

Report: Grandma Needs Government Help to be Children's Guardian

by **Stefanie Hubbs** - Katie Sutton is lucky. When the 56-year-old Philadelphia resident became the legal custodian for five of her grandchildren last year, she continued to receive the same government stipend as she had as their foster parent.

Washington, D.C. - Scripps Howard Foundation Wire - Other guardians are not so lucky. Generally, if a foster parent adopts or becomes a legal guardian, local and federal financial assistance ends or is reduced.



But wider use of government subsidies for legal guardians could provide more children with a permanent home, according to a study released Wednesday.

"Adoption was not an option for me," Sutton said at a news conference. "I did not want my son to lose all his rights to his kids. I'm hoping that one day he'll become emotionally, financially able to support them."

Under the direction of a state-subsidized program, Sutton is a positive example for those advocating the legal guardianship option, said Jennifer Miller, a consultant who helped write the report.

Sutton, herself a product of the child welfare system, had been the children's foster parent for six years before becoming their guardian. She said one of the benefits is being able to bypass a mountain of paperwork that used to be necessary for simple tasks such as medical appointments and out-of-state trips.

Sutton said she can use good judgment about her grandchildren's lives without any bureaucratic intervention.

"Support for this option is growing," said Mark Testa, co-director of Fostering Results, the nonpartisan, Chicago-based public education campaign that conducted the study. "This may be an idea whose time has finally come."

Known as "Family Ties," the study is sponsored by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to the Children and Family Research Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Testa said the study provides a unique perspective on the value of subsidized legal guardianship. He said there are more than 19,000 U.S. foster care children - those for whom adoption is not an option - who are in "permanency limbo" and could benefit from the guardianship of grandparents or other relatives.

"It gives the kids a sense of security knowing that this is their home and that they're not going anywhere," Sutton said.

In the late 1990s, several states responded to a federal invitation for child welfare demonstration programs by applying for waivers to give money to foster parents willing to become legal guardians.

Since 1997, seven states - Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Montana, New Mexico, North Carolina and Oregon - have used federal waivers to provide subsidies to relatives who become legal guardians. The Pennsylvania program uses state and local money.

Asked about the safety of placing abused children with relatives who could share similarly abusive traits, Testa said, "This is the old 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree' argument. We say, thank goodness the tree has more than one branch."

Sutton said the idea that all children in foster care have histories of parental abuse is an unfair assumption. She said her grandchildren live with her because their parents could not provide for them financially.

Nancy S. Salyers, co-director of Fostering Results and a former Cook County Juvenile Court judge, said the court's role in child welfare cases is critical. She said it is important to ask the right questions to make sure children are placed in the position that is best for them, and adoption, guardianship and foster care are all options.

When judges have determined that children are in safe and stable homes, prolonging the time they are in foster care diverts limited resources away from other children in need, Testa said.