

Illinois Department on Aging



Will County Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Pilot Program

January 1, 2025 - January 1, 2026

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.

Illinois Act on Aging. 20 ILCS 105/8.13

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 Raising Grandchildren (GRG) and Other Relatives Raising Children programs. 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. Both funding sources have remained stagnant since 1999, even though the cost of services has increased over the last 27 years.

Despite the modest funding, 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: in-home care, daycare, summer camps, sporting events, arts and cultural activities, childcare, and recreational programs; Legal Services: guardianship, custody, adoption, housing stability, access to needs-based benefits, education rights, and public benefits; Support Groups: Mentorship opportunities, peer support, topics related to relatives raising children, strengthening support systems, and new relationships; Counseling Services: Mental health support, academic and school related counseling; and Gap-filling: clothing, school supplies, computers, educational applications, school-related expenses, meal services, bedding, household goods, school activity fees, utility assistance, transportation support and school uniforms.

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.

Year Two Program Summary

In Year two, the program experienced an increase in the number of weekly interactions, units provided, intakes, and Information and Referral contacts. The program provided services for 68 caregivers and served over 80 children. The racial disposition of caregivers was primarily White/European American, while most children preferred not to disclose their race. The primary language spoken by both caregivers and children was English. Caregivers were predominantly female, while the children served were equally divided between male and female. During year two, Senior Services Center of Will County expended its FY 2025 allocation between July and December 2025 consistent with the state fiscal year and re-appropriation of remaining funding. 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, but the numbers increased in 2023, 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 but are raising relative children.

60+ Grandparents Raising Grandchildren				
PSA	2010	2015	2021	2023
1	1,031	846	807	844
2	1,511	1,676	2,492	3,186
3	495	554	485	941
4	527	572	661	679
5	1,075	992	1,346	1,261
6	125	101	231	558
7	703	637	678	496
8	804	916	818	635
9	355	311	330	283
10	259	281	182	214
11	446	556	654	1,002
12	4,443	3,448	2,682	2,299
13	1,858	2,172	1,535	1,670
Total	13,632	13,062	12,901	14,068

A map of the PSAs is below:



In Will County, the number reported in 2023 remained more than double 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	2023
Will County	312	393	658	644

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. Senior Services Center of Will County provided referrals to Extended Family Support Program, Child Only, CHIP, Department of Human Services, and Title III E services. In addition to the same challenges that were experienced in the previous year, we also encountered that the families are not having the time they need to be able to access services or resources. 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, 2025-January 1, 2026

General Overview

Senior Services Center of Will County implemented the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Plus (GRG+) pilot program over the 2025 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.

Building on strategies implemented in the previous year, Senior Services Center of Will County attended several school fairs to reach the targeted audience. Flyers and booklets of information were distributed to current school members to inform them of further resources. Will County had an increase in the number of grandparents and children that were assisted this year, so the campaign was successful in reaching more families and onboarding them into this program. They reached a total of 68 grandparents/relatives and 91 children.

The outreach campaign involved a coordinated mix of targeted communications and community engagement to raise awareness of available supports for older relatives raising children. Senior Services Center of Will County conducted direct outreach, including targeted mailings to Will County Schools social workers with clear information about programs and supports available to grandparents and other older caregivers. Outreach efforts also specifically reached current Senior Services Center participants who are grandparents or older relatives providing care, with the goal of informing them about additional resources that may benefit them.

To broaden visibility and engagement, Senior Services Center utilized a range of channels including social media, participation in community resource events, radio interviews and advertising and staffing a resource table during parent/teacher conference nights at schools in the Joliet area. These efforts were designed to meet caregivers where they are and to provide accessible information about the program and support options. As a result of this comprehensive outreach, program participants over the past year included individuals who self-referred as well as those referred by partner agencies, reflecting both community-driven interest and interagency collaboration.

