

Illinois Department on Aging



Will County Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Pilot Program

January 1, 2024 - January 1, 2025

Illinois Department on Aging Mission

The mission of the Illinois Department on Aging is to serve and advocate for older Illinoisans and their caregivers by administering quality and culturally appropriate programs that promote partnerships and encourage independence, dignity, and quality of life.

Public Act 103-0411

The Illinois Department on Aging shall establish and administer a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Pilot Program to operate in Will County beginning January 1, 2024, through January 1, 2027. The pilot program shall require the Senior Services Center of Will County to designate a staff member to serve as an intake coordinator for Will County who shall help connect grandparents raising grandchildren to existing relevant services and resources provided by the various State agencies, including, but not limited to, services and resources provided by the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Human Services, the Department on Aging, the Department of Healthcare and Family Services, and the State Board of Education.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (GRG) Program Overview

Currently, there are two very limited funding streams for Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children program. The federal Older American Act funds are dispersed by the Area Agencies on Aging and have an age restriction of age 55 or older. These funds support a Caregiver Specialist at each of the 13 Area Agencies Aging (AAA) across the state. The Caregiver Specialists assist eligible community members access the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren program as well as other services and/or resources that may be helpful. Since 1999, the state provides \$300,000 in state General Revenue Funds that helps to expand the federal program to grandparents and older relatives, regardless of their age or income, who are raising children through the Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children program. The state funding has remained stagnant since 1999, even though the cost of services has increased over the last 26 years. Since its inception, this program has assisted thousands of relatives who are seeking resources and referrals in their efforts to provide safe, stable, and loving homes for children. Services provided through the program are respite, legal assistance, support groups, counseling, and gap-filling to meet emergency needs.

Another access point for these services is the Illinois Department on Aging's Senior HelpLine that makes referrals on behalf of grandparents to the Caregiver Specialist at the appropriate AAA. The Caregiver Specialist will follow up with the grandparent, provide assistance directly from the AAA or may make a referral to one of the GRG providers in their area for assistance/follow-up.

Introduction from Deputy Majority Leader Natalie A. Manley

Like many things in the legislature, the road I traveled was a long one, to discover that there was this great need in our state to help support grandparents, who were now raising their own grandchildren. That road was determined to continue until something could be done about it. Over my time in the state legislature, I had been interacting with many families, who found themselves in similar situations.

But Covid exacerbated this looming problem and seemed to shine a spotlight on the struggles many families were experiencing – more specifically, that many parents were absent and their children were left to be raised by their grandparents. Having met several people in and around my district who were active in a grandparents' support group, I attempted to put together a legislative advisory committee composed of several of the support group members and then extended that invitation to others in the community interested in this issue.

I wasn't sure how this committee would be received, after all, grandparents are typically older and I wasn't sure they'd be up for this challenge. I was shocked when so many of these dedicated and loving caregivers came through the door. They were forthcoming about their own situations, honest about their own children, and willing to do whatever it took to make life better for their grandchildren and other families like their own.

The months went by, and they all kept coming back. The grandparents talked about the physical and mental health issues their grandchildren had, the costs associated with adequate medical care, the barriers to finding providers, the difficulties in navigating the legal system and the impossibility of getting answers to questions they didn't know how to find online.

Over many months, the committee engaged with various state agencies, both in person and virtually, asking questions, and searching for information that could be an actual first step in assisting everyone involved.

Good legislation takes time, it's frustrating, but it is something that needs to be done thoughtfully and carefully.

Finally, in the midst of a committee meeting, I began to hear a common theme. The grandparents kept mentioning what they needed and then an agency would respond that they had that resource. There seemed to be resources available but finding them was the problem. With the help of the House human services staff we drafted legislation that created a three-year pilot program, to fund a position for a person to work one on one with those who need to find resources within any state agency to help grandparents and the children they are raising.

Working hand-in-glove with Will County Senior Services Center, efforts are underway to make sure that if the resources are available. No matter what office is responsible for them, the services make it to those who need it.

