

Families need federal support for guardianships

By Fatima Goldman and Donna Butts

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For an increasing number of grandparents in the United States, "grandparenting" means much more than weekend trips or summer vacations at grandma or grandpa's house. Unable to live with their parents due to issues such as parental neglect, drug abuse or mental illness, young children are finding safe, loving places to grow up in the homes of their grandparents. Across the country, more than 125,000 grandparents, along with aunts, uncles and other relatives, are caring for children in foster care.

These grandparent and relative caregivers often find themselves in an extremely difficult situation. As foster parents, they don't have the authority to make everyday decisions for their grandchildren, including decisions on education and medical care that can greatly affect their ability to provide stable care.

Although adopting the children would give them the authority they need, for many grandparent caregivers, it simply isn't the right fit. Many grandparents are uncomfortable with legally assuming the role of parent. Moreover, many of these grandparents are dependent on the stipends they receive as foster care parents to provide basic necessities for the children.

Consider the story of Sandra Kelly, a 63-year-old retired grandmother raising two young grandchildren, James and Ashinique. In both cases, the children came to live with their grandmother after New York City's Administration for Children's Services removed them from their parents.

Although Kelly ended up adopting James and is in the process of adopting Ashinique, she acknowledges that the process of adoption and permanent separation from the parents was difficult on her and the children.

Despite the upheaval in her grandchildren's lives, Kelly is moving forward with her adoption of Ashinique. As a foster parent to Ashinique, she doesn't have the authority to make certain important decisions without checking in with the foster care agency first.

Another option that does not involve the finality of adoption might have made an easier transition. A bipartisan bill, the Kinship Caregiver Support Act, introduced by Sens. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., and Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, would provide help for relatives who become legal guardians for kids in foster care. As legal guardians, grandparents like Kelly would have the ability to make key decisions on behalf of their grandchildren, without disrupting family relationships or sacrificing the financial support they need to make ends meet.

If Congress could help relative caregivers by subsidizing legal guardianships, grandparents who are raising their grandchildren would not have to choose between staying in the foster care system and changing basic family relationships.

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