

Grandma's Angels

"God Has A Plan....We Have A Mission"

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Kinship Care

Foster Care vs. Relative Care:

Relative caregivers & foster parents are dealing with the same children from the foster care system. In many regards we share the same issues. The main differences between the two caregivers are:

Foster parents make a conscious decision to take foster children into their home. Before they can accept any children they must attend classes to educate themselves on issues, rights, choices & options. They must prepare their homes to accommodate the amount of children they will be allowed to accept. They know in advance how many children they can take into their homes. They have a choice on whether they will accept medically fragile children, whether they only want to foster temporarily/long term or possibly adopt. In addition, if they receive a child that is disruptive to the family, they may call and ask for the child to be removed from their home.

Relative caregivers get the "dreaded" phone call from a social worker at the Department of Children & Family Services informing them that they have a family member's children. They are given a choice of the children going into foster care or coming to them. Without hesitation, the relative says to bring the children to them. When the children are dropped off, the only instructions are to be in court within 72 hours and that they have 30 days to get them for medical checkups. There is no information left with the relative informing them of what Doctor takes Medi-Cal, where's the nearest school, where they can turn to for resources and help.

The relative does not understand at that point what's in store for them. The attitude is that the parents will NOW get it together. Of course this is going to be short term. We know that the parents don't want to lose their children, that they will do whatever is necessary to get their children back. Unfortunately, in most cases, this is a pipe dream.

The relative gets these children that are born drug/alcohol addicted. They now have to educate themselves on how to care for these children. Their lives are turned upside down. Many have to quit their jobs and/or careers in order to care for these children. Many homes are broken up because Grandpa says he's raised his children and he's not ready to start over by raising more children. Grandma on the other hand, is willing to go to the ends of the earth to care for them. When these traumatized children come into the home, it certainly changes all the dynamics of their life. When the children disrupt the home, they won't call to say come get these children and bring me someone else. The children are family.

The relative also has to deal with the biological parents, because they're family. Foster parents don't have to put up with such nonsense. There comes a point when the relative caregiver has to "cut the umbilical cord" with their family member that continues to go down the same path that had the children taken in the first place. This causes much family tension and even divisions with other family members.

When a foster parent adopts a child, they move forward with their new family member and never again have to deal with the biological parents. The relative caregiver doesn't have such luxury. They still have the parent coming in their homes to disrupt the children telling them that they're going to go back to live with them soon. Every child loves their parents unconditionally, no matter what abuse or neglect they suffered from them.

Goals for Children in Kinship Care:

Allegedly, we are ALL presumed to have the same goals for the children. We are told that the children must always come first. This does not always happen. The children need to know that they are loved and be given a permanent home in which they will feel safe, nourished & loved. If reunification is no longer an option, placement should be in whatever is in the best interest of the child. Permanency with either relative care or foster care should include services that the child needs and deserves. The caregiver needs services, resources, information & knowledge made available to ensure all the children's needs are met to have the best outcome possible. When EVERYONE gets on the same "page," we will begin to see results. Relative caregivers need to have more support in accomplishing this mission.

How will the public know when the foster care children have all the opportunities and support they need?

The public will know when things are better through the children living in their communities. When the children and relative caregiver receive proper services, everyone benefits. School teachers will witness the difference in the child when life is easier for their family when they see less behavior problems. The public sees these families through school,

church, social/sporting activities. They witness the caregiver struggling with the children. When the caregiver can say that their needs are being met, the witnessing public benefits.

County Leadership:

The State is absolutely correct in regards to the correct leadership in Los Angeles County. The leadership has been in lack of accountability up until two years ago, when the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors requested that a task force be formed. Their mission was and is to learn about the plight of the relative caregivers. Up until that point relative caregivers were living under a Gestapo regime.

Relative caregivers were told on a continual basis that the Department's attitude was the old adage "that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." They were also told that the social worker was the first & last word; that if you attempted to go through the chain of command it would be like shooting yourself in the foot and that if you went to the Board of Supervisors, you would find yourself out on a limb by yourself. In other words, retaliation was alive & well. If you didn't abide by these guidelines, you could have your children taken from you.

In the past 1 ½ years we have had leadership in the Kinship Division that treats the relative caregivers with RESPECT. That's not so much to ask for and besides, it's FREE. One cannot demand respect, but is sure makes life easier when it's given. For the first time, relative caregivers are receiving needed information and learning about resources. Knowledge is power. With the proper knowledge and information, the relative caregiver is empowered, therefore making life much easier to navigate.

The County has formed a Kinship Care Committee that meets monthly with the stakeholders. Together, everyone is learning and attempting to implement the federal guidelines in ways that will keep the children together with their families. The most important factor is permanency and that they stay in a loving, stable environment. All issues have been brought to the table such as respite, housing, child care, transportation, education, resources, information, legal issues. Through these efforts, this is truly the first sign of light to be seen at the end of the tunnel.

In addition, two years ago former Mayor Riordan formed the Kinship Care Coordinating Committee. This group of stakeholders includes members from both the County & the City. Mayor Riordan's expectations were to find out which agencies may be duplicating themselves in order to stretch funds and share resources.

