

Report from the Ad Hoc Grievance Committee

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force

I. Introduction

At the Direction of the Board of the Supervisors, the Office on Aging convened an Ad Hoc Committee representing the Courts and the Department of Public Social Services, and the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren programs of the Office on Aging, to make recommendations on how to best address the grievances being raised by the growing population of grandparents raising grandchildren.

II. Preamble

There are six core values that are recommended to serve as guiding principles for all Riverside County departments serving grandparents raising grandchildren.

ACCESSIBILITY:

County services, including information, guidance and referral, should be available to grandparents raising grandchildren in a way that is user-friendly, affordable, transparent and consistent with legal requirements. All employees shall promote enhanced access to courts and county services by working collaboratively with various departments, agencies, and community based organizations to remove barriers and streamline processes.

RESPECT AND DIGNITY:

All citizens of our county shall be treated with respect and human dignity, especially our grandparents who find themselves with the added responsibility of raising their grandchildren for a myriad of reasons. Grandparents shall be treated with courtesy and professionalism. Grandparents shall be acknowledged and respected for their role as caregivers, and shall be included in all major decisions that affect them.

COLLABORATIVE PROCESS:

In developing effective new programs that constantly improve, county employees must work collaboratively with the myriad of key interested parties, and respect and value each individual's contribution and perspective, including that of grandparents. All participants will be expected to build consensus to the extent possible, and to embrace diversity. These key stakeholders must commit to continued dialogue to develop creative new programs, and focus on long-lasting solutions.

FAIRNESS AND IMPARTIALITY:

County services and assistance to grandparents shall be provided in a fair and impartial manner and without discrimination based on age. This treatment is paramount to insure the public's trust and confidence in our local government. Equitable treatment and fairness require that staff be effectively trained to deal with complex issues, the unique circumstances of grandparents, and with an understanding of diversity. It also requires that procedures, rules, policies and practices be developed, implemented, and reassessed with these key objectives in mind.

All county employees must be vigilant about any practices that prevent fairness and impartiality. They must reexamine their practices on a regular basis, and realign them accordingly.

ACCOUNTABILITY:

In an effort to increase public trust and confidence in our local government and countywide systems, all county service providers must be accountable for the way they deliver services to the grandparent customers. This requires that reasonable standards be established to measure performance against the grandparents' expectations and perceptions.

The old axiom that "what you measure gets attention" is applicable to this guiding principle. A system that self-monitors its procedures will become transparent to the user and in the process will gain credibility and trust from grandparents and the public at large.

EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH:

In order to institutionalize an effective process to assist the growing population of grandparents raising grandchildren and to assure the permanent well being of the children, the system must educate its employees and policy makers to understand the special needs and challenges facing this population. It must also educate grandparents on the resources and options available so that informed choices can be made.

With increased understanding comes effective change to assure the necessary and appropriate level of service, and improve service quality. Part of the education process requires that an ongoing dialogue be established between county departments, grandparents, and members of the community. This will promote better understanding of mutual needs and constraints, and workable solutions can be created through partnership and collaboration.

The added benefit of community dialogue is that members of the community become ambassadors for local government and share the mission, which also assures the well being of children.

III. Major Recurring Grievances identified by Grandparents

A. Grievance Category: Inconsistent/unfair application of regulations and laws

Grievance: Lack of informed consent and informed choice

Inconsistent information from social workers about various legal options, the consequences and implications of those options, and their impact on various financial benefits makes it difficult for grandparents to make decisions in the best interest of the children. In addition, some grandparents experience undue social worker pressure to adopt without explanation of other options.

Grievance: Lack of consistent information on available childcare and how to access it

There are great variations among social workers on what information is provided and when and how it is provided.

Grievance: Lack of understanding on respite care and how to access it

Grandparents receive little guidance on the most effective way to request respite service emphasizing the benefits to the child even though it also provides much needed caregiver relief.

B. Grievance Category: Customer relations/service

Grievance: Inability to attend training classes for caregivers

There is a lack of childcare options available for grandparents.

Grievance: Social worker prejudice against grandparents

Grandparents are experiencing negative attitudes toward aging in some social workers and judgments on how age affects the capacity to parent children. Grandparents also experience negative judgments for having raised “dysfunctional children.”

Grievance: Limited opportunity to evaluate social worker performance and a fear of retaliation from county social workers

Grandparents are intimidated by a power imbalance and the risk of losing the children is a disincentive to making complaints.

Grievance: Information offered on the WarmLine is incomplete or inaccurate and outreach and follow up is not consistent

C. Grievance Category: Lack of coordination across and within county departments

Grievance: Lack of grandparent voice in the courts

Social workers do not consistently include the grandparent's point of view in the progress notes that are part of the court record. The child's attorney does not consistently include the grandparents' point of view. In juvenile cases, an attorney is not appointed to represent the grandparents.

