

## State helps cushion family relations Financial incentives available to guardians of children in their custody

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Phyllis and Daniel Donaldson are no different from other parents - they make sure their child is fed and help him with his homework.



But the Delta couple's home is not quite typical. Because at ages 63 and 60 respectively, Mr. and Mrs. Donaldson are not heading toward retirement but toward a life of child rearing.

Daniel and Phyllis Donaldson are taking care of their paralyzed grandson, Brandon Eckhoff, 15, in the home in Delta.

( THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT )

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Like thousands of families throughout the state, the Donaldsons are grandparents taking care of their grandchild, Brandon Eckhoff, 15. And thanks to a new state program - the Kinship Incentive Program - to go into effect Jan. 1, the couple may be eligible for up to \$3,500 to help them with their new responsibility.

"That'd be a lot of help, especially with the utilities we have to pay," said Mrs. Donaldson, whose seasonal employment will end soon. "I do the best I can. ... Help would be great."

The Donaldsons became legal guardians of their grandson a few months ago and love having the boy, who is paralyzed from the waist down, under their roof. But making ends meet on seasonal pay and a disability check can be difficult.

The Kinship Incentive Program "is a small cushion to help out those families, to help ease the financial burden of taking in a child," said Ohio Department Job and Family Services spokesman Carmen Stewart. "The ultimate goal is to promote permanency and to keep that family unit together."

In Lucas County, about 4,000 children are in a relative's care. Statewide, that number jumps to about 186,000 families.

Dean Sparks, director of Lucas County Children's Services, said the state program is a good start, but "I don't believe it goes nearly far enough. The state of Ohio clearly needs to do more."

He was concerned that eligibility requirements mean only about 40 families in Lucas County could benefit. Those families, including the Donaldsons, because their grandson was a Lucas County resident, will be notified and then can go through the application process, he said. Mr. Sparks said the majority of families that are taking care of a relative will not be eligible. The situation in other area counties varies. In Hancock County, more than 50 percent of the nearly 85 children removed from their homes long term each year are placed with a relative, said Diana Hoover, Children's Protective Services administrator.

Ottawa County officials determined they do not have any eligible families, but Dave Robenstine, director of the county's Job and Family Services, praised the program. In Fulton County, about five children are placed with a relative, said Ken Caldwell, director of the county's Job and Family Services.

If eligible, a family receives an initial payment of \$1,000 per child to help defray the costs of initial placement. After that, the family may receive \$500 every six months up to a maximum of \$3,500 to support stability in the home. The program expires for a family after three years.

Ms. Stewart said the state has dedicated \$10 million per year to the program from Ohio's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families fund. The program's eligibility requirements include:

- A court has adjudicated the child as abused, neglected, dependent, or unruly on or after July 1.
- The child is defined as special needs, including a part of a sibling group, a minority that is 6 years old or older, has a mental or medical disability, or has a history of drug abuse.
- The gross household income does not exceed 200 percent of the federal poverty guideline.

Families must fill out an application. Information is available in Lucas County from Children's Services, 419-213-3200.

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