

Editorial: Policy makers need to be aware of the growing trend of children in kinship care

Policies have not kept up with the trend of children living in homes without parents

Staff Reports

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More than ever, children nationally and in Florida are living with relatives and close family friends rather than their biological parents.

Too often, though, policy makers at state and community levels have not altered programs to address that growing trend. And, in many cases, those who have taken on the responsibilities of raising children are under emotional and financial strain and don't take advantage of existing programs available to help them.

According to a new report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, one of the nation's leading advocates for the health and security of children, about 2.7 million children are living in what is called kinship care either through informal arrangements within a family or in conjunction with state child welfare agencies. That's an 18 percent growth during the past decade. In Florida, the number of children living with grandparents, other family members or close family friends is about 164,000.

The Casey report, "Stepping up for kids: What government and communities should do to support kinship families," cites U.S. Census data that indicates kinship caregivers are more likely to be poor, single, older, less educated and unemployed than families in which at least one parent is present.

And, the report said, new data shows that one in 11 children will live in kinship care for at least three consecutive months at some point before age 18. Among black children, one in five will spend some time in kinship care.

Taking on the additional responsibilities of caring for a child because the parents are unable to provide that care can take a heavy toll.

The report said, "Many kinship caregivers take on this responsibility without government assistance, often because they do not realize they could get help. And even those who are able to get help find themselves navigating through thickets of bureaucratic rules and procedures that evolved without kinship families in mind."

Less than 12 percent of kinship families receive temporary cash assistance through that federal program, although nearly all children in such families are eligible and many

of the caregivers themselves are eligible, the report said. Less than half of low-income kinship families receive food stamps and less than half of eligible children in kinship care receive Medicaid coverage.

Clearly there is a disconnect between available assistance and those taking advantage of it.

In Florida, kinship caregivers can find out more about their options through the Florida Kinship Center at the University of South Florida School of Social Work and through its Kinship Care Warmline at 1-800-640-6444. The "warmline" — rather than "hotline" — also provides emotional support and referrals.

Kinship care, even if those entitled to assistance received it, is usually less costly to society than children being placed in state custody, such as in foster homes that do not include kinship caregivers. And, social workers say, kinship care is generally better for the children by providing stability, family bonds and links to the community.

In its conclusion, the Casey report said, in part, "Millions of American families have stepped up to care for the children in their extended families. To help them care for these children, public systems, private agencies, faith-based organizations, and the entire community must also step up."

Awareness of the growing trend of kinship care should be a first step for the community and for policy makers to begin addressing that trend.

HELP FOR CAREGIVERS

Relatives who have taken on the responsibility of caring for children whose parents are absent can get emotional support, information and referrals through the University of South Florida School of Social Work Kinship Care Warmline at 800-640-6444.



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