Since the legislation was signed into law by Governor JB Pritzker, here in Will County on August 2, 2023 the pilot program has been named "GRG+" (Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Plus) because it isn't

only grandparents who are raising children not their own. It's often times aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, neighbors. The list goes on. The resources are there for all those who step in to provide a family structure and to support to these children. The three-year pilot program requires a data collection and reporting component that will prove the efficacy of the program. The results of the program are as important as the families it serves. It is my hope that if the results show a need, that the program can fill that it be made permanent and even expanded to the rest of the state.

Prevalence of Grandparent's Raising Grandchildren or Older Relatives Raising Children

Year one of this program identified hundreds of families in which someone other than the parent is raising children. Very often it is grandparents that raise the children, however, many circumstances exist, including great grandparents raising grandchildren, great aunts and uncles raising grand nieces, aunts and uncles raising nieces and nephews, older siblings raising younger siblings, and family friends raising others' children.

According to Rita Facchina, Executive Director of CASA of River Valley, over four hundred children are served through CASA each year. Of those, more than half rely on a non-parent for primary custody and care. "Any opportunity or resolution that we can provide to better serve a family is critical," Facchina said. "There is absolutely a need for this kind of assistance."

"Families are exhausted from trying to navigate all the services they are entitled to receive," said Tammie Parrish, advocate supervisor for CASA of River Valley. "We are working with the families one-on-one, and we see the difficulties they face and the stress they are going through."

Similarly, Sheree Stilwell agrees, co-founder of Grandparents Raising Children Education and Support Group, which meets monthly. Stilwell chose full adoption of their grandchild, which rendered them with no resources, such as insurance benefits to the child afterwards. "We lost everything," Stilwell said. "We struggled with all of that financially on our own."

Through the support group at Senior Services Center of Will County, Stilwell meets many people who struggle with basic needs, such as a grandfather recently who could not get his grandchild enrolled in school. The support group directs these non-parents to the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Plus program. Families report back to Stilwell that the program offers "very good support."

Over the last several years, across the state, there has been a slight decrease in the overall numbers of grandparents raising grandchildren according to the US Census data from 2010, 2015, and 2021, as demonstrated in the chart below. The grandparents raising grandchildren numbers are presented by the 13 Planning and Service Areas (PSA) throughout the state, these do not include relatives who are not grandparents who are raising relative children.

60+ Grandparents Raising Grandchildren			
PSA	2010	2015	2021
1	1,031	846	807
2	1,511	1,676	2,492
3	495	554	485
4	527	572	661
5	1,075	992	1,346
6	125	101	231
7	703	637	678
8	804	916	818
9	355	311	330
10	259	281	182
11	446	556	654
12	4,443	3,448	2,682
13	1,858	2,172	1,535
Total	13,632	13,062	12,901

A map of the PSAs is below:



Whereas statewide, there was a slight decrease in the overall number of grandparents raising grandchildren from 2010 to 2021, in Will County, the number reported in 2021 almost doubled the number reported in 2010. Additionally, the number of persons aged 60 and older also increased significantly: .

Age 60+ Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (Will)			
County	2010	2015	2021
Will County	312	393	658

Pilot Program Legislation

Section 5. The Illinois Act on the Aging is amended by adding Section 8.13 as follows:

(20 ILCS 105/8.13 new)

Sec. 8.13. Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Pilot Program.

(a) Subject to additional appropriations, the Department shall establish and administer a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Pilot Program to operate in Will County beginning January 1, 2024 through January 1, 2027. The pilot program shall require the Senior Services Center of Will County to designate a staff member to serve as an intake coordinator for Will County who shall help connect grandparents raising grandchildren to existing relevant services and resources provided by the various State agencies, including, but not limited to, services and resources provided by the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Human Services, the Department on Aging, the Department of Healthcare and Family Services, and the State Board of Education. The intake coordinator shall provide services at local senior services centers in Will County that are operated by the Senior Services Center of Will County and shall work with the Department on Aging to create a public awareness campaign on the services and resources offered by each of the agencies. The intake coordinator shall maintain records regarding the number of families who received referrals, the specific services each family was referred to and received, and the frequency of calls and visits. The intake coordinator selected by the Senior Services Center of Will County must be knowledgeable on the following programs:

- (1) The Extended Family Support Program administered by the Department of Children and Family Services.
- (2) The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Program administered by the Department on Aging.
- (3) The Child Only Grants assistance component of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program administered by the Department of Human Services.
- (4) The Children Health Insurance Program administered by the Department of Healthcare and Family Services.

