

Help Relatives Caring for Kids

Gerard Wallace

Guest Essayist

Democrat and Chronicle: August 4, 2008

Family takes care of family. That's a family value that everyone agrees on. Yet, for kinship caregivers — relatives who are substitute parents — the road to family caregiving is filled with potholes.

Although most children are in kinship homes for the same reasons that children enter foster care, most kinship families care for children independently of the foster care system. In America, more than 2.5 million children live with relatives. In New York State, 400,000 children are in this informal child welfare system, while fewer than 27,000 children are in foster care.

Many kinship caregivers are retired and on fixed incomes. Many two-income families choose to replace one paying job with full-time caregiving. Kinship caregivers succeed better than many unrelated foster parents because their love and determination to keep children with their families enable them to overcome any obstacles.

Kinship caregivers face challenges including accessing services; negotiating the education, court, and health systems; and coping with parents who cannot parent. Children who've suffered abuse, neglect, abandonment, or whose parents have died, been incarcerated or are suffering from mental illness also face emotional, psychological and developmental problems.

Sometimes, even becoming a caregiver presents challenges. Child welfare laws favor placement with relatives — but relatives don't have a legal right to care for children. Across state lines, bureaucratic hurdles can be especially cumbersome, delaying and often defeating the efforts of out-of-state relatives to care for children.

For kinship families in the foster care system, there are substantially more services and financial assistance. But kinship foster parents, just like all foster parents, eventually must exit foster care.

In 39 states, kinship foster parents can then become guardians and receive subsidies similar to those in the federal adoption subsidy. The other remaining states, including New York, do not offer subsidized guardianship.

For both kinship foster and non-foster kinship families, additional assistance could dramatically increase the stability and well-being of children. And now for the first time, Congress may be willing to help. On June 24, the House passed the "Fostering Connections to Success Act" (H.R. 6307) to provide federal funds for both kinship navigator programs and subsidized guardianship, as well as funding to help states locate relatives and involve them in family decision-making. For New York, this federal funding is crucial. The number of kinship families far exceeds state resources.

The Senate has two similar bills. Both the "Kinship Caregiver Support Act" (S.661; H.R.2188) and the "Improved Adoption Incentives and Relative Guardianship Support Act of 2008" (S.3038) contain provisions similar to the House bill. All three bills have bipartisan support. Senate action could reconcile the House and Senate versions. Let's take pride in the fact that family takes care of family, and help them succeed.

Gerard Wallace is the Director of the New York State Kinship Navigator, a statewide program operated by Catholic Family Center in Rochester to provide information and resources to kinship caregivers.