

**HOLD ON GRANDMA, HELP IS ON THE WAY:
THE SAN FRANCISCO KINSHIP SUPPORT PROGRAM**

Joyce Richardson*

INTRODUCTION

It was a warm Indian summer morning. The sun was shining brightly, but I felt as if it was 50 degrees. I had been asked to arrive at the courthouse at 9:00a.m. with my daughter. We showed up on time and I was waiting patiently. I don't why I was so nervous. I'd been to court a number of times with the children and their mother. Why did today feel so different? My head hurts so bad and I know my blood pressure is up. I worry about my kids all the time. You know I've practically raised them myself. I wish that I could have some help but I'll continue to do it alone if I have to. If I don't help them they will be sent to a foster home. It's so cold in this courtroom.

I would like to tell you what led me to that day and how some of my prayers were answered. My name is Sophia and I'm 76 years old. Last year the court gave me custody of my three (3) grandchildren. Phillip age 16, Carl age 9 and Susie age 2. Phillip and Carl had been living in and out of my home for the past 8 years without any court interference. Their mother, my daughter, was on drugs so their home life wasn't very stable. When their mother would go out on a binge they would come and stay with me for awhile and sometimes even their mother would come. Well, one day her problem got so bad that she started physically abusing the children and her neighbor called 911. A lady from the welfare office, along with the police, came and removed the children.

A court date was set and I was asked to be there. I'll never forget it. I was scared to death. Was the judge really going to give me, a 76 year old woman custody of 3 children? I had already raised my own 4. I already knew the answer: of course they were going to give me the kids. I wasn't about to let my "kin" live with strangers. Well, they gave me custody and now I'm called a *relative caregiver*. Like I said before the children had been in and out of my home for years but they always went back to their mother. But not this time.

I'm not the only one in a situation like mine. My Child Welfare Worker told me that over the last decade, reports of child abuse and neglect in the United States have almost tripled. This country has experienced a 68% increase in the number of children removed from their families and placed in Foster care. What is happening to our country?

My sister, Roberta, who lives in San Francisco County told me that 19,000 of the 125,000 children under the age of 18 are being raised by relatives. One difference between foster parents and relative caregivers is that foster parents consciously decide that they want to take care of children. Relatives take children out of a sense of responsibility and love. The benefit for a child that is placed with relatives is that they remain connected to their family.

I bet some of you think that relatives receive more support from Social Services than foster parents. Well, we don't. We aren't even recognized as foster parents. We receive little or no support. If a child is not a dependent of the court their caregiver receives less benefits than one who is a dependent.

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The majority of relative caregivers, like myself, have little resources of their own. Many are elderly and not in the best of health. We often have to deal with our own problems as well as those of the young children and their parents. Without the aid of Social Service or other external support services our families are not going to remain intact and more children will have to be placed in foster homes.

Roberta said that there is a center in San Francisco that gives support to relative caregivers called Edgewood Center. I later discovered Edgewood Center for Children and Families had developed a Kinship Support Network as they were interested in meeting the needs of the community. Edgewood primarily served emotionally disturbed children and their families. Over the years they have realized that the needs of families and community have changed and they must proactively respond to those changes. In order to stabilize extended families they have developed two community outreach programs, *Kinship Support and Resource Program* and *Grandparents Who Care*.

Kinship Support and Resource Program provides case management, family support and guidance and other services including assistance with discipline, recreation, education, housing, medical care and financial management. Many of the relative caregivers are older and the children in their care have experienced traumatic loss or abuse and frequently suffer from drug exposure in utero. These children require special medical and educational needs and the Kinship workers are able to provide information and necessary services in order to fulfill the needs.

Grandparents Who Care recognizes the special needs of grandparent caregivers. Their own children may have been lost to drugs or violent crime and now they have little energy or confidence to parent their grandchildren. Through *Grandparents Who Care* they are able to attend weekly support groups and workshops to gain skills and confidence to care for their grandchildren. *Grandparents Who Care* also provides an Independent Living Skills program for non-dependent teenagers in order to help them stay on track by tutoring, recreational activities and self esteem building supportive services.

I took a tour of the facility and was it nice. It was a clean, bright, and cheer- place. Their staff is very diverse. There were grandparents my age working there as well as young and middle aged adults. They came in all shapes, sizes and colors.

