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## Seniors raising their grandkids get a new boost

By Sara Miller Llana | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

**BOSTON** - When Dorothy Chase watches out for 12-year-old Kania, it's not with the adoring gaze of a grandmother, but the hawklike stare of a first-time mother. Every day at 2:05 p.m., she peers out her living-room window as Kania steps off the bus.

The same goes for 9-year-old Michael. "I don't let him out of my sight," says Dorothy's husband, Sylvester.

After raising four children in the Boston area, Mr. and Mrs. Chase, who will celebrate their 44th wedding anniversary this year, found themselves as child-rearers again when Michael's and Kania's parents were unable to care for them a decade ago.

They're part of a growing number of grandparents filling the void left by parents incapacitated by drug abuse, poverty, or mental instability. And they're changing the face of the American family.

Challenges for this demographic remain formidable, but the nation has begun to assist their efforts, especially when it comes to housing. Indeed, the Grandfamilies House where the Chases live is now set to become a national model.

When it opened eight years ago, the Grandfamilies House was a social experiment, the nation's first public-housing project designed for grandparents raising their grandchildren. Since then, 32 states have contacted the housing complex, but only a handful of similar models have emerged.

But in December, Congress approved funding for such "grandfamilies" after portions of the Legacy (Living Equitably: Grandparents Aiding Children and Youth) bill was signed by President Bush in 2003 - to expand on the concept, and incorporate the lessons learned, in Boston.

At least 20 communities across the country are considering such housing complexes, says Donna Butts, the executive director of Generations United, a Washington group that promotes intergenerational relations. "There has been great progress in recognizing the role grandparents play in raising grandchildren," says Ms. Butts. "Children deserve the support of loving families, even when their [immediate] families are not there."

The missing generation in many households traces back to the AIDS epidemic, tougher drug laws, and changes in welfare that some say have made it more difficult for single parents to support their children, says Carrie Jefferson Smith, an associate professor of social work at Syracuse University. The problem crosses all race and class lines, but it disproportionately affects

African-Americans.

Nearly 4 million children live in households headed by grandparents, according to 2003 data released by the US Census Bureau. That figure increased 30 percent from 1990 to 2000, the census found.

The challenges faced by both grandparent and grandchild are complex, though by no means uniform. Many elderly caregivers live on fixed incomes. Others may struggle to keep up with young ones. Many children, meanwhile, deal with loss or abandonment. In some cases, the "generation gap" can be daunting.

In the Chase household, Kania has lived with her grandparents since she was 18 months old; her brother, Michael, since he was just 34 days old. Still, parenting is harder for the Chases than the first time. The streets aren't as safe; ideas on parental authority are different. "The generation has changed," says Mr. Chase. He says his goal is to live long enough to make sure both choose the right path.

Experts say new housing models must be tailored to a community's specific needs, whether it is lack of transportation or available services.

In Boston, it was the lack of affordable housing that drove the creation of the Grandfamilies House. Some seniors were facing eviction, living in overcrowded homes, or in places with lead paint or rickety staircases, says Stephanie Chacker, the program director. Within the 26-unit complex, a community room functions as the setting for support groups for grandparents. It is filled with children's books and board games like Chutes & Ladders and Candy Land. The adjacent bathroom is handicapped accessible.

Though it was hailed for its potential, leaders in Boston have learned some constructive lessons. Because the center was an abandoned nursing home, space was limited. They opened with preschool and afterschool programs for young children, yet no on-site teen center. "But children grow up quickly," says Ms. Chacker.

Indeed, unlike the archetypical nuclear family that shares the same roof for at least 18 years, grandfamilies tend to be more fluid. Among the most important elements, Chacker says, is making sure that seniors get the services that they need in the housing complex, as opposed to having to move to a nursing home, where their grandchildren would not be permitted.

The newer projects, like GrandParent Family Apartments, a 50-unit project in the Bronx, have learned from the experience charted by Boston.

Now with \$4 million in funding for new housing, Ms. Butts says challenges still lie ahead, especially for subsidized guardianship. She says grandparents often don't receive the financial support they need to raise their grandchildren. Sometimes, experts suggest, the family can be relied on too heavily as a cost-effective alternative. Grandfamilies "can sometimes be foster care on the cheap for the state," says Eric Kingson, a professor of social work at Syracuse University.

Though the costs of raising children a second time may be difficult to meet, many grandparents are reluctant to say "no." That's what Lynne Katz, an early childhood specialist at the University of Miami, found during a study of grandfamilies in the late 1990s. "I don't want to see a stranger pushing my grandchild in a stroller," they would tell her.

The Chases, for one, can't imagine life without their grandchildren. Ms. Chase has the minutiae memorized: Michael dunks his cookies in milk, Kania does not. Mr. Chase tucks Michael in each

night. "I stare at him until he goes to bed," says Mr. Chase. "He keeps me going."

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