(b) The intake coordinator must be given the contact information for the designated point of contact for each State agency listed in subsection (a). Each State agency's designated point of contact shall provide educational materials and training on the different programs provided by the State agency. The intake coordinator may receive this information within 14 days after his or her selection by the Senior Services Center of Will County in accordance with this Section.

(c) By January 1 of each year beginning in 2025 until the pilot program terminates, the Department on Aging shall submit an annual report to the General Assembly on the number of families who received referrals to relevant services from the intake coordinator during the prior calendar year, the specific services each family was referred to and received, and other related information on the frequency of calls and visits to the office of the intake coordinator during the reporting period.

Will County Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Plus Pilot Program January 1, 2024-January 1, 2025

General Overview

Senior Services Center of Will County implemented the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Plus (GRG+) pilot program over the 2024 calendar year by building and executing an outreach and awareness campaign, developing a resource network, and having a strong focus on case management with participants.

The outreach campaign included direct outreach with targeted mailings providing an overview of programs available to older relatives raising children to Will County Schools social workers. Outreach also included targeting existing Senior Services Center of Will County participants who are grandparents or older relatives raising children and may benefit from additional resources. Additionally, Senior Services Center of Will County worked to increase visibility of the program through social media posts, participation in community resource events, radio interviews and ads, and staffing a resource table during parent/teacher conference nights at targeted Joliet-area schools. Through these outreach efforts, over this last year program participants consisted of people referred either by themselves or partner agencies.

The Intake Coordinator collaborated with designated point of contact agency staff to learn a) what services and supports they offer that may support kinship families, b) eligibility requirements for those services, and c) procedures for accessing those services. A mapping of community resources was completed to identify local and independent agencies offering complementary supports for kinship families including, but not limited to, resources for clothing, food, and furniture. Also, the Intake Coordinator accessed McKinney-Vento coordinators at area schools to educate them on the program and, where appropriate, connect these coordinators with GRG+ program participants to access school-centered rights for the children they are raising.

Direct participant-centered work focused on case management to identify needs and goals, then matching existing community supports to those needs/goals and accessing supports via the identified processes. Priorities for participants trended to reliable healthcare, access to school, before/after school programs, and basic essential needs including, but not limited to, clothing, food, furniture, and school supplies.

The Intake Coordinator maintained records regarding the number of families who received referrals, the specific services each family was referred to and received, and the frequency of calls and visits. On the following page, please see the chart with the number of families, referrals and services provided. The intake coordinator recorded the number of families who received referrals, the specific services each family was referred to and received, frequency of calls and visits to the office of the intake coordinator.

Calendar Year	2024
Fiscal years	2024-2025

The frequency of calls and visits	YTD
Number of GRG interactions per week	6.5
Units	25
Number of GRG intakes	44
Number of GRG Care Coordination	97
Number of I&A GRG contacts	110
Unduplicated number of persons served	39

The number of families who received referrals:	
Number of older relatives raising children	43

Number of referrals made	113
Number of services started	34
Number of referrals/ services denied and reasons	0
Outreach	
Events per week (average)	3.5
Average attendance at outreach events	320

Types of services started:

- Utility Assistance (LIHEAP)
- TANF
- Medicaid
- HeadStart/childcare
- Furniture assistance
- Domestic violence counseling
- Housing
- Tutoring
- McKinney Vento Fund access (clothing, transportation, therapy)
- Youth counseling
- 3E Services
- Healthcare and Family Services (HFS) connecting to medical providers
- Legal assistance
- Financial assistance for college students through IDDES
- FAFSA

The following is a breakdown of the number of referrals that were made to the state agencies.