Grievance: County programs and departments are working in isolation and are not cross-referring grandparents to all available resources

D. Grievance Category: Legislative limitations and barriers

Grievance: Limited availability / funding for childcare service

Grievance: Limited availability / funding for grandparent respite services

Grievance: Lack of legal voice and legal rights for grandparents in court proceedings

Grievance: Lack of sharing information across county programs/departments

Interpretation of regulations and strongly entrenched professional practice codes are deterrents to sharing information across county programs and departments in the interests of improved customer service to grandparents.

Grievance: Disparity in public financial support between grandparents and foster parents

Grievance: MediCal eligibility for seniors does not take into account family size

IV. Current new programs being developed through the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force that may assist in the prevention and satisfaction of grievances raised by grandparents

The Multi-Disciplinary Team that will bring together representatives from multiple departments to address complex cases. (funded by Prop 10)

The new Grandparent Advocacy program that has trained 30 volunteer grandparent advocates to assist individuals with navigating the system. (funded by Prop 10 and Older Americans Act Family Caregiver)

A vision and program concept for a One Stop Center for Grandparents that would bring together in one setting a variety of government agencies that provide services to grandparents. (seeking grant funding)

Plans for a model legal self-help center in coordination with the One Stop Grandparent Center. (seeking funding)

The KinCare program in Hemet and Perris (Quail Valley). (funded by state Kinship funds)

The availability of pro bono attorneys in Probate Court on a means tested basis for guardianships. (volunteer attorneys)

The establishment of a guardianship assistance program, under the direction of the Supervising Probate Attorney, to assist with guardianship questions and concerns.

V. Priorities identified for new system improvements

A shift within DPSS to a more family centered service approach inclusive of the whole family, (kin, biological relatives and caregivers) in decision-making.

A system of checks and balances and accountability for social workers within DPSS to assure grandparents are consistently receiving essential information at critical points of decision and in a fair and impartial manner.

More collaborative and innovative approaches in relative caregiver training to improve access for grandparents and to provide childcare.

Expanded opportunities for joint discussion between grandparents and social workers to expand understanding and to build mutual trust and respect.

Coordination and electronic data sharing across Juvenile, Family and Probate Courts.

Advocacy for expanded resources to provide case management, child-care, respite care, and mental health counseling for grandparents raising grandchildren.

VI. Specific recommendations related to Grandparent grievance prevention and resolution

The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force should explore the feasibility of developing an **all-purpose Ombudsman grievance prevention and resolution process** located outside of the department of social services and the courts to respond to grandparent grievances in a manner that is effective and considers ethnic and minority needs. The Office on Education and the Department of Mental Health should be included in the planning process and in the implementation of the Ombudsman pilot. (Assign to Program Committee)

The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force should coordinate a process that will link the centralized placement services of DPSS (Grandparent Warm line and foster care advocates), DPSS adoption social workers and CPS social workers, the KinCare program, and the new Multi-Disciplinary Team and the Grandparent Advocacy program to better **coordinate service to grandparents and prevent and resolve grandparent grievances**. (Assign to System Change Committee)

The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force should develop a system for **tracking grandparent customer satisfaction**, including the development of measurement tools for use by county departments, grandparents and the community. This system should include a measure to track grandparent satisfaction with the courts and how they might be made more user friendly. (Assign to System Change Committee)

DPSS should expand and redesign social worker and supervisor training to address grandparent concerns about ageism and grandparent rights, including the right in informed choice, and implement a system that assures **social worker and supervisor accountability** for measuring improved customer service to grandparents. (Assign to System Change Committee)

The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force should continue to place high priority on the development of a **One Stop Center for Grandparents**. (Assign to Program Committee)

The Grandparent Raising Grandchildren Task Force should continue regular outreach to grandparent support groups throughout the county to uncover the concerns and grievances of grandparents, and **hold public forums to identify strategies** that can address and resolve the issues identified. (Task Force as a whole)

The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force and Committees should proceed with the **implementation of these recommendations**, and report back to the Board of Supervisors on progress being made and any obstacles encountered.

VII. Contributors to the Report:

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GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

DPSS ADDENDUM

TO THE AD HOC GRIEVANCE COMMITTEE

The Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) wholeheartedly supports the core values expressed in the December 2002 report prepared by the Ad Hoc Grievance Committee:

- Accessibility
- Respect and Dignity
- Collaborative Process
- Fairness and Impartiality
- Accountability
- Education and Community Outreach

We support, value, and admire grandparents and other relatives, who step in with love and self sacrifice to help raise children who cannot safely remain in the homes of their natural parents. We also value the opportunity to hear from this committee on how our system can be improved. We would like to take this opportunity to report on the efforts in process to address these concerns, and to articulate our plans for future improvements. Supportive, suitable, loving relative caregivers are the most precious resource available to children who can no longer remain safely in their own homes. DPSS intends to continue assisting grandparents and other relatives raising their kin with all available resources.