BACKGROUND

In 1992, a woman by the name of Lillian Johnson spent a year with support groups made up of grandparents to find out what they wanted. Some of the things they wanted were:

- Respite services so they could have an afternoon off
- Something fun to do
- Respect and recognition
- Advocacy
- Better relationship with the caseworker (They resented young social workers coming into their home and telling them how to raise their children.)

- Help with their own children's issues

Ms. Johnson listened to the grandparents and acted upon what she heard. She went to the Board of Edgewood and the Department of Social Services with a proposal they couldn't refuse. She was very persuasive. Beginning in July 1993, blended funds from San Francisco Department of Social Services, Community Mental Health, Edgewood and small foundation grants paid for staff, space, supplies and other miscellaneous costs for the program. That was quite a collaboration between private and public agencies.

As my sister was telling me these wonderful things about San Francisco's program I kept thinking to myself : *It sure would be nice if Contra Costa had a similar program.*

THE GOOD NEWS

Well, I'd like to tell Roberta that Contra Costa is developing such a program. In fact a Bidders Conference was held on April 7, 1997 announcing a Request for Proposal (RFP) No. 1046 For Family Preservation: In-home Family Preservation Intervention, Kinship Care and Shared Family Care. Any agency wishing to respond to the RFP had to have a representative at the meeting.

The proposal is to private, non-profit agencies for contracted services to provide Family Preservation services. They have \$1,106,000 for the program. The Kinship Support Program has been allocated \$300,000 county wide.. The service contract is for the period July 1, 1997 through June 30, 1998.

Approximately 50% of the out-of-home placements are with kin in Contra Costa County. Most of the placements occur in Richmond and Pittsburg and the majority of the families are African American. The program is geared towards caregivers who are caring for Juvenile court dependent children as well as non dependents. Their goal is to stabilize and enhance placements. In non dependent cases they want to give the kin the support they need so the placement doesn't disintegrate and the child has to enter the foster care system. They would like for the families that are in the system and are stable to have dependency dismissed and exit the system as soon as possible. If the Hannigan Bill passes then this may be possible. The bill will allow relatives who have a stable long-term placement to receive the basic foster care rate and also receive Medi-Cal coverage. Dependency would be dismissed upon the departments entering into a long-term kinship agreement with the relative and with the relative taking on custody or guardianship of the child. Thus the government is not interfering in the family and will save money which can be used elsewhere in the department.

Per the RFP, some of the key concepts for the proposal are:

1. Kinship Care site locations must be in areas of high density of relative caregivers such as Richmond and/or Pittsburg.
2. Outreach services must be available to relatives unable to attend site activities.
3. In-home outreach assistance and case management must be available.

4. Support groups, workshops, training, parenting groups. and a resource library should be developed.
5. Coordination should be developed with existing Information and Referral resources in the targeted area of the County.
6. Relatives should be utilized in the delivery of service.
7. Coordination of services with other govern mental and community organizations.
8. Respite resources should be developed.

Intake forms, evaluation and measuring tools as outcomes will be devised by Social Services Department and the Contractor.

CONCLUSION

Roberta and others like her will be receiving help. It must be hard for her to raise a 16 year old with teen issues, a 9 year old going into adolescence and a 2 year old toddler. On top of that she has a daughter with a substance abuse problem. She will no longer have to worry about her grandchildren going to a foster home.

Now that you have heard Sophia's story I hope that you have a better understanding of the concept of kinship care. So, what are the implications for Alameda County?

The same needs exist in Alameda County as are in San Francisco and Contra Costa Counties. Fifty per cent of our placements are with relatives. The majority of the families are African American. We also have Family Preservation dollars that can be used in creative ways to help our relative caregivers. We should have a program very similar to Contra Costa County's. Alameda County will also be participating in a pilot project with Contra Costa County and three other counties to implement the Hannigan Bill.

Alameda County is currently developing ways to better utilize its dollars and to provide support for relative caregivers. It's been proven that children who live with relatives have better outcomes. If we fail to create a Kinship program it will be harder for our families to remain unified and the Foster Care roles will increase .

So Hold on Grandma, help is on the way!