



Assessment of the Needs of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren in Doña Ana County, New Mexico

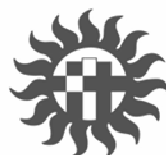
Executive Summary

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E Background and Purpose of Needs Assessment

In the United States, more than 2.4 million grandparents are raising 4.5 million children, numbers that have risen steadily since the 1970s. During the 1990s, this trend garnered national attention when the number of grandparent caregivers began to grow more rapidly. In Doña Ana County, there are an estimated 3,003 grandparents who are the primary caregivers for their grandchildren, representing 54% of the 5,524 grandparents in the county who are living with their grandchildren. Grandparents and other relative caregivers confront many economic and emotional challenges when assuming responsibility for their new families. Those who once worked full time may find that their new family responsibilities prevent them from working outside the home, creating economic hardships. In many cases, grandparents have taken in their grandchildren temporarily until the children's parents are able to resume their childrearing responsibilities, which mean they are not the legal guardians of the children they are raising. As informal guardians, grandparents raising grandchildren may encounter difficulties enrolling their grandchildren in school, providing health insurance coverage, or accessing other programs and benefits. They also face many emotional challenges, such as dealing with the loss or absence of their grandchildren's parent(s).

Based on national and local trends, as well as the reputation of Las Cruces as a retirement destination for older Americans, the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Housing Study Committee (GRG Housing Study Committee) was formed to identify and address the needs of grandparents raising grandchildren in the City of Las Cruces and Doña Ana County. The committee included representatives from the Housing Authority of the City of Las Cruces and the City of Las Cruces Senior Programs, as well as individuals with other expertise and experience working with seniors and grandparents. Through their work in the community, committee members were acutely aware of the many challenges that grandparents face when raising grandchildren and were interested in learning about and developing programs to support grandparents in their caregiver roles. To that end, the Committee embarked on an effort to develop housing programs for this population and secured funding from the New Mexico legislature. As a first step toward developing housing programs, the Committee decided to conduct a needs assessment of grandparents raising grandchildren. Bids were solicited from independent contractors and a contract was awarded to John Snow, Inc. (JSI), a health care research and consulting organization headquartered in Boston, to conduct the assessment.

Methodology

The needs assessment of grandparents raising grandchildren was an eight-month, collaborative effort between the GRG Housing Study Committee, JSI, and local community members. In May 2007, JSI and the committee met in Las Cruces for the first time to discuss a range of data collection methods that could be used to conduct the needs assessment. Together, the Committee and JSI agreed that a survey was the best approach for gathering the desired data. Although originally conceived to address housing needs of grandparents raising grandchildren, the Committee and JSI also agreed that other issues, such as legal rights and educational and social service needs, affected the lives of grandparents and grandchildren and decided that the survey should include a range of questions about demographics, household characteristics, housing situation, challenges of raising grandchildren, and related housing

and social service needs. By the end of June 2007, a final draft of the needs assessment survey tool was completed and ready for a pilot test that was conducted with eight grandparent volunteers in July. Once finalized, JSI and the GRG Housing Study Committee made the survey available in three formats (hard copy, digital copy, and online) and in two languages (Spanish and English). Committed to distributing the survey as widely as possible, JSI worked closely with the GRG Housing Study Committee to develop and reach out to a comprehensive list of contacts within Doña Ana County. The Committee felt strongly that there should be countywide representation in the responses. Therefore, JSI contacted different media throughout the County to get coverage and raise awareness about the survey. Incentives were offered to grandparents for completing the survey, and JSI joined the GRG Housing Study Committee for survey distribution at Grandparents Day in September.

Profile of Survey Respondents

By October 15, 2007 (the close of the survey collection period), 106 completed surveys were received; 103 were determined to be valid. The total number of completed was well-below the project's target of 300, reflecting the difficulty of reaching a population for which there is no comprehensive mailing list or other network for distribution.

Survey respondents reflect generally the population of grandparents raising grandchildren in Doña Ana County. Of the 103 survey respondents, 85% were female. The largest proportion of respondents were White/Caucasian (46%), and another 46% either reported that they were of a race other than the categories provided on the survey, or race was not specified. Respondents' housing characteristics very closely matched the US Census estimates for grandparents raising grandchildren in Doña Ana County, with 80% of respondents residing in owner-occupied housing and 20% in renter-occupied units. Fifty-four percent of respondents were either married (47%) or living with a domestic partner (7%). Respondents were a relatively young group, with nearly two-thirds under the age of 60; the mean age was 57 years (median = 50).

