

Senior Spotlight

Groups reach out to grandparents raising grandkids

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The often-sudden responsibility comes with many problems

No matter how much a grandparent loves a grandchild, having the responsibility for raising them comes with many challenges. And with complicated problems like custody, adoption and financial support at the forefront of discussion, emotions ran high for the 20 or so grandparents that attended "Legal Issues Facing Grandparents Raising Grandchildren," which was held at the Sandwich Public Library on May 14.

The event, which was co-sponsored by Women's Empowerment through Cape Area Networking (WE CAN) of Harwich, Cape Cod Neighborhood Support Coalition and the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, featured Lynn Girton, attorney and vice president of the commission, Kerry Bickford, secretary of the commission, and Skip Stuck, co-chairman and editor of commission's newsletter.

Girton, who was the main presenter, volunteers her time and services to similar workshops across Massachusetts, and opened the event by encouraging attendees to not only ask questions, but to share their stories throughout the evening.

While not all the grandparents present were facing legal problems, many shared the emotional trauma that has taken its toll since losing their own children to addiction, automobile accidents or war, with the result that they have taken on a parental role for their grandchildren. Girton, who took the time to address each member of the audience, said that while each case had a different set of circumstances, "no one is alone."

"Over the years I have found that while we need to approach things from a legal perspective, we also need to recognize that there is the emotional side of things that needs to be addressed as well," Girton said. "This issue has become near and dear to my heart, and we can talk about any topic that all of you want to address."

Stuck, who was raised by his grandmother, agreed with Girton that both legal and emotional struggles play a part when a grandparent, or any family member, steps up to raise a child in lieu of their own parents. He said he has seen 35- to 80-year-old grandparents that have taken on a parental role, and said education and support -- no matter the age -- is necessary.

"The number of grandparents raising grandchildren in this state has grown dramatically in the last 20 to 30 years with parents being unable to care for kids due to drugs and alcohol

involvement, incarceration and sometimes illness. As a grandparent that may be a generation or two removed from being a parent; it's hard to re-learn how to take on that role in today's day and age especially," Stuck said. "Even for families that are intact, it still takes a village, and sometimes it takes an army to raise a child, and it's very important to recognize the struggles and expectations that come along with becoming a parent again."

But with support groups that are held bi-weekly at the Council on Aging in Bourne, the Cape Cod Neighborhood Support Coalition in Hyannis and Child and Family Services in Harwich, Stuck is confident that family members that need help navigating their way through the maze of systems like Probate Court and the Department of Child and Family Services will not only find resources, but also connections to those that are enduring the same hardships.

"Right now there are about 33 grandparent support groups throughout the state that meet every other week, and they talk over any kind of issue you can think of, and families can find assistance. Groups like ours, as well as this workshop, are designed to make sure we have good information available for grandparents so they can protect their families," Stuck said.

While this specific workshop is only held once a year, Andi Genser, executive director of WE CAN, revealed that because this problem is "of great concern" on the Cape, there is a good chance that future collaborations will move forward in coming months.

"While WE CAN is here for women who might be experiencing challenges or transition in their lives, that includes grandparents, and our goal is to offer hope, opportunities and guidance with legal services and mentoring events. For this particular workshop, Lynn, Kerry and Skip had the expertise and we had the ability to support them with legal information, so it was a great team effort," Genser said. "It is also imperative to address the fact that the Cape has one of the largest population of those that are 50 and over in the state, and thousands have become grandparents raising their grandchildren. So we know we definitely need to focus on this issue and continue to help out where we can."

And as Stuck and Bickford continue to compile information and resources for grandparents raising grandchildren, Stuck says he hopes to meet anyone that needs help at future support groups and meetings.

"We have definitely increased the support groups and amount of information that gets out there because the whole opioid crisis has been front and center throughout the state and has been on the radar more than ever before, which is resulting in grandparents becoming parents in huge numbers," he said. "As time goes on we expect to see the number of multi-generational families increase, but we are here for them and will do everything we can."