The Intake Coordinator actively engaged with designated points of contact at partner agencies to gather comprehensive information on the services and supports available to kinship families, including the scope of services offered, eligibility criteria, and access procedures. This included identifying programs that provide tangible supports (clothing, food, furniture) as well as services that address legal, financial, health, and parenting needs. A community resource mapping process was completed to document local and independent agencies offering complementary supports for kinship families, ensuring a broad network of referrals and resources.

In addition, the Intake Coordinator established communication with McKinney-Vento coordinators in area schools to increase awareness of the kinship support program and to facilitate connections between the schools' liaisons and program participants. Through this collaboration, families were linked to educational rights and services available under McKinney-Vento Act, including enrollment assistance,

transportation, and access to non-academic supports, as appropriate. This outreach also helped coordinate referrals and information sharing between school-based supports and other community services to enhance stability and well-being for children in kinship care.

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 continued to 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 (see the chart below) 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. The collection of data of the pilot program is critical to inform future policy, funding and evidence-based strategies once the pilot program concludes.

Senior Services Center of Will County also completed Christmas shopping for all the GRG families in December 2025. As a result, Will County have purchased gifts for 63 children served through the program.

Calendar Year	2025
Fiscal years	2025-2026

The frequency of calls and visits	YTD
Number of GRG interactions per week	30
Units	30
Number of GRG intakes	70
Number of GRG Care Coordination	118
Number of I&A GRG contacts	118
Unduplicated number of persons served	68

The number of families who received referrals:	
Number of older relatives raising children	21

Number of referrals made	60
Number of services started	6
Number of referrals/ services denied and reasons	0
Outreach	
Events per week (average)	*2 per month
Average attendance at outreach events	250*

* Data is being compiled and will be updated in an amended report to be filed in CY 26.

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 IDES
- FAFSA

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

- Department of Children and Family Services: 12
- Healthcare and Family Services: 8
- CCAP: 7
- Department of Human services: 9

- Department on Aging: 10
- State Board of Education: 3
- DDD (PUNS): 7
- IDES: 4

Successes

Illinois Department on Aging continued 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 IDES
- 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 must 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 for grandparents seeking services such as healthcare, assistance with nutrition, and transportation.

Challenges and barriers are described more fully below:

Complex application process.

Many grandparents reported difficulty completing complex applications on-line that served as a barrier to accessing additional supports and services. Frequently participants expressed a desire to meet in person to receive assistance with applications, and to convey confidential information. Additionally, even with an online application, some documents are required to be delivered in person. As a result, participants fail to complete applications that could provide them with additional benefits such as the Department of Human Service's Child Only Grant.

Lack of Transportation.

Consistent with findings from previous outreach and studies, many older adults experience challenges with transportation to ensure grandchildren in their care can attend medical appointments, participate in activities, and go to other appointments that are routine for most individuals.

Summary

Over the past year, grandparents and older relatives raising children sought assistance from the GRG program to access resources and navigate complex systems, including the court system, education, and available social services. The outreach campaign, along with direct engagement with schools, increased the visibility of the program and helped connect more families to support. Additionally, having established points of contact within state agencies enabled Senior Services of Will County to more effectively refer participants to appropriate resources.

A number of experiences highlight the continued need to create efficiencies that support collaboration across state agencies to better serve families holistically by breaking down silos. This includes maintaining clear and effective communication channels to ensure timely connections to services. In addition, statewide training for GRG providers would strengthen their ability to advocate effectively for both children and older adults. Recommended training topics include guardianship and custody processes, proper completion of the Child Only Grant application, access to DCFS Extended Family Support Program, and ensuring protections under the McKinney-Vento Act. IDoA will continue working collaboratively across state agencies to improve communication, strengthen coordination, and ensure

families are connected to needed services. Over the coming year, the Department will incorporate these lessons learned into the implementation of the Multi-Sector Plan on Aging. In addition, the findings, lessons learned, barriers, and gaps will be considered when implementing the FFY 26-28 State Plan on Aging.

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 14,000 grandparents and other older relatives raising children. Additional funding across the state will 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)

ilaging.illinois.gov

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