Nearly one-half of respondents were employed, with 33% working full-time, 6% part-time, 5% self-employed, and 4% retired, but working part-time. Over one-half of respondents (53%) have a high school degree or less; the remaining 47% have had some college education, with 6% holding a Bachelor's degree and 8% a graduate degree. A large proportion of respondents reported that they were Hispanic or Latino/a (70%), and roughly 90% of respondents reported that they speak and read English well or very well.

The vast majority of respondents are raising grandchildren on limited incomes, with 57% earning less than \$25,000 per year. About a quarter of respondents reported no source of income. Nearly 60% of respondents relied on Medicaid (36%) or Medicare (22%) for health care coverage, while another 28% have private health insurance and 17% have no health insurance. Finally, fifty-four percent of respondents reported that their own overall health was either poor (7%) or fair (47%). The grandchildren that respondents are raising were markedly healthier, with 88% reported to be in either good or excellent health.

Social service needs

Grandparents reported that they experience a range of challenges as caregivers, but those experienced by the most respondents include stress (50%), less time for themselves (50%), financial burdens (43%),

and less privacy (32%). Service utilization across all 16 services included in the survey was low, with all but one service (support groups) used by less than 10% of respondents. The top four services with the highest unmet need (meaning the service was needed, but not being used) were education about available services (55%), support groups (52%), legal assistance (52%), and assistance accessing services (49%). The largest barriers to grandparents' use of services were either not knowing a service was available (44%) or not knowing where to get it (40%).

The four services for grandchildren for which there was the greatest unmet need were scholarships (60%), support groups (53%), tutoring (47%) and summer camp programs (46%). The barriers to service utilization were the same as for grandparents.

Housing Services

A second focus of the assessment was to understand housing challenges and needs. Respondents were asked to select which challenges they experience with their home, including insufficient money for rent/mortgage, lease restrictions on number of residents or pets, lack of space, and proximity to services. Surprisingly, the largest proportion of respondents reported that they had no challenges (29%), followed closely by 28% who said they did not have enough space or were cramped and 27% who said they had insufficient money for their rent or mortgage. Another 12% reported "other" which included the need for repairs (4%) and the cost or need for utilities (4%).

In spite of what appears to be some level of need for housing assistance, there was a notable reluctance among survey respondents to take advantage of public housing programs. Over 75% of respondents said that they would not be willing to move from their current home into affordable housing or public housing programs, indicating a strong attachment to their homes.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this needs assessment, the following recommendations are proposed to guide service development and further analysis of the needs of grandparents who are raising grandchildren:

- ❖ Free or low-cost legal services are needed to help grandparents define and secure their relationship with the child in their care. This was one of the top needs reported in the survey.
- ❖ For existing services, there must be increased publicity and education to reach this population and to increase their awareness of what already exists. Any new services that are developed must include education and outreach to this population; local newspapers were found to be particularly effective, but other approaches should be considered.
- ❖ Efforts to explore housing needs and potential solutions (e.g., intergenerational housing) must continue. These could include key informant interviews or focus groups with grandparents raising grandchildren that allow for a richer discussion of housing issues and possible housing models and services.
- ❖ Grandparents raising grandchildren need support groups of some form. In addition, any future data collection activities related to program development for grandparents should use focus groups or key informant interviews so that grandparents feel they have a voice.

Conclusion

Grandparents raising grandchildren serve a critical and under-recognized role in the Doña Ana County community by providing stable, loving, and supportive environments for children in need. More than half of the grandparents surveyed have been caring for their grandchildren for five or more years, and 84% of them said they have never lost responsibility for the child during that time, reflecting a stable and strong commitment to their caregiver role. They play an important and valuable role in the community by taking in children that might otherwise be abandoned or left to the custody of state and local child service programs. Nonetheless, grandparents raising grandchildren in Doña Ana County face significant challenges and experience a range of social and housing service needs that must be addressed to support their critical role in the community.