

## THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

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Proposal would give cash to caregivers of relatives  
Other plans touted for \$431 million left in state agency fund  
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Encarnacion Pyle

When she took in four granddaughters who had been in foster care, Rhonda Terry had two options: keep working full time, but spend nearly half her salary on child care, or quit her job.

It wasn't a real choice, she said: "I made good money, but not that good."

A new proposal that would allow people to become legal guardians and receive financial help raising their relatives' children would have spared Terry, 44, of the South Side, that painful realization.

Several child and family advocates gathered at the Statehouse yesterday to push for a plan to pay about 3,000 relative caregivers in Ohio \$250 a month per child.

It's one of several proposals that have sprouted since August, when the Center for Community Solutions, a Cleveland advocacy group, revealed that the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services has \$431 million in unobligated funds to help the poor.

Other proposals include increasing the monthly cash assistance for families participating in the Ohio Works First program, restoring child-care cuts and creating a state earned-income tax credit similar to the federal program, said Jon Allen, spokesman for the state Department of Job and Family Services.

An agency work group will make a recommendation next month on how to use the reserve of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families money.

"The goal is to have the ideas debated, flushed out and incorporated into the state budget process, which begins in late January/early February," Allen said. "It would require legislative input and ultimately approval."

Under the guardianship plan, eligible caregivers would receive a monthly stipend per child, similar to the state subsidy for people adopting foster care and other special-needs children. Relatives would receive the money until the child turned 18. Advocates estimate the program would cost \$3 million a year.

"Welfare (reform) has been overwhelmingly successful and that's why we have all these funds" available, said Joan Lawrence, director of the Ohio Department of Aging.

Children in foster care can find permanent, safe and secure homes with grandparents and other relatives through subsidized guardianship, Lawrence said, citing a national report released yesterday by Fostering Results.

There are an estimated 19,250 children in foster care nationwide and about 3,000 in Ohio in "permanency limbo," where a court has determined they cannot be safely returned to their parents and adoption is not an option, said Crystal Allen, executive director of the Public Children Services Association of Ohio.

Unlike adoption, guardianship doesn't require terminating parental rights. And unlike foster care, the relatives wouldn't be subject to routine court appearances, quarterly case reviews and monthly visits by caseworkers, she said.

"Studies show that children cared for by relatives are safer, less likely to change living arrangements, have fewer behavior problems and better attendance in school."

When the state retains legal custody, the government, through a caseworker and a judge, is the only legally recognized decision-maker for the child. For relatives caring for a family member's children, simple tasks such as immunizations, school pictures and out-of-state trips can require prior approval and multiple signatures from that family member.

"In such cases, the better choice is for government to get out of the lives of these families," said state Rep. Linda Reidelbach, a Columbus Republican.

Under current Ohio law, children being cared for by extended family can't receive subsidies if they become guardians. By contrast, other states have financed guardianship with state money, federal TANF funds or waivers for federal child-welfare dollars, said John Saros, executive director of Franklin County Children Services.

In states with waivers, such as California, the number of children in long-term foster care declined by one-third.

"Most child-welfare agencies use local funds for foster care; this would allow us to shift some of the burden back on the federal government," Saros said.

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