

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: Truly grand parents

More children locally, nationwide are raised by grandparents

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Arthur Kornhaber, founder and president of the Foundation for Grandparenting, movingly notes the obvious: "Every time a child is born, a grandparent is born too."

Driving to the jubilant details, journalist Megan Rutherford wrote, "There is a magical moment in the latter half of life when adults have a chance to reinvent themselves. They take on new names: Nana, Grandma, Bubbeh, Poppy, Grandpa, Zayde. They cast themselves in new roles: caregiver, mentor, pal, pamperer. They are filled with powerful new emotions that make them feel alive and vital. They become grandparents."

Jerry and Suzanne Perry are doting grandparents to two very active grandkids who surround them with affection, energy and joy, while adding purpose to their lives. At the same time, Jerry and Suzanne teach them their core values while providing them with unreserved love — no strings attached.

Most grandparents, however, can send their grandchildren home after an afternoon of frolicking and get on with the things that grandparents do. That is not the case for the Perrys. They have temporary custody of their grandchildren and they are very active in raising them.

Jerry and Suzanne are not alone. In 2007, one in 10 San Angelo children lived with a grandparent. More than 3,800 children lived with grandparents by 2009, representing a 65 percent increase over the number from 2007.

More than 2,500 grandparents in the city are primary caregivers to at least one grandchild, and slightly more than half (50.2 percent) of these have had this responsibility for three years or more. There are dramatic increases in both the number of grandparents with primary caregiving responsibility and the number of children living with grandparents in our city.

National surveys reflect that grandparents raise and nurture their grandchildren for a variety of reasons including the death of a parent or a military deployment. Many care for grandchildren while their own children are looking for another job or undergoing career retraining.

Grandparents also become primarily responsible because parents are physically, emotionally or financially unable to look after their children. Grandparents sometimes represent the only stable environment available for children.

Whatever the reason, the Perrys and other grandparents often are willing to take on the responsibility. They take their grandchildren to school, wait in a pediatric dentist's office and attend school sporting events. These involvements confirm the evolving role grandparents play in the daily lives of their grandchildren.

However, these changes do not come without some detrimental consequences.

Grandparent providers, especially older grandparents living on fixed incomes, did not envision needing to raise another family. They often find financial, health, housing and work hurdles thwarting hard-earned and long-awaited personal plans.

Economic recession is one of the factors likely to increase the numbers of grandparents taking responsibilities for children. Ironically the same recession forces severely pinch the income resources of grandparents at the same time. Interest on fixed income investments has been pushed down and maintained at meager levels in the current recession and hopes for any modest increase in Social Security benefits routinely are disappointed.

But the cost of living does not stand still. In San Angelo, for example, the composite cost of living index measured 89.2 in 2007 before the recession onslaught. This meant the local cost of living was about 11 percent below the national average. The 2010 index crept up to 92.4, or about 3 percentage points closer to the national average.

As purchasing power declines, pressures build for grandparents to help out with grandchildren. Grandparents respond, sometimes by compromising their own health and nutrition needs and by turning to food stamps, housing and utility bill subsidies, and charities.

Some re-enter the workforce as evidenced by a 43 percent increase between 2007 and 2009 in the number of local grandparents in the workforce, even as unemployment was rising.

The data amplify the need for additional resources that enable a growing number of vulnerable "grandfamilies" to effectively provide for children while maintaining their own security. Concerned citizens in our community took exploratory steps in 2007 when a small group of individuals met to discuss ways to strengthen grandfamilies. Regrettably, a sustainable coalition did not emerge.

The Area Agency on Aging of the Concho Valley tried to fill the gap for a while. Sponsored by the Concho Valley Council of Governments, the agency used Title III funding under the Older Americans Act of 1965 and the Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services to address some of the needs of older people and their caregivers.

This was a noteworthy endeavor, but the Area Agency on Aging no longer provides an effective program to help empower the city's grandfamilies.

Many states and communities across the country have a variety of family caregiver support programs in place. Some are based in state health departments and area agencies on aging. Others operate from universities, rural extension services, churches and various family service-missioned nonprofits.

For its part, Texas appears to be much more centered on connecting grandparents to fee-for-service home health care companies and retirement community land development projects chalked with golf course and dining club amenities.

Struggling grandfamilies are nearly invisible in Texas. It is difficult for any of them (and their numbers are rising, as in San Angelo) to find any resource remotely tailored to their needs.

Yet their needs are fairly well known. They need to not be community pariahs, so emotional and social support is important.

Opening access to services is important too, as is training on how to balance the needs of caregiver grandparents with their children's needs in health, nutrition or financial management. Importantly, much need also is centered on legal counsel to making complex decisions involving custody, guardianship, medical consent and powers of attorney that plague caregiving relationships.

There is one entity at ASU's Center for Community Wellness, Engagement, and Development that is seeking to make some traction in this area. The WED Center's Caregiver Research Institute is vigorously seeking to develop a program to allay the immense stress that grandparents and caregivers feel. This is a good step toward the emotional and social support needed.

The truth is, however, that our community needs to resurrect the 2007 initiative to robustly address the needs of our grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. The concerns they noticed then have worsened and are likely to escalate into the future.

An alliance of individuals, groups and agencies in San Angelo should consider tailoring a model to build the capacities of this very vulnerable group in our community that is pleased to be called Nana, Grandma, Bubbeh, Poppy, Grandpa, Zayde.

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