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Forum: Support needed for grandparents raising kids

By MATT GILLARD Feb 13, 2016

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Congratulations to the Record-Eagle and reporter Carol Thompson for your Jan. 20 story “Grandparents Raising Grandchildren in Traverse City Area.”

For many social and economic reasons, the number of grandparents who are primary caregivers for their grandchildren has risen sharply in recent years and your report has shed a needed spotlight on a timely and critical issue.

Nearly one-third of children in the state’s welfare system are placed with grandparents and many others are cared for by grandparents not in the system. Nearing or in retirement, often ill and living on fixed incomes, these caregivers face many challenges. Children whose own parents are dealing with incarceration, drug addiction or mental health issues often arrive on their grandparents’ doorsteps suffering from trauma that’s difficult to navigate.

At Michigan’s Children, we’ve heard from many grandparents who have assumed these responsibilities — often without the services and supports children need — and know there is much work to be done in Michigan to improve systems for all involved, including foster, adoptive and kinship families.

Through the “FamilySpeak” forums we’ve hosted, caregivers have shared their challenges and frustrations directly with state lawmakers and policymakers, and they’ve asked for additional flexibility in Michigan’s child welfare system to adequately serve the children.

To adapt to the changing dynamics of our multi-generational society, children and youth in kinship care should receive the same resources as those cared for by foster care parents. There must be support for the challenging costs of education, health and mental health care, child care and transportation, which often overwhelm older relatives living on limited incomes. To address the trauma these children have experienced, immediate services should be available.

As we've read, grandparents are often the silent and invisible caretakers holding sibling groups together; improving the odds for reunification with parents and providing a loving and familiar home that otherwise would fall entirely on the state. To help children grow healthy and strong in the care of their extended families, it's time we examine our programs and services to make accommodations that will help them do that.

Michigan's Children urges that our state follows the lead of national think tanks and other states to look more comprehensively at the circumstances of children being raised not just by grandparents, but also by aunts, uncles and extended relatives, and develop investment, policy and program recommendations for improvement.

These issues can be solved if public policymakers take into account the experiences of caregivers and make adjustments within all systems involved that make sense for these families.

About the author: Matt Gillard is the President and CEO of Michigan's Children, a statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children and youth from cradle to career and their families, with a focus on policy solutions that improve equitable outcomes for all children.

About the forum: The forum is a periodic column of opinion written by Record-Eagle readers in their areas of expertise. Submissions of 500 words or less may be made by emailing letters@record-eagle.com. Please include biographical information and a photo.

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