

A publication sharing ideas and insights



THE DIRECT SERVICE AGENCY OF
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

Voice

Spring 2007 Volume Eight Issue Two

*National Foster Care
Month: Making Their
Stories Good Ones*



*Foster Care Month Mobilizing
a Nation*

*Actress Victoria Rowell Honoring the
Women Who Raised Her*

*Casey Alliance Pioneering Racial
Equity Practices*

*Kevin Campbell Connecting
Children with Lost Families*

Supporting Grandparents and Relative Caregivers

View from Washington



by Robin Nixon, Executive Director, National Foster Care Coalition

JJ, the oldest of four children at age 14, moved with his brothers and sister in Michigan to their grandparents' home when they realized that their mom and dad could not provide a safe home for them. That's right – the kids decided, and left on their own. This decision, while right for the kids, presented a tremendous challenge to their grandparents and aunt, who willingly took on the responsibility of four children. Neither their home nor their incomes were big enough for a family whose size had doubled overnight. Even their house, built by hand by JJ's grandfather and other family members, was not large enough.

The newly expanded family was forced to sell their home and build a larger house on family property out in the country, doing much of the work themselves. JJ remembers working several all-nighters installing hardwood and tile floors in order for the house to be ready for licensing. The family completed a specialized kinship care licensing process with the state, and received a small subsidy for about three years. The grandparents then adopted the four kids and effectively ended all support or assistance from the child welfare system. While JJ and his siblings are happy and secure with their family, JJ regrets the stresses and financial struggles experienced by his aging grandparents as they took care of and, subsequently adopted, him and his siblings. He wishes that there were more supports available to them.

More than 2.5 million children are being raised by grandparents and other relatives, and many need financial assistance in order to support their new family members, according to a 2007 issues brief from the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP). Of these children, more than 125,000 are in the formal foster care system, representing almost 25 percent of the overall population of children in care.

The discussion of what supports kinship families might require is complex, but the benefits to children from such an arrangement are very clear. Children placed with relatives experience more stability in their living arrangements, have fewer behavioral problems, and are often able to remain connected to friends and to their schools, according to the same CLASP brief.

There is a lot of attention in the nation's capital to the issue of supports for grandparents and other relatives providing kinship care and permanent homes for their young relatives. Pending legislation would provide additional funds and services to kinship caregivers, and would establish subsidized guardianship as a valid permanency option for children.

The Kinship Caregivers Support Act, reintroduced in the current Congress by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-NY, would take a number of steps to strengthen support not only for kinship caregivers, but for young people in kinship placement, as well. The proposed Act would do the following:

- Establish a Kinship Navigator Program in states, large metropolitan areas, and Indian tribal organizations to assist kinship caregivers to navigate their way through existing

programs and services. This program would provide families with the guidance they need to learn how to obtain health care coverage for the children in their care, apply for housing assistance, locate childcare, enroll them in school, and gain access to other services.

- Establish a Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program to provide federal assistance to states for subsidized guardianship programs to better serve the needs of kinship care families. This provision gives states the option to use their Title IV-E funds to provide payments to grandparents and other relatives who have assumed legal guardianship of children they've cared for as foster parents.

- Ensure notice to relatives when children enter foster care to make it easier for families to stay together.

The new version of this bill, introduced in early 2007, strengthens systems already in place to support these families by expanding eligibility for the Foster Care Independence Program and strengthening requirements for collaboration in Navigator grants.

For more information on specific legislations, please visit the Child Welfare League of America, www.cwla.org; Generations United, www.gu.org; and the Kids are Waiting Campaign, www.kidsarewaiting.org.