

## **For children raised by grandparents, every day is Grandparents Day**

**By Donna Butts**

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"I raised my grandchildren. I had to because I had no alternative but to raise them," Dorothy, age 79, says of her grandchildren. "I had to take my little Social Security and my retirement benefits and take care of these kids. I don't know how I did it."

Dorothy is remarkable, but not unusual. Rather than let her grandchildren be placed with a stranger, she, like thousands of other grandparents across the nation, have set aside their own personal needs to care for a relative's child placed in foster care. For these families, this often means making difficult financial choices regarding their own health and well-being to ensure that a child grows up in a healthy and stable environment. One grandmother raising her grandchild relates her daily dilemma: "Do I buy Pampers or fill my prescription?"

When a court has determined that neither reunification with their parents nor adoption are viable options, abused and neglected children may languish in the foster care system. Often, a grandparent or other relative steps up saying they will care for the child. Nearly 25 percent of the 500,000 children currently in foster care live with a relative. Some of these children cannot leave the foster care system to live permanently with these relatives because, without much-needed foster care payments, the relatives could not afford to provide adequately for them.

Instead, families like Dorothy's are subjected to continual review by caseworkers and courts, leaving children and their caregivers in a constant state of uncertainty; knowing that they are considered much the same as other foster families and their rights could be terminated at any time. Even to do the routine things most kids take for granted - sleepovers, family vacations, field trips and school pictures - grandparent caregivers like Dorothy must get permission from social workers and even judges.

Policies that would provide these families with basic rights and responsibilities have been introduced in Congress. Called subsidized guardianships, these arrangements are currently offered in some states, but without guaranteed federal aid, it becomes a juggling act to keep them funded from one year to the next. And ultimately it is the children that

end up being juggled, their lives left up in the air.

Subsidized legal guardianship promises a safe landing for everyone involved and it is a sound fiscal move. The federal government would likely save money by reducing the management and review of open foster care cases. Legal guardians would receive financial support similar to what foster parents receive.

For caregivers with limited resources, this means an end to the daily dilemmas that mean choosing between new school clothes for the children, or prescription drugs for them. And the children in their care feel safer because they are with a member of their family, and they have fewer fears about being taken from their home and sent to live with strangers.

Sept. 10 is the national observance of Grandparents Day. It was founded to serve three purposes: To honor grandparents; to give grandparents an opportunity to show love for their children's children; and to help children become aware of the strength, information and guidance older people can offer.

Let's take this day to celebrate those grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, and give them access to the supports and services that they need in order to fulfill this critical responsibility.

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