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Support Groups and Resources Help Older Relatives Raising Children

“Helen” didn’t need another support group, she told her fellow grandmother. Her life was complicated enough with raising her grandchildren. She was angry and stressed and had difficulty functioning. But she agreed to go to the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren meeting at North Shore Senior Center and, 10 years later, reports it has helped her deal with the many challenges she was and still is facing.

With North Shore Senior Center and other partner agencies, AgeOptions offers 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. In addition to Grandparents Raising Grandchildren programs and support groups, services include counseling, limited financial assistance, help with legal matters such as guardianship and adoption issues, and connection to resources such as SNAP and prescription drug and energy assistance.

In advance of National Grandparents Day on September 10, the U.S. Census Bureau released figures on grandparents raising grandchildren. It says 7.3 million grandparents have grandchildren under 18 living with them and, of those, 2.6 million are responsible for the basic needs of grandchildren living with them. More than half a million grandparents responsible for grandchildren have incomes below the poverty level, 642,852 have disabilities and 1.5 million are still in the labor force.

In Illinois, the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey estimates that 34,027 grandparents age 60 and over are raising grandchildren as primary parents.

Many, like Helen, were unprepared. Now 62, she says she has been taking of grandchildren and great-grandchildren for more than 20 years. Her own children were still in high school when she took in four young grandchildren, and she wasn't able to be as supportive or available to the teenagers as she wanted to be because of the demands of the very young grandchildren.

What she thought was a temporary situation became permanent, and she suffered from financial stress and isolation as she dealt with the childrens' overwhelming needs.

In the grandparents group, she found support and tools from other members who shared their experiences, helped her gain understanding of her situation and deal with challenges such as the Department of Children and Family Services and going to court. Just as important has been the YMCA family membership and the summer camp that benefit her and the children, she says.

Today Helen cares for three grandchildren, ages 9, 7 and 5, as she confronts the 2016 death of her husband, and she remains active in the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren program.

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