The grievances listed within the report's category A (Inconsistent/unfair application of regulations and laws) describe three problem areas:

- Differing and conflicting information given by different social workers at different times regarding resource availability and legal processes.
- Arbitrary decisions made by social services staff regarding access to resources such as childcare.
- Confusing information regarding legal requirements and options.

We are addressing these issues by:

- Developing written materials (brochures) explaining the legalities and procedures regarding permanency options for children (such as adoptions and legal guardianship) and the basic requirements for being a relative caregiver. The brochure, entitled “Family Matters”, explains the processes for placing and maintaining a child with relative caregivers and enumerates the options available to relative caregivers when a placement must become permanent for the child. This will be completed by May 2003.
- Developing written materials explaining available financial support options. A “Family Support” brochure will explain all government funding available to children placed with relatives. This will be completed by May 2003.
- Revising policy to ensure fair and equitable use of resources with limited funding such as childcare and respite care. Policy is being developed that sets priorities for use of our very limited funding for childcare. Childcare subsidies will be used primarily for relative caregivers and for children receiving services while placed with their parents. Childcare funding will be limited to short periods of time in order to ensure equitable access to this increasingly limited resource. The written policies will be shared with the committee in draft form for comment.
- Developing written materials regarding limited funded resources for distribution to both relative and non-relative caregivers. A brochure explaining the time limits and other restrictions on childcare funding will be written and ready for distribution by this summer.

Making sure that everyone has the same information will assist both relative caregivers and social workers in discussing the options best suited to each individual family situation. Clear policies regarding the use of limited funded resources such as childcare will eliminate inequities in the distribution of those resources. Clear explanations and policies in written form also act as training tools for the social work staff, improving each worker’s knowledge of and familiarity with the issues most important to our clients.

In category B (Customer relations/service) the main issues articulated are:

- Requiring activities for caregivers but without the minimal support needed for the caregivers to meet the requirement.
- Negative attitudes and comments aimed at caregivers’ abilities to provide well and make good judgments regarding the children in their care.
- Helplessness when confronted with perceived injustices and abuses of power on the part of the social workers.

- Lack of available, timely, and accurate advice, information, and referrals to help alleviate issues as they arise.

The issues listed above are being addressed as follows:

- DPSS is a willing participant in problem-solving issues that it cannot address alone. While the Department, for example, cannot provide child care for adults participating in caregiver training courses, we invite dialogue with other community partners and caregivers about how child care could be arranged. The Foster Parent Training Advisory Board, the Parents by Choice Board, Prevent Child Abuse- Riverside County (the lead Child Abuse Prevention Agency) are all existing forums in which such dialogue may occur. In addition, DPSS is planning, as part of our strategic process for community outreach, on conducting open forums in each of its five operational regions address ongoing issues regarding the care and safety of children.
- A Family Centered Practice approach to children and families places relative caregivers at the very core of services to children. All of our social services staff will be trained to assess individual family strengths, service needs and risk factors using a standardized tool (Structured Decision Making). The use of SDM guides each social worker to approach each family with the same thorough, family centered assessment process. SDM will be fully implemented in our County by July 2003. Training has already begun for managers and supervisors.
- DPSS recognizes that policies, philosophies and training alone do not control individual human behavior. The vast majority of our social workers are respectful and caring of the people with whom they work. Most have enormous respect for relative caregivers. However, every system has individuals who may sometimes say or do the wrong thing. DPSS is aware that clients fear retaliation such as losing the children or losing access to resources for the children, if they complain. We have developed a complaint protocol (attached) that ensures a prompt, thorough response to people with the grievances or complaints and protects them against retaliation. Interpersonal issues can be addressed with detailed information (who, where, what, when, why and how). We are willing to work on individual issues that are brought to our attention.
- Efforts are underway to update the resource information available to the Warm Line, train the staff responsible for answering the phones, and reestablishing specific contacts for services within the Department (such

as CalWorks). We plan a comprehensive customer service initiative for the Warm Line operation to be completed by July 2003.

The Ad Hoc Committee describes a lack of coordination between governmental agencies. Specifically, the Committee mentions that the Court reports do not have information from grandparents and relatives regarding the children in their care. When a grandparent or other caregiver has a child placed with him under the supervision of the Juvenile Court, the Court requires that information from the caregiver about the child be included in each review report (submitted by the Department every six months). In addition, caregivers have the right to provide written information to the Court at the time of each review. Individual lapses regarding these procedures would surely constitute a valid complaint and specific instances of such negligence should be brought to the Department's attention. They will be corrected immediately.

DPSS admires the dedication of family members who commit to raising the children of relatives. We know that for anyone, the addition of even the most beloved children to a household can result in major disruptions to lifestyles and plans. We look forward to continuing our participation on the Grandparent Task Force and to future dialogues. We want to do everything within our power to assist relatives in being the best possible caregivers for their children.