For some Brevard seniors, another round at parenthood

MELBOURNE — M When Deloris Collins envisioned life in her 60s, she saw herself skiing in Aspen. Studying. Traveling to Texas, the Poconos or somewhere, anywhere, when the mood hit her.

Instead, between 5 and 6 p.m. every night, Collins is serving dinner to her 7-year-old grandson and 8-year-old granddaughter, whom she gained custody of after their father went to prison. There’s homework during school months, and play time, and then bedtime.

By the time the oldest, Trenesha, 8, turns 18, Collins will be 71. Being mom to her son’s children wasn’t part of any rosy retirement plan, but “it’s what I have to do. It’s the reality,” the Melbourne native said.

“We were family from the time they came out of the womb.”

At 60, Collins is one of an estimated 2.7 million grandparents in the United States raising a grandchild.

More than 10,000 grandparents in Brevard live with their grandchildren and some 4,450 of those claim responsibility for the children’s care, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That’s roughly 7,700 children locally — about 7 percent of youth in the county — being cared for in some capacity by their parents’ parents.

“There are 10,000 grandparents in Brevard County schools,” said Mary Ann Sterling, 77, founder and president of the 700-member Grandparents Raising Grandchildren of Brevard, or GRGB. It’s the state’s largest support group for grandparents in that situation, offering help since 1996 for everything from financial and legal problems to childcare, medical and school issues.

Such “kinship care” is growing — up 18 percent over the last decade, according to a recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its Florida partner, the Department of Child and Family Studies at the University of South Florida.

Parenting your children’s children takes a toll: financially, physically, mentally. The federal government estimates it costs $990 a month to care for one child. For
grandparents, that sometimes means going back to work or staying in the workplace longer than intended. There is some financial help from the state, but it’s usually far short of $990 a month and also less than what’s provided to foster families, who are required to receive training that grandparents aren’t.

Many grandparents also lack a support network since friends are long past their child-rearing years, living much different lifestyles than they did as parents. And, often, the grandchildren have come from difficult situations and need extra help, too.

The grandparents and those advocating on their behalf say they need more assistance, including easing the route to guardianship. They criticize the Florida Legislature for not doing enough to respond to this growing constituency.

Former state representative Mitch Needelman, now clerk of Brevard courts, recalls constant talk about grandparents’ rights during his eight years in Tallahassee. “There was always a big argument, working to recognize that the grandparents play an important role in the family. The other was money. There was always a battle with that.”

Sterling’s fought that money battle for years.

“When the Department of Children and Families removes children from a dysfunctional family, the first place they look to place them is with the grandparents,” she said.

“And yet, we receive very few benefits, especially compared to foster parents. And when the children wind up coming back to us, they’ve often been traumatized, from bouncing back and forth.”

Seeking assistance

Brevardians called into a second round of parenting duty range in age. Most members of Sterling’s group are in their late 60s to mid-70s, though some are as young as their 30s and others are into their 80s. Some are great-grandparents.

Families affected cross the socioeconomic spectrum.

“We say we lost the right to die,” Sterling said, laughing wryly. “It gives you a reason to keep living, wanting your grandchildren to be self-sustaining before you go.”

Whatever their age, most “grandfamilies”
start out, Sterling said, with “absolutely no idea where to start to get help, or even that they can get help.”

Florida gives grandparents who become guardians — without the involvement of the Department of Children and Families — $180 per month for the first child and $61 per month for any others in the household, through Temporary Cash Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding.

Grandparents who gain custody through the courts, such as in cases of neglect or abuse, are instead eligible for Relative Caregiver Funds based on the child’s age. Maximums are $242 for children up to age 5; $249 per child between 6 and 12; and $298 per child for ages 13 to 17.

A foster family, in contrast, typically receives $15 per day for a child’s care or about $450 a month, “but it’s not an apples to apples comparison,” said Jim Carlson. He’s chief operating officer for Brevard Family Partnership, the local agency handling children in foster care.

“There’s a lot of training and other responsibility that goes into foster care. We’re very grateful to the grandparents and aunts and uncles who step forward and provide homes to these children. The majority of Florida children in out-of-home care are living with relatives ... if they weren’t, they would overwhelm the system.”

Collins gets around $1,000 monthly to care for her grandchildren, including $242 in Relative Caregiver funding for one and another $689 in Social Security funding, as one child is diagnosed as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. A former Harris employee, she works odd jobs. She has taken care of the siblings’ 4-year-old brother in the past, too, with no financial assistance.

Some might ask: Why should a grandparent expect financial help for raising family?

Because these people are at a time in their lives when they’re on fixed incomes, Sterling said. Because whatever they can do for their grandchildren, including keeping them out of the foster care system, is beneficial for their stability and growth, she added, which helps society in the long run.

