

City Offers Assistance For Raising Grandkids

Monthly Stipends Add Income Boost

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More than 150 District residents who are raising grandchildren are seeking financial assistance under a \$2 million pilot program the city inaugurated this month.

District officials expect to begin awarding the monthly stipends -- about \$800 per child -- in April or May for applicants who meet income requirements and pass personal and criminal background checks.

"We're pretty excited about this program," said Janet Maher, chief of staff at the Child and Family Services agency, which administers the District's foster care program. "It gives us an opportunity to prevent children from having to come into our system. And it gives us an opportunity to invest in the community."

The program grew out of legislation passed last year by the D.C. Council after advocates for the elderly lobbied for the assistance. About 14.5 percent of District residents 18 years and younger are being raised by grandparents, compared with a national average of just over 6 percent, according to the District's chapter of AARP, which pushed for stipend.

Grandparents typically take over child-rearing when parents die unexpectedly, are drug addicts or have a mental illness. If grandparents are not available, the children generally are placed in foster care.

Mimi Castaldi, director of the District's AARP chapter, said the organization grew aware of the need for the stipends after interviewing grandparents and learning that they "couldn't afford school uniforms or pay for college visits."

"They may not have ways of making money," she said. "How do you help people on fixed incomes? So we thought, to get at all these issues, you need to provide financial resources."

Shirley Byrd, 60, a retired cashier who is raising four grandchildren on her own in Southwest, has applied for a stipend.

Byrd said she gave up her car and cut expenses across the board 16 years ago when she took responsibility for the first of her daughter Johnnie's children.

Johnnie, who Byrd said had become addicted to crack, had three more children and dropped each of them off with Byrd. The eldest, Terri, is 16 and attends high school; Adolfo, 15, is in ninth grade; Chelsea, 13, is in seventh; and Elijah, 6, is in first grade.

Byrd subsists on \$731 a month in disability payments and about \$460 a month that she receives in welfare assistance for the children. That covers her \$314 monthly rent, but it leaves little for extras -- a computer the kids could use for homework, for instance, or a family vacation.

"I could really use the money," she said.

The District set aside \$2 million in its 2006 budget for the program. Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) has proposed doubling that amount in his 2007 fiscal plan.

Overall, the District has handed out more than 400 applications for the stipends since the application process began March 1.

Those eligible to apply for the stipends must have legal custody, or what is known as standby guardianship of the children. Applicants can earn no more than \$25,660 if they head a household of two, or \$32,180 if they head a household of three. The children's parents cannot live in the home. Great-grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles also may receive the subsidy.

Maher said the program's goal is to "prevent people from coming into foster care, which is a lot more expensive" because they receive "a full panoply of services in a range much greater than the stipend."

But she also acknowledged that officials are unsure how the program will work because it is new. "It's going to be a learning process," she said. "We don't want it to result in parents giving up their children so grandparents can collect a subsidy. We can monitor and learn from it as we go."