Most Pressing Challenges:

The most pressing challenges still facing the relative caregivers are:

Child Care - This is a major obstacle for the relative caregivers if they are working. Sometimes the cost of child care doesn't make it worth going to work. Even if

the relative caregiver doesn't work, she may have her own Doctor or Dentist appointment. She can't possibly drag children with her to these places. It's not like raising your own child, when you could leave them with a family member or neighbor. The relative caregiver cannot leave the children with anyone that has not been fingerprinted and approved by the social worker.

Respite - Respite is so important but seems to be a phantom subject for most. When caring for these traumatized children, the relative caregiver gets to a point of not being able to hear themselves think. Between the time spent with the children, social workers, attorneys, judges, school teachers and biological parents, they can get extremely overwhelmed. Sometimes just an afternoon of lunch with a friend & a movie may be what the Doctor ordered for the day.

Transportation/Education - It is important that the relative caregiver attend the FREE classes given by the Community Colleges and to the various FREE conferences provided by the County. This is where and how they will learn how to properly gather information about services & resources. Many of the relative caregivers either have no transportation or have a "get around the corner" car. They don't dare go any further than the school, grocery store and Doctor.

The County was having local Kinship conferences throughout the year. For the past two years there have been no Kinship conferences allocated in any budgets. Fred & Barbara Lainier recently held their 3rd Annual Foster Conference in Ontario. They are a foster parent association, but have opened their arms to the relative caregivers. This year they brought in Dr. Crumbley for an all day Institute for the relative caregivers. They have promised to include relative caregiver topics in all future conferences.

In regards to conferences, the relative caregivers are invited, AFTER the foster parents. In some instances, the County and/or State funds the expenses such as travel, hotel and meals. In most cases, the funds are not available to the relative caregiver until after the conference. This puts them in a financial strain to attend if they have to wait until after the event to get compensated. Therefore, many don't bother. In addition, there's the old problem of child care. Those that could possibly get away for a couple of days, can't afford the child care. This is why more relatives don't sign up for anything that they have to put money up for first.

Financial Aid - Relative caregivers are not always given the right information for them to form correct choices & options. They are not told about the various rates such as D & F that will help them to better care for the children. Nor are they properly informed on the subject of collecting Yoachum funds, services and resources. Unless a relative caregiver is actively involved with going to monthly support groups, conferences and classes, they aren't informed of resources.

One of the most disturbing situations is that if the children's biological parents were working within six months prior to them being taken, the relative caregiver cannot access Yoachum funding, services and resources. It doesn't matter how much the parents

make financially if none of it is going to the relative to take care of the children. The relative is usually on a fixed income and it is a great financial burden on them, even though there are those that believe that since they're family they shouldn't need financial help. Yet, these same children can be taken from the parents and placed in foster care with the foster parent receiving foster care funding & services immediately.

Media - Relative caregivers should not have to be subjected to the bad media, like they are the ones that caused this whole situation. The media needs to be informed of the good work that relative caregivers and stakeholders are doing. A positive public outreach is needed within the communities, schools and churches. The public should be hearing stories of the well-behaved and loving children that are living with Grandma, Auntie or Uncle and what it means to them.

Medical - Again, if the biological parents were working and the relative can not receive Yoachum funding, they do not get a medical card for the children. But, if that same child goes to a foster home, they get a medical card the same day.

County Employees on Confidentiality - County employees from different departments don't always communicate & respect each other. In other words, the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. There seems to be no clear clarification about sharing information between each other. For instance, the County has hired Kinship Liaisons for the various SPA's. On occasion, the case-carrying worker would not speak with the Kinship liaison, stating that the case was confidential. Everyone should be "on the same page", working together to help the relative and their children receive services. Until the Department learns to work with each other, it leaves little hope to reach the common goal, which is a safe, nurturing and loving home for the children.

Resource Book - Resource books or a brochure should be left with the relative caregiver when the children are left in their care. It should be filled with information such as the various support groups that have monthly meetings and/or the phone number for the various organizations. If they're working, they need to know that they may be eligible for childcare. They need to know about mental health & special education programs. At least the relative doesn't have to sit in limbo, stressing on what happens next. It's reassuring to know that there are others in the same situation in which you can call for information & services.

Relative caregivers need information, education, childcare, respite, mental health services. Services can be provided now at a minimal cost or the public can wait until these traumatized & abused children grow up. More than likely, they may end up in prison with taxpayers paying a much higher price for their incarceration. Economically, it's much more cost effective to fund the needs of these special needs children NOW.

Expectations of Oversight Agencies:

On a yearly basis a questionnaire should be sent to the relative caregiver asking:

- 1- If their service needs are being met;
- 2- How is their relationship with their social worker;
- 3- Are they receiving respect;
- 4- Have they had any respite;
- 5- Are they receiving unannounced visits when there's been no allegations;
- 6- Does their social worker answer their questions;
- 7- Does their social worker inform them of services & social events;
- 8- How do they find out about services; and
- 9- Are the children's educational needs being met such as tutoring.