

Hannah News Service - Comprehensive Coverage of Ohio Government

Vol. 125, No. 448

Wednesday, October 13, 2004

New Subsidized Guardianship Program Supported

Ohio Department of Aging Director Joan Lawrence joined with Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO) and Rep. Linda Reidelbach (R-Columbus) Wednesday to support the creation of a subsidized legal guardianship program in Ohio. According to PCSAO Director Crystal Allen, it could be funded with "approximately \$3 million" of Ohio's "nearly \$500 million in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) reserves."

This program would specifically target relatives who are currently caring for approximately 3,000 children in the state's temporary foster care system. The relative caregiver would receive \$250/month until the child reaches 18. In addition, they would be awarded permanent legal custody or guardianship so that "children services can then get out of their lives." This latter requires changes in state law in addition to the funding, Allen noted.

Lawrence added that "when there are programs we can fund with the unobligated TANF dollars, we should do it to make life better for these kinship caregivers."

Allen commented that six other states have had "tremendous success" with such a program. She added that not only does it save the child welfare system substantial funds through reduced caseworker visits and court supervision, it is much better for the children, for whom there are much better outcomes.

In fact, the programs have been so successful, Allen said the federal government should make the subsidized guardianship program one of the options available to all states using federal child welfare funds. Currently, that is possible only with a waiver from the federal government.

Supporting that view is a report from the national group "Fostering Results" which was released Wednesday. Entitled "Family Ties: Supporting Permanence for Children in Safe and Stable Foster Care with Relatives and Other Caregivers," the study found that "foster children are safer and more secure when placed with relatives than in foster homes unknown to them." Allen said they adjust better and do better in school.

"By supporting legal guardianship with a subsidy the same way federal policy now supports adoption, additional children in long-term foster care with kin could join the thousands of children who have already left the child welfare system for adoptive homes. Subsidizing legal guardianship complements subsidized adoption and builds on the strengths that foster care by grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives brings when children can no longer be looked after by their birth parents and a court determines that adoption is not an appropriate option for them," the report explains.

That report is available online at <http://www.fosteringresults.org>.

Rep. Reidelbach said that "subsidized legal guardianship in Ohio would transfer decision-making rights to grandparents and other caregivers, offering them a pathway out of temporary care and into safe, loving and permanent homes."

Allen explained that this proposal has been part of the discussions in the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services stakeholders group on the best use of TANF funds. This is the group that is designing a replacement for the "consolidated funding" system that had been used until the department discovered earlier this summer that the TANF funds were being inappropriately used for food stamps and Medicaid. Department spokesman Jon Allen said, "This is one of several proposals about how to increase TANF spending. We continue to consider the various proposals but have not made any final decisions at this time." Those decisions are expected early next month.

PCSAO's Allen explained that there are currently three programs in place to help kinship caregivers:

- The Kinship Navigator Programs which helps kinship caregivers find existing resources in their communities to assist as they raise the children in their household.
- Under the TANF-funding Ohio Works First program, these children can be eligible for a "child only" grant of \$243/month plus \$70/month for each additional sibling.
- **HB130**, which just became effective this summer, provides grandparents who do not have judicial custody the necessary legal documentation to enroll the children in school and to access medical care for them.