“I know I had to quit my job when I took my grandchild,” Sterling said. “I traveled a lot for Harris and my grandson would always say, ‘Are you coming back, Grandma?’ ”

'It's getting worse'
Drugs and alcohol are the No. 1 reason for grandparents getting custody in Sterling’s group, she said.

“Then we have abuse, neglect, abandonment, and recently, we’ve had deployments,” she said. “And it’s getting worse.”

Needs are diverse and ongoing: Sterling gets calls every day. One grandmother, 48 years old, recently asked the group for assistance. She is caring for six grandchildren, all younger than 4 and all in diapers.

Guidance for grandparents raising kids in Brevard County is so sought after that GRAND Parenting Again was formed this spring by Aging Matters of Brevard to provide more practical navigational tools.

The group has helped grandparents 55 and older tackle issues ranging from insurance to swimming pool safety, bullying and Internet use, said Heather Dimmig, Aging Matters’ vice president of operations.

In addition, grant money will allow a Volunteers in Service to America recruit to help grandparents apply for benefits and offer tutoring services for grandchildren over the next year, Dimmig said.

There should be no shame, no stigma, directed at grandparents who are doing the best they can for their families, Sterling said.

“A lot of people will tell us that if we’d done a better job with our children, we wouldn’t have this problem,” she said.

“And I always say, ‘All of you who have perfect children, please stand up.’ ”

Wanting what's best

It isn’t always doom and gloom, Collins said.

She pulled out her phone and scrolled to pictures of her “babies.” The 4-year-old was smiling broadly in one picture, one eye squeezed shut.

“He’s learned to wink for the camera,” Collins said proudly. “I just want the best for him.”

Harold and Barbara Koenig of Suntree were awarded custody of their grandson and granddaughter 10 years ago, when the boy was a few months old and the girl just 2.

Over the past two years, they’ve adopted
the children, whose mother had a drug problem “that just really wrecked her life,” Harold Koenig said.

A former manufacturing executive, Koenig is 86. His wife is 76.

“It’s a challenge, as you get older, to raise a family. We weren’t sure it would work out,” he said.

But when a judge told the Koenigs, “If you can’t do it or choose not to, the children will go to foster care. What would you like?” there was no debate.

“We said, ‘We’ll take them,’” Koenig said. “We never questioned it.”

This grandfather-turned-dad-again is especially worried about bullying at his children’s school, where, he said, they are teased about everything from the advanced age of their “parents” to problems with classes. Other grandparents in the group have taken in grandchildren who self-mutilate or have anger issues after having been molested.

“They have to navigate life with a child in a much different and more dangerous world than the one in which they raised their own children,” Sterling said.

She’s been there, learned that. She was 55 when she and her husband gained custody of their then-6-year-old grandson, Matthew Armstrong, after their daughter, Lynda, was killed in a car accident.

Armstrong, now 28, is an attorney in Orlando and is on GRGB’s board of directors. Since grade school, he has watched his grandmother’s support group grow to a point where it’s the primary resource for hundreds of people.

“I don’t think people realize the number of children actually being raised by family caregivers,” he said, arguing they should enjoy the same level of attention and funding as foster parents.

“To me it seems obvious that if you have a stable set of grandparents, it’s a better environment for the child. They’re less likely to bounce from home to home.”

At a recent GRGB meeting in Melbourne, Deloris Collins and more than a dozen other grandparents heard about mental-health services they could qualify for through the state if the child was adjudicated into their care.

Koenig would like to be around to guide his children through their young-adult years.
“My mother lived to be 108. I don’t know if I can do that, but I’m praying that I see them both graduate from high school. We didn’t plan this but it’s been a blessing. It’s keeping us young.”

Trevor Collins, 7, has been living with his grandmother Deloris Collins of Melbourne for the last seven years.

Raising grandchildren, by the numbers
- 2.7 million: American households with grandparents raising their grandchildren in 2010.
- More than 10,000: Grandparents living with their grandchildren in Brevard in 2010, with near half claiming responsibility for their care.
- 50: Percentage of Brevard grandparents raising their grandchildren still in the work force.
- 19: Percentage of Brevard grandparents raising their grandchildren and living below the poverty level.
- $990: Estimated monthly cost of raising one child.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau and Grandparents Raising Grandchildren of Brevard; U.S. Department of Agriculture
Common concerns
Grandparents raising grandchildren:
• Might have to contend with child trauma from parental separation and the emotional and behavioral issues tied to abuse or neglect.
• Sometimes lack legal authority to enroll a child in school or get basic medical care since requirements for becoming foster parents aren’t always applicable to kinship families.
• Are more likely to be poor, single, older, less educated and unemployed. These factors make it difficult for them to take on extra responsibilities associated with raising a child.
Source: Casey Foundation

Florida Kinship Center offers help
The Florida Kinship Center, housed within the USF School of Social Work, has several programs that benefit relative caregivers across the state. The Kinship Care Warmline (800-640-6444) provides emotional support, information and referrals for caregivers statewide.

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