Grandparents raising kids of addicts struggle with little aid

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With each passing day, Guy Renda thinks, his household edges closer to typical. So many of the kids in his working-class neighborhood live with grandparents or other relatives instead of mothers and fathers.

“When we go to parent-teacher conferences, it’s obvious,” he said.

Renda and his wife, Martha, are among the more than 100,000 grandparents raising grandchildren in Ohio, a fast-growing demographic bound by love and duty and, too often, struggle.

The nation’s crisis of drug addiction remains relentless in its outsourcing of parental responsibility. But the pool of aid to help so-called kinship families clothe, feed and educate kids they neither expected nor planned for barely budges.

“The landscape of support is the same, or virtually,” said “grandfamilies” expert Ana Beltran, an adviser to the Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group Generations United. “There needs be recognition that ongoing support is needed, at least for many. These kids would otherwise be in the foster system and cost taxpayers billions more.”

The vast majority of children who wind up with other relatives aren’t in the protective-services system. Those who start out there are more easily tracked, and their numbers have soared. Since 2010, according to the Public Children Services Association of Ohio, the number of kids who come into state custody and are placed with relatives in lieu of foster care has increased by 116 percent.
In Franklin County, about 19 percent of kids removed from their homes in 2012 were placed with relatives; by last year, the share had nearly doubled, to about 36 percent.

Research has long shown that kids fare better with kinship arrangements than in foster homes. The grandparents and relatives, however, rarely receive comparable financial assistance and benefits.

“I try not to think about what we gave up, because these kids are more important than any retirement we could have had,” said Mrs. Renda, who had to quit her job several years ago and tap her retirement account to buy a minivan when she and her husband began caring for Hunter, now 14, and 12-year-old Brooklynn and 11-year-old Dominic.

The Rendas had been planning to downsize from their family home in Franklin Township near the Southwest Side when Franklin County Children Services called. They’re glad they hesitated to move, because it soon became clear the situation was unlikely to be temporary. The children’s parents continued to relapse into substance abuse and couldn’t provide a stable home.

“When we started out, there was more help — some kinship caregiver money, a couple clothing vouchers a year,” Mrs. Renda said, but the assistance they received from the state and county was time-limited and has ended. “Their parents? They qualified for every benefit you can get, but we don’t.”

Ohio, despite being especially hard hit by the epidemic of opioid abuse, is not among the 35 states that now have an ongoing kinship assistance program to provide subsidies to caregiver families who meet requirements similar to those of foster parents. Although the idea has been kicked around for years, Ohio’s 88 county agencies — many of them poor and without a property tax levy — are wary about the local share of the cost.

“The consensus was that if the legislature agreed to appropriate those funds, then the counties would move forward with that,” said Scott Britton, assistant director of the Public Children Services Association of Ohio.

Advocates now wonder, Britton said, whether a recent federal court decision about kinship-caregivers in Kentucky eventually could affect Ohio. The 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, whose jurisdiction includes Ohio, ruled last year that
Kentucky had to pay relatives who provide free foster care just as the state pays licensed foster families. The payments would last until a case is closed through adoption or a permanent-custody decision.

Kentucky appealed the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court, which in October declined to hear the case.

“We’re all of two minds about it,” Britton said. “We would love to be able to give more support to kinship care providers. If we had to pay them those per diems, our agencies would go bankrupt even faster than they are now.”

Ohio kinship families who offer a permanent home to a child can receive up to eight, relatively modest payments (the initial benefit is $525; subsequent payments drop to $300) from the state over a 48-month period to help stabilize the family. Some county agencies, including Franklin, also provide matching kinship payments and other temporary help, but the only ongoing financial aid available is federal child-only welfare aid.

Many kinship families aren’t aware of those resources, or are hesitant to seek help. “There’s so much confusion out there,” said Kim Novak of Apple Valley in Knox County. “People are new to this, and they don’t know what to do.”

Novak, an advocate for grandfamilies, has been caring for her 14-year-old grandson most of his life. His mother, Novak’s 33-year-old daughter, died of an overdose in October after more than a year in recovery. “It’s still warm, for sure,” Novak said of the family’s heartbreak. “These drugs are unforgiving. They are killing our children, and leaving our grandchildren without parents.”

The Rendas receive $474 a month in child-only welfare money for their three grandchildren — about $316 for the first child, and $79 for each additional minor. Foster parents caring for the three children in Franklin County, by comparison, likely would receive about $2,000 a month.

“We’re not asking for sympathy, no. But as much as I can, I try to advocate,” Mrs. Renda said. “The last time I went to a kinship meeting the place was packed. I’d never seen anything like it. It’s crazy. There are families trying to care for seven, eight, nine kids.”
In 2014, the Rendas helped to promote a property tax levy campaign for Franklin County Children Services because they believe the community support is critical. Though their grandchildren are far from grown, the Rendas no longer receive financial help from the agency.

“There's worse-off people, we know,” Mr. Renda said. “I'm devastated because I see so many who don’t have anything.”

Still, at 65, he can’t afford to retire or to buy another home. The children are doing well, but their grandparents worry about crime and drug use in the area.

Last year, Mrs. Renda heard a boom and ran to the corner to find that a young man had crashed his car. “He got out of the car and needles fell out,” she said.

A baby sat in an unsecured car seat. Mrs. Renda reached for him, hoping and praying that he, too, had family who would keep him safe.

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