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Going from Visiting Grandchildren to Raising Them: Services and Support are Available

The Scotts (we have changed their name), who are in their late-50s, were enjoying retirement. The north suburban residents enjoyed going to concerts and the lakefront, and visiting their grandchildren in Arizona. But their lives changed a year ago when the grandchildren, a 12-year-old and 10-year-old twins, came to live with them.

Grandparents can become guardians for a variety of reasons, including illness or death of the parents, divorce, drug use and incarceration.

Instead of just the two of them, the Scotts now have a household of five. They have to remember that they need to find a babysitter if they're invited somewhere. They might go to a movie when the children are in school, but their free time is mostly reserved for errands. Their biggest adjustment, though, is not losing the freedom to go and do as they please. It's financial. They're buying groceries for five instead of two. The children are growing so fast that they're growing out of their clothes and shoes. And they can no longer afford to take their grandchildren to fun places.

Nevertheless, the Scotts are glad to have their grandchildren and they have peace of mind knowing the children are with them. They say they can't imagine them being placed with another family where, they fear, they could be at risk for physical or emotional abuse.

The Scotts are among 7.3 million grandparents whose grandchildren under age 18 are living with them, according the U.S. Census Bureau. Not included in this count are other older relatives who are also responsible for raising minor children. They face a variety of challenges they never expected to have to deal with in their later years.

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As soon as the Scotts' grandchildren came to live with them they contacted Catholic Charities Northwest, where they were able to get support and assistance with clothing and food. AgeOptions and our community-based partner agencies, including Catholic Charities Northwest, offer assistance and resources for grandparents and other non-parent relatives responsible for minor children or adults between the ages of 18 and 59 who have disabilities.

Those programs include counseling, support groups, limited financial assistance, help with legal matters such as guardianship and adoption issues, connection to resources such as SNAP and prescription drug and energy assistance.

Mr. and Mrs. Scott say the assistance they've receive through Catholic Charities Northwest has been tremendous. They now plan to join the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren support group so they can interact with other grandparents facing similar challenges.

The couple remains optimistic. Although Mrs. Scott is somewhat limited after a stroke, she says the grandchildren are a big help. "They help me get up out of a seat and make sure I get water at night to take my medication," she says. "The fact that my grandchildren are willing to help brings a smile to my face."

For information about programs and services for grandparents and other non-parent relatives, call Chelsea Hawkins at AgeOptions, (708)383-0258.