

New York Times

Article published Jul 23, 2006

States trying to keep child care in the family

PHILADELPHIA — Kali Ward is just glad she can finally go to slumber parties.

Now that she is out of foster care, the sociable 17-year-old no longer has to get a criminal background check on her friends' parents if she wants to sleep over.

"People make plans same day," said Kali, a cordless phone in one hand, an afternoon waffle in the other. "Background checks take weeks."

Under the legal guardianship of their grandmother, Kali and two of her siblings left such worries behind last year with help from a city program that focuses on moving children from foster care into permanent homes with grandparents or other relatives.

States struggling to fill a void left by parents lost to drug addiction, AIDS and incarceration are increasingly using such programs to deal with the rising costs of foster care. Thirty-eight states have such programs, more than half of them initiated in the last five years.

Congress is considering legislation to finance the programs, correcting what some advocates call a perverse system that provides much more support for children in foster care than it does to get them out of the child welfare system.

"Many of the half million children in foster care are spending years and years stuck without a permanent home, and these programs are an excellent exit strategy for them from the child welfare system," said Carol Emig, executive director of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, a nonpartisan panel of experts convened to study problems with the child welfare system.

States like the programs because they are cheaper than foster homes, which require more oversight. Child welfare advocates like them, too, because they are more permanent.

Critics say the programs are a new form of welfare and potentially

more costly than advocates claim.

The programs are especially popular in poor cities like Washington and Baltimore, and in methamphetamine-ridden states like Arizona and Iowa.

Studies show that foster children average more than two years — double the time that federal law advises — without a permanent home, often drifting from family to family.

In Washington, which initiated a similar program last month, Patricia McCoy, 62, talks about being able to send her 10- and 12-year old grandsons to Boy Scout camp for the first time.

"These are the kind of things that make a big difference in boys' lives," said McCoy, who began caring for three grandchildren after their father went to jail and the courts ruled that their mother's depression left her incapable of caring for them.

McCoy and the children had survived on her \$700 monthly retirement check and about \$300 in welfare. With an extra \$1,900 she started receiving this month from the city's guardianship program, she has replaced her squeaky brakes and fixed her freezer.

Foster care costs up to \$80,000 per child per year, according to the Council of the District of Columbia.

In some ways, the programs are not new. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, state officials began experimenting with so-called kinship care programs, which tried to draw relatives into the system. But costs were high, numbers expanded and children still lingered without a permanent home.

"States have definitely reached a certain comfort level now in that they realize subsidized guardianship is one more tool that should be available," said Rob Geen, director of the Child Welfare Research Institute at the Urban Institute. "Now, it's a matter of whether the federal government catches up in dealing with the situation."

More than 2.5 million children are being raised by grandparents or other relatives. The number has risen more than 86 percent since 1990, up from 1.3 million, according to census data analyzed by the Children's Defense Fund. States have been watching the trend closely.

"Grandparents and other relatives have always played a vital role in childrearing," said Rutledge Q. Hutson, a lawyer at the Center for Law and Social Policy, a nonprofit public policy research organization in Washington. "But we've never before seen so many grandparents single-handedly raising children, and the nation's foster care system is simply not able to handle so many of them."

Donna M. Butts, executive director of Generations United, a nonprofit group that advocates on behalf of multigenerational households, added that children often linger in foster care because there is too little support for grandparents and other relatives who want to provide homes.

"Federal child welfare law states that children should be moved out of foster care within 15 months in one of three ways: reunification with their families, adoption or placement with a legal guardian," Butts said. "But in 2004, the average length of time spent in foster care was 30 months."

Although federal assistance is available to families providing temporary foster care and is available to many families adopting a child from the foster care system, federal support is not available to relatives who become legal guardians.

In Washington, for example, foster parents receive nearly \$800 per month per child, whereas the only public resource available to a caregiver outside the foster care system is welfare, at roughly \$239 a month, according to a report from the District Council.

Numbers are hard to come by, but some states claim significant savings under the new programs. Illinois started a program in 1997 that has been studied closely and has moved more than 9,000 children from foster care into permanent homes. The state has saved about \$6,000 per year per child, according to a 2003 study conducted by the School of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

But Geen of the Urban Institute said that other states, where administrative costs for foster care are lower, would probably save less, if they did at all.

Critics say states should not pay relatives to do what is their responsibility anyway.

"Members of the advocacy community view these programs as a way to get more government payments into a high-risk population," said Heather Mac Donald, a researcher at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative nonprofit policy research organization in New York.

Critics also say that grandparents who raised children with problems should not be trusted with another generation.

"I've heard from social workers of cases where the drug addict mother is living downstairs from her mother who is getting a payment that is several times what she could get on welfare," Mac Donald said. "In a case like that, there is really little incentive for the drug addict to get her act together because she still has access to the children."

Mark E. Courtney, director of Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, said he supported subsidized guardianship but worried that the programs allowed states to abdicate their responsibility to help troubled parents.

"States may view it as a lot easier and cheaper to give up on the parents and pay a family member to take the children off its hands than it is to provide the services needed by a mother to deal with an abusive relationship or a substance abuse problem," Courtney said.

For Carol J. Hayes, a 64-year-old grandmother living in Milwaukee, money is not the issue.

"Especially when the social workers came twice a month, the kids were always asking whether they were going to be taken away," said Hayes, who became a foster parent to her three grandchildren after her daughter became a crack addict more than a decade ago. Last year, when Wisconsin initiated a subsidized guardianship program, Hayes signed up immediately.

"I don't receive any more money than I did as their foster parent," she said, "but the children know now that this is their home, for good."

The programs are crucial in poor cities like Washington, where about 19 percent of children live in households headed by grandparents, the third highest percentage behind Baltimore and New Orleans, according to 2000 census data.

In 2001, Washington created a subsidized guardianship program that focused on children in foster care. This year, the city took a step

further, setting aside \$6.5 million in local money for the next two years to create a more pre-emptive program that focuses on children in need who have not entered foster care.

Grandparents and certain other relatives can qualify only if they meet particular income requirements, and once the court recognizes them as legal guardians after determining that the parents are truly unavailable.

NYT-07-22-06 1414EDT