

4th Annual *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren* Conference: Another Tremendous Success



Commissioners

If you missed the 4th Annual *Commission on the Status of Grandparents raising Grandchildren* conference this year, you missed a great deal. Held at a new location, the Best Western Royal Plaza Hotel in Marlboro on June 10th, registrations for the full day event filled up early, with 120 guests registered and a number of others on a waiting list (we hope to accommodate a larger audience next year).

This year, attendees were an eclectic group of grandparent and relative caregivers, social workers, social service agencies, state representatives and their staffers, judges and court personnel. The conference featured an expanded series of workshops, an awards ceremony and keynote speakers and, once again, the interactive "World Cafe".

The day began with a welcome from Grandparents' Commission Chair, John Lepper, who introduced the day's keynote speaker, the Honorable Angela M. Ordonez, Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Probate and Family Courts. Judge Ordonez was inspiring, speaking about the impact that living with her grandparents had on her life, their love and the values they imparted on her. It was a stirring and emotional reminder of the contributions grandparents make every day.

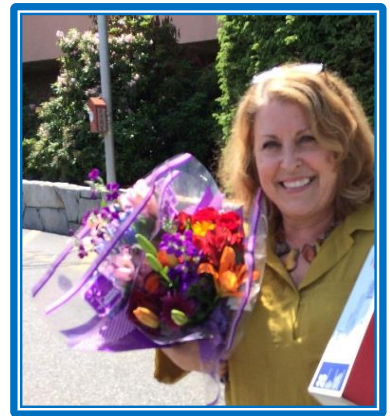
Her talk was followed by a series of workshops covering many of the issues grandparents have requested including legal issues, child care, finances and the complicated relationships with children and grandchildren that relative caregivers so often encounter.

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The lunch was followed by the honoring of Sheila Donahue-King, this year's recipient of the Harriet Jackson-Lyons Leadership award, for her work as a founding Commissioner and her professional efforts on grandparents' behalf at the Executive Office of Elder Affairs.

In addition, Chair John Lepper recognized Manuela DaCosta, the retiring DCF representative on the Commission, for her work with the grandparent support groups and developing greater support for and understanding of grandparents and relative caregivers within DCF itself. Both Sheila and Manuela have set a high standard for advocacy, and the Commission is extremely grateful for their contributions.



Following the ceremony, Commissioner John Laing once again facilitated the "World Cafe", an interactive opportunity for attendees to identify the most important issues facing "Grandfamilies", and discuss solutions and the resources required to support them and the children they care for. As always, this was the hit of the day, with active participation by all and many new ideas and solutions emerging. John's humorous, but efficient manner was appreciated by all. The result was a consensus on the top priorities to guide the Commission's work in the coming year. The top five were:

1. Increasing public awareness of grandparenting and kinship care issues and providing outreach to grandfamilies through access to information regarding resources, education of professionals, improved coordination among the service agencies, and a focus on more locally targeted resources.
2. Hiring a staff person/coordinator/director for the Commission in order to organize the growing list of initiatives and address the suggestions raised in this meeting.
3. Strengthen the relationship with DCF by insisting upon and working with the Department to train workers, develop a Commission liaison with DCF central and area offices, developing a liaison with local courts, and to address the confusion around CORI/Waiver issues and restrictions for kin.

4. Provide more support in obtaining child care vouchers and summer camp subsidies. For grandparents who now have to work to support their new families, child care subsidies are essential.
5. Three topics tied for 5th place
 - Education regarding legal and custody issues for grandparents
 - Identifying and accessing financial support and resources for grandfamilies
 - Developing stronger advocacy and strengthening legislative support

A full and engaging day ended with closing comments by Kerry Bickford who spoke about the Commission's growing communication capacity, newsletter, upcoming website improvements and other efforts to better communicate with grandparents around the state.

We want to recognize everyone who attended, the presenters, keynote speaker, Commissioners, volunteers, and especially the amazing work of Colleen Pritoni, the conference's chief organizer, and hardest worker.

If you were attending this year, we know we will see you again. If not, we hope to meet you when you attend next year. You won't regret it.