



## Changing families add new burdens

### Grandparents are being forced to return to the role of parent for their grandchildren.

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By Sheila Hagar

Surrounded by primary-colored art projects and day-camp artifacts, heads of white hair looked out of place at Central Middle School in Milton-Freewater on a recent evening.

As did hand-carved walking canes juxtaposed against lunch tables designed for children.

There was no concert or junior-high play drawing older adults into the school cafeteria on this night. It was because of children, however, that grandparents had congregated at the Grandparent Appreciation Night sponsored by Horizon Project and the Umatilla County Mediation Program.

These were not the spoil-them-rotten and send-them-home variety of grandparent - their home is home for their grandchildren.

Grandparents have long stepped up to the parenting plate when circumstances called for it, experts say. In the past, grandparents teamed with their own children to take care of the next generation. Only serious illness or the death of parents might have thrust Grandma and Grandpa into a principal parenting role.

Now the root causes of custodial grandparents have changed; with that, the number of such family structures is rapidly rising.

Incarceration, teen pregnancy rates, mental illness, poverty, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect all have a hand in dissolving the nuclear family.

But methamphetamine use in particular has plowed through the traditional family structure like no other crisis could even approach.

According to a report released this summer, written by a coalition of child-advocacy groups and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, growing numbers of adults are exper-

imenting with the toxic and addictive drug; for those with children in the home, the darkness that descends upon their lives almost always envelopes their offspring, as well.

Children in such homes typically live in unsafe and unsupervised chaos without appropriate care, the report found.

The document, "Meth and Child Welfare: Promising Solutions for Children, Their Parents and Grandparents," states the problem is worse in rural areas with limited resources.

With social-service agencies and court systems stretched to capacity and barely stitched together with limited government funding, the youngest victims of America's meth epidemic are going more and more often into kinship, or relative, care.

Those most likely to have homes to offer are grandparents - the restructured blend is called "grandfamilies" in social-service lingo.

Today, estimates put four to six million children living with their grandparents, who raise about six percent of the nation's young, said the National Center on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. Those are the ones identified by census and other means; many more children are in informal care arrangements with family members, including aunts and uncles and older siblings.

According to the 2002 census findings, 44 percent of children who don't live with either parent reside with grandmothers and grandfathers. In Washington, that amounts to about 35,000, or just over 10 percent, of grandfamilies compared to traditional; across the border Oregon has close to 22,000 such families, about 12 percent of the state's population, said Mary Pleger of Catholic Family and Child Services in Yakima.

As the Milton-Freewater grandparents at last week's meeting attested, it's not easy for anyone. When children are ushered through the door into a new living situation, a horde of problems is almost sure to follow.

For many grandparents, for the first time since their own children left the nest, they will be called on to fulfill basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Frequently, a fixed retirement income means financial hardship for the new family structure, Pleger said.

She is one of two kinship navigators for a state program started in 2003. As such, Pleger leads relative caregivers through the complex maze of finding resources; legal help, emergency funds, state medical coupons and support groups are just some of the many needs grandparents find themselves unexpectedly facing, she said. "The whole idea is to help families be successful so the kids don't end up in foster care."

Her office administers a grant, overseen by the Legislature, that allows her to meet some monetary needs - perhaps procuring a bed or gathering school supplies for a grandchild.

"Foster families get a lot of support but grandparents get nothing," she said.

While open Child Protective Service cases are not eligible (those folks are already tapped into help) and there must be genuine hardship and a blood connection, nothing must be a formal arrangement to qualify for kinship help, Pleger said. "Everyone can call about navigation services, the program serves all relatives."

Grandparents and other relatives who care for children impacted by meth are a salvation for families and the communities in which they live, the Pew paper concluded. "Yet many grandfamilies are struggling to meet the basic needs of the children in their care."

The report called for concrete help, such as federal assistance for all children adopted from foster care and those that want subsidized guardianship; drug-impact education for families; training for caseworkers on the needs of grandfamilies and flexible resources to expand community support.

Joan Howard, a custody mediator for Umatilla County, seconded that at the Central Middle School meeting. Grandparent-headed households often struggle with financial burdens - some people must take on new jobs while others will leave careers to mitigate child care costs or manage behavioral problems in grandkids.

Legal issues can also be costly; a majority of parenting seniors will deal with custody matters and a fight for some form of child support, either from the grandchild's parents or a social-service agency.

Too, grandparents have limited rights in many forums - they may not be able to obtain emergency medical care without legal custody or get their charges into treatment programs without parental permission.

Some grandfamilies will do battle with school districts to get children enrolled and provided with educational services.

Perhaps worse, though, is the emotional roller coaster that will threaten to throw everyone involved off track at times.

Childrearing is a challenge for anyone; doing it during the Social Security years even more so. Almost a quarter of custodial grandparents are over 65, according to the National Center on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren.

At a time most folks are looking forward to doing what they want when they want to, grandparents signing up for a second term must face a loss of the life they built. They will be plunged again into the world of homework, pediatric appointments and play dates.

Some grandparents will feel a sense of failure at their own parenting and anger at themselves and their children. Almost all will be affected by fatigue, stress and depression.

Too, grandchildren are still children and will not recognize the sacrifice of other generations. They will share many of the same emotions as their grandparents without the life experience to help them deal with those.

"And know the child will still want their parent, whether that parent is a druggie or abusive," said Jenni Galloway, coordinator the Community Access to Resource Effectiveness, a program shared between Umatilla County and the Pendleton and Hermiston school districts. "They want you to be their grandparent. They want their parent to be their parent."

None of that is helped by the loneliness and isolation most custodial grandparents feel, Howard told the group. "Everyone thinks they are the only one."

The blackest cloud over everything, however, seems to be the specter of losing the child to the inadequate parent.

In the Central cafeteria, with summer evening sun still streaming in, fear was almost palpable as people pulled handwritten notes of guardianship from well-worn manila envelopes. Grandmothers spoke of keeping logs of missed parental visits or a tally of days drug use was evident. A grandfather shook his head over a granddaughter's in-and-out stays at his house as she rode the secondary waves of her mother's substance abuse.

Through everyone's stories ran threads of behavior problems, tantrums, conflicts at school - of kids damaged by what they have been through.

In low voices, the grandparents murmured about not upsetting children who might remember who really has custody and retaliate by reclaiming grandchildren who are, finally, settling down. Having a real life for the first time.

How best to prevent that, the group asked assembled agency personnel. Foster parenting? Guardianship? Adoption?

No matter which arrangement is undertaken, experts agree the saving grace for most of these children will be permanency.

"Providing children with a sense of stability and continuity is critical," said Dr. Arthur Kornhaber of the Foundation for Grandparenting. Although custodial grandparents are "robbed" of the luxury of spoiling and unrestricted playfulness, the reward comes from saving a child from the foster-care system and offering the chance to grow into healthy and productive adults, he said.

The meeting was a hopeful beginning for what has been a somewhat hidden situation, said Janelle Woody of Horizon Project as people slowly broke away to return home to parenting duties. Perhaps seeds will have been planted for a support network among attendees. At the least, it provided a clearinghouse for questions and information, she said.

"We felt this was an underserved group of families. What we heard tonight confirmed the need for

action. The hope is these grandparents will leave tonight empowered."

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