

Older relatives step in when meth ruins families

When a child is removed from a meth-lab home, he often arrives at the grandparents' with nothing.

By Dahleen Glanton,
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Crossville, Tenn. | Delta and Paul Cottrell thought they would be empty nesters by the time they reached their 60s. By then, they would have completed the toughest job of their lives - parenting - and a leisurely retirement would be just a few years away.

But methamphetamine has a way of altering lives, not just for those who abuse the drug but also for the relatives who step in to pick up the pieces when families fall apart. So Delta Cottrell, 56, and her 57-year-old husband, Paul, have settled into an unexpected life as parents of her 11- and 7-year-old grandchildren, adopted when Delta's stepdaughter from another marriage lost custody because of drugs.

"When this happens, your whole life is imposed upon, but it is by choice because there is no other way," said Paul Cottrell, a retired Air Force veteran who works as a handyman. "I would not take anything for my children, but our new lifestyle means there is no time for me, and more of my hard-earned money is going toward things I had not planned for."

Grandfamilies

What happened in one home in rural Tennessee is being played out across the United States as methamphetamine makes its way across the country, breaking up families and creating an influx of abused and neglected children who have placed an unprecedented burden on state welfare systems.

In many cases, grandparents are viewed as the last hope for relieving foster care systems that are overflowing. And they are stepping out of retirement or forgoing it in record numbers to raise grandchildren whose parents are unable or unwilling to take responsibility.

More than 4.5 million children in the United States live with their grandparents, according to the 2000 census, a 30 percent increase from 1990. An additional 1.5 million children live with other relatives.

The increase in so-called grandfamilies, experts said, coincides with the rise in meth addiction, particularly in rural areas where social services are limited. In a recent study by Generations United, a grandparents advocacy group, 40 percent of child welfare workers reported an increase in meth-related placements.

No support

"Because of meth and other problems, grandparents have become lifelines for so many hurt children," said Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United. But, she said, grandparents are not receiving the support they need.

Advocacy groups are lobbying Congress to change laws to make it easier for grandparents and other relatives to care for children, giving them the same rights as foster parents but easing some of the stringent

requirements for state licensing. The federal government and many states, however, have been slow to grant financial help and decision-making rights to relatives who have no legal status in the child's life.

"In the foster care system, there are restraints on how many bathrooms you can have. You have to go through parenting classes, and there is oversight," Butts said. "Under current rules, a grandparent would have to ask the court whether the child can travel outside the state or spend the night with friends. These rules are outdated."

Congress last year approved \$145 million in matching grants to help local officials provide services to children affected by drugs. When Congress extended the USA Patriot Act, lawmakers included a provision restricting the sale of over-the-counter medications containing pseudoephedrine - a primary ingredient in meth. Thirty-nine states already had taken that action, which has contributed to a decline in amateur meth labs and children affected by them.

But Mexican super-labs have taken their place, saturating the country with the highly addictive drug that has disproportionately affected young women, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.

'From the heart'

"When people are on meth, they don't think about feeding a child or changing a diaper. When they come down from a meth high, they crash and sleep for a long time, so you might have a 4-year-old trying to take care of a 2-year-old," said Joe Dunn, associate legislative director for the National Association of Counties lobbying group. "Some counties are spending over \$1 million a year on child welfare because of meth."

When a child is removed from a meth-lab home, he often arrives at the grandparents' home with nothing. And he often suffers from medical problems.

This can cause a financial burden for grandparents, many of whom are on fixed incomes. Foster parents receive monthly assistance; grandparents, for the most part, receive little or no financial aid.

While alcohol and other drugs, including crack cocaine and heroin, devastate urban communities, U.S. Attorney Gen. Alberto Gonzales declared meth the most dangerous drug in America in terms of its damage to children.

People such as the Cottrells are on the front line of the battle to save them. For the first four months, the Cottrells received no help from the state of Tennessee. Both children had medical problems and needed counseling. Zachery, who suffers from attention deficit disorder, takes five medications.

Both children are now enrolled in TennCare, the state's medical care program for children, and the Cottrells receive \$9 a day to care for Amber Rose and \$12 a day for Zachery.

They have built a comfortable life in a six-bedroom home that is bustling with energy. Two of the Cottrells' former foster children, 18-year-old Kendra and her 19-year-old sister, Dawn, have returned home. Dawn's 7-month-old daughter, Charlee, also lives there. A mentally challenged friend of the family, 21-year-old Sheena, recently moved in. There are also three dogs and a cat.

Days and evenings are full for the Cottrells. Delta, who underwent surgery in May for a brain aneurysm, said, "You do get tired sometimes and you realize why God gives children to young people.

"For me, the children I gave birth to are no different than the children I adopted. Children don't only come from the womb, they come from the heart."