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Relief for Grandparents Raising Grandkids

BY ANDY HART

"If I knew how much fun my grandchildren would be, I would have had them first!"

This amusing bumper sticker points out the differences between being a parent and being a grandparent — under normal circumstances.

In most cases, grandparents can enjoy their grandchildren with little of the responsibilities, the hard work or the financial strain of actually raising a child.

But, for a variety of reasons, an increasing number of Hartford grandparents have assumed the role of actual parent with all its hardships.

Hartford Probate Court Judge Robert Killian said that when he assumed his position 22 years ago, his court would handle less than 100 cases a year in which a grandparent or other relative asked to assume custody of a child. Last year he handled almost 500 such cases, he said.

"We all thought we were going to have fun in our so-called Golden Years but now we're raising kids all over again," said Chandler Street resident Carmen Lozada, who has been raising her late daughter's two sons (one age 19, the other 6) for several years.

To assist people like Lozada, the Kinship Fund was created to provide financial assistance for grandparents and other relatives who are raising children. The Fund is a court-administered program that provides small grants for children in the care of their grandparents who have been appointed guardianship in a probate court.

The grants, which are frequently used for items such as school supplies, counseling, eye glasses, field trips and dance lessons, range from \$50 to \$250.

"It doesn't sound like much but believe me, it's a godsend. It's been very beneficial for people like us. We're not rich people. We're what you call 'working stiffs,'" said Lozada.

The fund also provides grants for "respite services" for the grandparents in the amount of \$2,000, which



Carmen Lozada decorates a birthday cake for one of her clients. Lozada is raising her late daughter's two sons and finds cake decorating, which she usually does early on Saturday morning, a welcome break. "It's a time to be by myself and be creative," she said. (Hart photo)



Senator Toni Harp (10th District) and Senator Edith Prague (19th District) recently teamed up with local probate judges to thank grandparents who are legal guardians receiving assistance from The Kinship Fund. Back row (L to R): Honorable Frank Forgione, New Haven Regional Court; Honorable Robert K. Killian Jr., Hartford Probate Court; Honorable James J. Lawlor, Office of Probate Court Administrator in West Hartford. Front row (L to R): Honorable Paul J. Ganim, Bridgeport Probate Court; Honorable John A. Keyes, New Haven Probate Court.

can be used for child care, counseling and other bills bringing relief to their situation.

Killian said grandparents raising children are "real heroes." He explained that in Connecticut, about 5,000 children are in the care of foster parents, which is far more expensive to the state, while approximately 60,000 children are being cared for by grandparents and other relatives.

"Can you imagine the financial

strain that would be placed on the state if just a fraction of those 60,000 kids were placed in foster homes?" Killian said. As an example, Killian said that a foster parent raising three children receives about \$2,100 per month from the state, while a grandparent receives only about \$540.

"These grandparents are saving the State of Connecticut a tremendous amount of money...the Kinship Fund is just a small way to

say thank you...The Respite Fund is another step in the right direction. I wish we could do more."

Killian also pointed out that children placed in foster care have a case worker from the State Department of Children and Families, who provide support in many areas, such as meeting with teachers at the child's school. Grandparents do not have such support.

Lozada said she knows many other grandparents who have become parents all over again. "Some are dealing with it but some are just too old. It takes a lot of energy. It's very stressful. But you do have more patience. I guess that comes with age."

The Kinship Fund was established in New Haven in 1998 as a pilot program by the Children's Trust Fund, Connecticut Voices for Children, Yale University, Children in Placement and the Probate Court. It was so successful it now serves nine probate court districts in Connecticut including Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport, Norwich and Waterbury.