- Department of Children and Family Services: 8
- Healthcare and Family Services: 6
- Department of Human services: 5

- Department on Aging: 4
- State Board of Education: 5

Successes

Illinois Department on Aging helped to broker direct contacts for state agencies with programs that help to support grandparents or older relatives raising children. Senior Services Center of Will County met with each contact person from the various state agencies to establish a connection and present information about the Senior Services Center of Will County Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Plus (GRG+) Pilot Program. These state agencies included:

- Department of Children and Family Services
 - Extended Family Support Program
 - Kinship Navigator Task Force
- Department of Human Services
 - Child Only Grant
- Department on Aging
 - Grandparents and Other Relative Raising Children Program
- Department of Healthcare and Family Services
 - Children Health Insurance Program
- State Board of Education
 - McKinney-Vento Act for homeless children to attend school without barriers

Will County developed a public awareness campaign, that entailed a great deal of intergenerational outreach. To increase visibility of this program, Will County staff attended several community events, including school functions and fairs where information was provided about the GRG Pilot program. Additionally, Will County staffed resource tables during parent/teacher conferences to increase visibility of the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Plus Program and provide information on this resource.

Over the year, there were many successes, which included, connecting families with mental health counselors to get assistance with coping with various issues, and connecting children/families with many other services including:

- Utility Assistance (LIHEAP)
- TANF
- Medicaid
- HeadStart/childcare
- Furniture assistance
- Domestic violence counseling
- Housing
- Tutoring
- McKinney Vento Fund access (clothing, transportation, therapy)
- Youth counseling
- 3E Services
- HFS connecting to medical providers
- Legal Assistance
- Financial assistance for college students through IDDES
- FAFSA

Another success came through work with the State Board of Education where the Senior Services Center of Will County GRG+ Pilot Program developed the contacts and language needed to successfully advocate and refer children who are homeless to school through the McKinney-Vento Act. Additionally, many families attended sessions on getting their children into the trades or community colleges with little or no financial strain on the caregiver.

Testimonials

While several older relatives raising children have benefitted from the services through the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Plus (GRG+) program, a few took the time to offer testimonials on what this program means to them.

"I am a retired veteran and I hired a private lawyer to take custody over my granddaughter who is now 17 years old. I did not have the necessary information to fully understand what alternatives or support was available to us when it was time for her to leave her mother. I consider myself to be a resourceful person, but navigating the process was very stressful. Information about the services offered by the State are so hard to find and access, and I wouldn't have been able to get the assistance I am now receiving without the GRG+ program. I've only worked with Andrea for a month, but since then, I have become aware of so much of the assistance available for people like me. I no longer have to sit on the sidelines while my granddaughter falls behind. If I had known about GRG+ earlier, I would have used it right away. I know there must be so many other families out there who need this program and imagining the number of people who have given up before finding it makes me sad. I hope to see this program continue, because even though the caregivers are the ones receiving assistance, the tangible and lasting result is a better future for our children." -Margaret Keniley

"I spent many years navigating the system to take guardianship of my grandchild and to provide him with all of the resources he needs. I had to figure it all out by myself. Had access to GRG+ been available when I needed it, I would have saved so much time, money and stress. My grandson would have been so much better off for it too. I am so happy that GRG+ now exists to help those families that are in the same position I was in. I've met and spoken to several families who have received help from GRG+ and everyone was grateful for the help Andrea was able to provide for them. This pilot program is a step in the right direction, but only a small step. More grandparents need to know about GRG+." -Virginia Linke

