to insurance requirements, they can serve the whole family, including any children in the home, whether they are in kinship placement or are birth children of the caregiver. They can meet the family at the kinship home or during a visit with the birth parent. They also can provide services at a hospital or in respite settings. In addition, the clinicians provide mental wellness awareness and advocacy for the staff at ASCI and the broader community alike.

A spirit of inclusiveness and community begins with all ASCI staff and radiates outward in countless ways. “Bring the whole family” is the implicit invitation in everything the agency offers.

This is evident in the inclusion of all children in a kinship family. The caregiver’s birth children are encouraged to participate in everything from family visits to agency events, such as its annual Community Day, which provides children with backpacks stuffed with school supplies, or Camp C.O.P.E.S. (Children Optimizing Personal Experience through Sports), a sports program that consistently reaches full capacity. A summer internship program teaches workplace and life skills to youth in kinship care and birth children of kinship providers, along with staff members’ children. Kinship and birth fathers are engaged through programs such as Young Men of Promise and Fathers Mentoring Fathers.

The Taylors described Lisa as their lifeline. She spent time on the phone with Debra often, particularly

helping to calm the family’s nerves before critical court appearances. In time, she became more than a caseworker — she became part of the family. In addition to making the twice-monthly home visits that ASCI requires, Lisa made a habit of stopping by unofficially, bringing pizza or accompanying the family to a softball game. When Debra’s mother passed away, Lisa drove an hour from Pittsburgh to attend the funeral. Seeing her there meant the world to Debra.

For her part, Lisa says she can’t imagine doing her work any other way: “When I’m in court, yes, I’m Kiara’s caseworker. When I’m in the Taylors’ home, it’s professional, but it’s also family.”

### **We’re all family: Staff support and community engagement**

The work that ASCI does requires the organization to support its staff. “We recognize that our most valuable assets are the people who are here,” Dr. McDaniel says. “Just as the program has an obligation to serve the needs of children and families, we have an obligation to provide professional development growth opportunities for our staff.”

All new ASCI staff, including leadership, participate in a six-week onboarding process called Standards for Training and Advancing Kinship Care, which orients every team member to the strengths and challenges of the families they serve. They learn about the workings of the child welfare system and how to navigate some of the dynamics that may be present as families face and resolve challenges.

We decided we’d bring Kiara in, knowing that she would return home. That was our goal — that she would return back to my sister.

—DEBRA TAYLOR,  
KINSHIP CAREGIVER

# How did A Second Chance, Inc. transform kinship care in Allegheny County?

Ongoing professional development opportunities are extensive, and include:

- Strengths-based family worker credentialing.
- A yearlong emerging leaders program for direct line staff who wish to become supervisors.
- A supervisory academy, required of all new supervisors whether hired externally or promoted from within.
- Executive coaching for directors.
- Individualized professional development plans for all staff.

In more formal ways, ASCI consistently seeks input to ensure its staff and approach are responsive to family needs. A **Community Advisory Board** of present and past caregivers meets regularly to explore ways to raise the agency's profile and increase its impact in the community. A **Youth Advisory Board** also helps to shape services and elevate the youth voice for change.

## Happy endings: Evidence of success

ASCI is a self-described data-driven agency, and the evidence of its success is in the numbers:

OUTCOMES <sup>3</sup>		
MEASURE	A SECOND CHANCE, INC. AVERAGE	NATIONAL AVERAGE
Length of stay for children discharged to reunification	6.2 months	7.6 months
Length of stay for children discharged to adoption	21.4 months	29.4 months
Length of stay for children discharged to subsidized guardianship	18 months	24 months
Percentage of children who change schools when first entering care	5%	56%
Percentage of youth who complete high school	95%	50%
Pregnancy rates for young women in care	1% (following entry into ASCI)	33%

# How did A Second Chance, Inc. transform kinship care in Allegheny County?

ASCI's parenting classes showed me a different way to handle things when my son is acting out. ... I don't yell. I talk to him, instead of talking at him. I learned that through the program. Now I'm working, but I'm involved more: family nights, reading books. I feel wonderful.

— SANDRA,

A BIRTH PARENT WHO SUCCESSFULLY REUNIFIED WITH HER CHILD

Behind every statistic is a story like Kiara's. In her case, despite everyone's best efforts, her birth parents were unable to resolve the issues that prevented them from keeping her safe and helping her to thrive. However, through kinship care, Kiara has been able to remain connected to her extended family network and her community.

Last fall, the Taylors made Kiara a permanent member of their family through adoption. Today, Kiara is a thriving 3-year-old, bursting with sass and activity, and fully integrated into her new family. As for the Taylors, they say they can't imagine life without her. "She just fits with us," Paul says.

I've never known an agency to be so family-oriented and supportive of every person. ... It is a business, yes. But it is a family first.

— LISA,

CASEWORKER, A SECOND CHANCE, INC.

- 1 All family names and some details have been changed to protect the family's privacy.
- 2 Data provided by ASCI, March 20, 2019. By comparison, the most recent national Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) statistics show 32% of children in foster care were in a relative's care as of Sept. 30, 2017: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport25.pdf>.
- 3 Data provided by ASCI, March 20, 2019.

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