

# The Oregonian

## **Kinship care and the spread of methamphetamine**

### **Government policies must be more flexible and realistic to meet the need for permanent homes for abused kids**

A Clackamas County detective described the scene of a large-scale methamphetamine bust Wednesday as "horrendous."

Indeed, the rural Canby home was strewn with garbage and dog feces. Armed felons were there. Thirteen guns were confiscated. So were drugs.

Not exactly a wholesome environment for children. That's why seven of them, ages 3 to 17, were taken from the home and placed in the care of relatives.

The seven thus entered kinship care, which is the child-welfare system's term for children being raised by grandparents, aunts and uncles or other relatives. It's a huge phenomenon in the United States, growing in importance as parents struggle with substance abuse, mental illness, incarceration and other challenges. Last year 6 million American children lived in such households. Oregon was home to 51,617 of them.

Historically, the nation's strategy has been heavily tilted toward foster care for abused or neglected children. Placing them with grandparents or other relatives hasn't always been viewed as being in the kids' best interest.

As study after study showed just the opposite, such thinking began changing a decade ago. Nonetheless, attempts to reform federal policy have been like trying to turn a battleship around.

This reform needs to speed up, not just for the sake of children but also for the millions of American grandparents who are trying to care for them. That's one of the conclusions of this summer's landmark report, called "Meth and Child Welfare: Promising Solutions for Children, Their Parents and Grandparents."

This report, put out by a coalition of child-advocacy groups and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, didn't grab a lot of national headlines, but it should have. It connected the dots on extensive research about methamphetamine addiction's devastating impact on the American family -- with particular emphasis on the crucial role of kinship care.

The report concluded that abuse of methamphetamine is increasing the need for such guardianship, yet federal barriers still remain. Among many excellent recommendations, the study calls for federal financial assistance -- the same subsidies foster parents receive -- for relatives willing to become permanent guardians of abused or neglected children.

"Grandparents and other relatives who care for children impacted by meth are a salvation," the report concludes. It also points out that such potential caregivers are usually older Americans with low incomes -- people who are willing to take on the job but are already struggling.

In the wretched case of the Canby meth bust, the ideal long-term outcome would be for the parents to straighten out their lives so they can be safely reunited with their children. Failing that, the next best option for the kids -- the least disruptive and traumatic -- would likely involve permanent homes with relatives.

Government barriers to such placement, as the "Meth and Child Welfare" report makes clear, should be minimized.