

The cost of caring

Relatives serving as foster parents to get financial aid from state

Monday, December 19, 2005

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



TOM DODGE | DISPATCH

Yvonne Anderson, left, had to quit her job after she took in grandchildren Marquis, 5 months, and Charlique, 5, who had been taken from her daughter. She also cares for her mother, Patricia Anderson, right.

Where to turn

For more information on Ohio's Kinship Permanency Incentive Program:

In Franklin County

Call Children Services at 614-341-6035. Relative caregivers who are ineligible for the program can receive other services by contacting the recruitment office at 614-341-6060. Information about other services, such as money management and counseling, is available through FirstLink at 614-221-2255.

In other counties

Call your local child-welfare agency or go to the Public Children Services Association of Ohio Web site at www.pcsao.org after Jan. 1.

Who is eligible?

- ▶ The child must be in the custody or guardianship of a relative or close family friend and have been found abused, neglected, dependent or unruly on or after July 1 of this year.
- ▶ The child must have at least one of these criteria: part of a sibling group; member of a minority; age 6 or older at the time of custody or guardianship; a developmental, medical or mental impairment; history of drug abuse or other risk factor; or been moved among foster homes.
- ▶ The caregiver's gross income can't exceed 200 percent of the federal poverty level, which for a family of three is \$32,180 a year.

Sources: FirstLink, Franklin County Children Services, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Public Children Services Association of Ohio

Yvonne Anderson already had her hands full caring for her ailing 60-year-old mother when she agreed to take in her two grandchildren after Franklin County Children Services took them away from her daughter.

Anderson, 42, of the South Side, could have kept planning for a long-anticipated trip to Maui and saving for retirement. But she didn't.

"I have nothing against foster care or adoption, but I firmly believe family has to care for its own, whatever the costs," Anderson said. "Anything less would have been sinful."

She opened up her home, heart and all the energy she could muster to keep her 5-year-old granddaughter, Charlique, and 5-month-old grandson, Marquis, out of a foster home. That decision cost her her job and what little money she had saved.

A new state program that starts Jan. 1 could give Anderson and other people caring for their relatives' children a financial pick-me-up. Eligible families — who have had custody or guardianship since July 1 — will receive an initial payment of \$1,000 per child followed by a maximum of five \$500 payments over a three-year period, for a total of \$3,500 per child.

"There's nothing more therapeutic for a child who has been removed from their mommy or daddy than family," said Deborrah Armstrong, Children Service's recruitment supervisor. "But for many of these family members, unexpectedly taking in a child can turn their lifestyle upside down."

Nationwide, 6 percent of children live with grandparents. In Ohio, nearly 10 percent — more than 193,000 — are growing up in grandparent-headed households, according to the 2000 Census.

More and more, grandparents and other relatives are taking on parental duties. Contributing to the higher numbers of parents losing custody are factors such as drug abuse, divorce and an increasing number of women being incarcerated, experts say. Poverty, unemployment and teen pregnancy also play roles. So do chronic illness, death and domestic violence.

Many grandparents are not prepared for the demands of young children. They struggle with declining health and energy, fixed incomes and limited help from family and friends.

“I knew it was going to be tough, but I never expected it to be this hard,” Anderson said.

She quit her job as a garage-door installer to care for her grandchildren when they came into her home this summer. Charlique wasn’t yet in kindergarten, and Marquis was a newborn.

The family didn’t wish to discuss why the children were taken from their mother.

“I thought it would be a temporary situation and that my daughter would get herself together,” Anderson said. “But that didn’t happen.”

Savings kept her afloat until mid-November, when she started borrowing from family members and friends and relying on churches and social-service groups. Children Services came through with \$250 for each child so Anderson could make Christmas special.

As of the end of November, 543 of 3,253 children in the agency’s custody were living with relatives. That saves taxpayers \$14 million a year, which is the typical length of time children spend in foster care.

An additional 337 youngsters not in Children Services’ custody live with family members, as do many children who were in foster care but have been adopted.

“It’s about more than dollars and cents,” said John Saros, the agency’s executive director. “Whenever you remove a child from their birth parents, even when it’s an unhealthy situation, it is traumatic for the youngsters.”

Placing children with relatives helps them cope with being separated from their parents by providing continuity and a sense of family. That improves school attendance and academic performance and minimizes behavioral problems, Saros said.

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services has set aside \$10 million from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families fund for the program. Experts predict that 2,200 to 5,000 children statewide will be eligible at any one time. In Franklin County, 233 children currently might be eligible, according to Children Services.

“A person could buy a crib for a baby, clothes for schoolchildren, pay for sports or extracurricular activities for a teenager — really, anything,” said Carrie Anthony, section chief for placement services for Job and Family Services.

Until now, most kinship caregivers could get \$245 a month in Ohio Works money for the first child and \$77 for every subsequent child. Under the new program, they still can receive that money. Foster parents typically receive \$400 to \$500 a month.

While child advocates hail Ohio’s efforts to help relatives, they worry that a bill passed by the U.S. House of Representatives this fall could cancel them out.

The bill would cut about \$600 million in federal funding for foster care for abused and neglected children. It also would prevent local child-welfare agencies from being reimbursed for placing children with caregivers unless they’re licensed foster parents. That policy change is projected to cost Ohio \$4.5 million a year if agencies must put children in foster homes instead of relatives’ homes.

The bill also would overturn a 2003 court ruling that made more children eligible for federal foster-care money, particularly those living with grandparents and other relatives.

Federal officials say people caring for relatives' children should be bound by the same safety requirements as licensed foster parents. Opponents say kinship caregivers already are required to meet many of the same safety measures, including criminal background checks and home visits.

Some worry that the extra oversight, paperwork and required training would discourage people from taking in their relatives' children. Others point out that the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 encourages child-welfare agencies to place children with relatives whenever possible.

"We're making strides here," said Crystal Ward Allen, executive director of the Public Children Services Association of Ohio. "Meanwhile, the federal government is hindering our efforts and moving us backward."

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