"I never imagined my retirement years would be filled with the challenges of raising my grandson. When my son passed away, he left behind a young boy who was born with health struggles. Raising a child other than your own at this age comes with its own unique set of challenges. I felt like I was fighting against a system that seemed designed to make things as difficult as possible for people like me. The first few years were a whirlwind. I navigated the maze of social services, trying to secure custody for my grandson. It was a battle, filled with endless paperwork, court hearings, and legal fees that drained my retirement savings and strained my ability to care for my grandson. Over many years, I've spoken to many legislators, shared my story multiple times, and fought hard for policies that would provide relief for families in the same position we were in. Few other than Leader Manley were ready to take action. I joined Leader Manley's legislative advisory committee to offer my experience and to help shape GRG+ into the fantastic program it has become. I've heard from families and seen how Andrea, the intake coordinator for GRG+, goes above and beyond to be a passionate advocate for the rights and needs of grandparents. Had GRG+ existed when I became a guardian, it would have changed everything." - Adrian Charniak

"The GRG+ program, for me has been very impactful. Being in a situation where we are raising our grandchildren, means something did not go as planned. For us, our grandsons were very emotionally harmed. And the impact of that touches every part of our lives. To sit in a room with people who understand what it's like to go through a day with grandchildren as acting as a parent, is very powerful. It's a lonely, often emotionally, difficult journey to raise your grandchildren. To have a space where we can raise our concerns and not only have them heard, but have action taken, has been a huge relief. From access to doctors and expediting school registration, to learning about the program that Andrea leads has made our life easier. The other impact this program has had for us is to help us in seasons where financially we would be even more tapped out. They help us with school supplies and Christmas presents and Thanksgiving food. We don't always access the services, however it has been a game changer more than once to know where to go for help. The services GRG+ offers has been a huge relief for these things that I mentioned." - Geriann Wiesbrook

Challenges

Despite the many successes of the program, there were also challenges and barriers this past year in receiving services. Finding medical assistance providers for the families was a continuous issue. Grandparents who wanted to enroll in the Department of Human Service's Child Only Grant found the application was hard to navigate and therefore, could not complete it.

Families had a difficult time enrolling into the Extended Family Support Program. To enroll the family must call the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) 1-800 number and due to stigma around be associated with DCFS, most grandparents shy away from calling the 800 number. Also, there were issues in receiving accurate, consistent, and reliable information about legal, custody and guardianship from the Extended Family Support Program providers, even with the appointed contact person.

Summary

Over this past year, grandparents and older relatives raising children sought help from the GRG+ Program to find resources and navigate complex systems, including the court system, education, and available social services. The outreach campaign and directly contacting schools helped increase the visibility of this program. Also, by having direct contacts for the state agencies, Senior Services of Will County was better able to refer participants to resources.

Lessons learned include the need to continue to create more efficiencies to work across state agencies for the benefit of serving families holistically by breaking down silos. This includes continuing to have effective communication channels to ensure connection to services. Also, training of GRG providers statewide would help them to advocate more effectively for both the child and older adult. Training suggestions include how the process works for guardianship and custody, how to properly complete the application for the Child Only Grant, accessing the DCFS Extended Family Support Program, and ensuring rights under the McKinney-Vento Act. IDoA will continue to work across state agencies to break down silos to improve communication and ensure connections are being made. Over the next year, the Department will include these lessons learned in the development of the Multi-Sector Plan on Aging

which is focused on ensuring these types of inter-agency linkages are robust. In addition, the findings, lessons learned, barriers and gaps will be considered when developing the upcoming State Plan on Aging.

While this pilot program was funded for one year with \$150,000 from the state's General Revenue Fund, since 1999, the full state GRG program has been stagnantly funded at \$300,000. Once dispersed across the state this funding is very limited for 102 counties. The federal funding for older relatives raising children has also been stagnant over the last several years and there is no indication that it will be increasing. This translates to very limited resource availability for the more than 12,900 grandparents and other older relatives raising children. Additional funding is paramount for this program, across the state, to ensure supports and resources are in place for both the vulnerable children who need care and vulnerable older adults who have found themselves in a position where they are caring for relative children, many times in very complex situations.



State of Illinois

Department on Aging

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Senior Helpline: 1-800-252-8966, 711 (TRS)

8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday

24-Hour Adult Protective Services Hotline: 1-866-800-1409, 711 (TRS)

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