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## **Planning and presenting a yearly informational conference for grandfamilies**

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*Practice Brief***Planning and Presenting a Yearly  
Informational Conference for Grandfamilies**

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**Abstract**

This practice brief describes the planning and implementation of a local yearly conference for grandparents raising grandchildren. The conference was first held in 2002, and today is offered by a task force consisting of Area Agency on Aging staff, grandparents, Human Service program staff, representatives of various provider agencies and organizations, and academics from a local university. This practice brief describes funding, venue, logistics of the conference day, topics of most interest over the years, and the challenge of reaching grandfamilies. Also described is how evaluation by grandparents has helped the conference evolve to remain relevant and meaningful for grandfamilies today.

*Keywords:* grandfamilies, conference planning, task force, Public Law No: 115-196

In July 2018, the *Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act*, was passed into law by the 115th United States Congress (Public Law No: 115-196, 2018). A focus of the law is to establish a federal task force/advisory council to identify how states, agencies, and organizations are best supporting grandfamilies, and to disseminate this information to the public. A key finding reported during Senate hearings was that “Grandparents would benefit from better coordination and dissemination of information and resources available to support them in their caregiving responsibilities” (Senate Bill 1091- 4, 2018, section 2, Findings, #7). Although no funding appropriation is attached to this legislation, the Council will conduct outreach that gives states, agencies, organizations, and grandparents opportunities to provide information on best practices, and other recommendations that could help grandparents raising grandchildren.

Passage of this bill reflects what local service providers have long observed: there are increasing numbers of grandparents who have sole responsibility for raising their grandchildren, and in addition to love, this “off-time” parenting role may result in financial hardship, social isolation, inability to obtain policy-based resources or engage with the schools if not legal custodians, lack of mental and emotional help for the children, and complications of parenting due to grandparent health (e.g., Dunifon, Ziol-Guest, & Kopko, 2014). In response, some service providers have already stepped up to form coalitions that support grandfamilies in their

communities. This practice brief describes how one community coordinates to support grandfamilies, with information that could be useful to the new Federal Advisory Council as well as to other communities.

The strategy of bringing together representatives from various helping agencies and organizations is how our community targets local grandfamily needs. The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force idea was initially sparked by personnel in the local Area Agency on Aging (AAA), which brought together individuals representing a number of community agencies and organizations. Over the years the task force has consisted of local Area Agency on Aging staff, grandparents, local university personnel, county extension personnel, independent service providers for older adults and children, and representatives from the county Department of Human Services, including adult protective services, kinship services, and the family caregiver coordinator. The task force is currently chaired by the AAA information and assistance coordinator. Since its formation, members of the task force meet once per month to touch base on grandfamily experiences each has observed, as well as to plan supportive activities, including facilitated support groups, informational events, and social events where grandfamilies (including the children) may get together.

This practice brief describes how a local community has implemented an annual conference for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, in part through support offered through the Older Americans Act. The conference addresses grandfamily needs for information about topics of concern and an in-person gateway to resources in the community.

### **Planning the Annual Conference**

The goal of the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force annual conference is to provide expert speakers who have information about topics of importance for grandfamilies, as well as a place for local agencies and organizations relevant for grandfamilies to meet in person with attendees to give information about their services. Conference planning takes place at monthly meetings, with each task force member contributing ideas for topic speakers and resources from their respective areas of expertise. Funding for the Task Force and its activities is allowed for grandfamilies from the Older Americans Act National Family Caregiver Support Program (ACL Administration for Community Living, ND., Yagoda, 2002), under Title 111-E, which allows resources for adults age 55 and older who provide care to children under the age of 18. The local AAA allots a part of these financial resources for the conference. Task force members are also adept at engaging local businesses for donations of refreshments, gift cards, and other items given as door prizes or giveaways during the conference day.

The first year of the conference was held in a local recreation/senior center that had enough room to hold 100 people, as well as several smaller rooms for concurrent sessions and for community resource providers to set up exhibit tables. This venue also had a kitchen, convenient for preparing refreshments and serving lunch, which included donated refreshments, as well as items purchased with funds from the Task Force budget. There was no charge for use of this venue from 2002-2013.

There were two conferences a year for the first few years, one in fall and one in spring. In 2014 the task force mailed a "How Can We Help?" survey to grandparents in local support groups, as well as to those who had attended prior conferences. The survey was also sent to any other known grandfamilies in the county through their engagement with task force member agencies. The purpose of the survey was to ask grandparents their views on current resources for grandfamilies, including the annual conference. Results showed that a one-day conference was

preferred to two and the most convenient time for attending would be mornings, because grandparents needed to collect grandchildren from school in the afternoons. They also liked the original senior center location where the first events were held, mainly because it was a familiar location. Unfortunately, that venue became too expensive in 2014, and the conference has moved among several other venues that cost little or nothing and have meeting rooms, free parking, and kitchens. Venues after 2014 included a business building in the community and church meeting halls, all of which received positive feedback from attendees.

### **Getting the Word Out**

The greatest challenge in presenting the conference is how to find grandfamilies in addition to those already affiliated with the AAA or their support groups. Task force members often have custodial grandparents they serve in their own agencies, and these are referred to the grandfamily support system. However, outreach to the community at large, i.e., grandfamilies not affiliated with any helping organization, remains difficult. Analysis over the years shows that the majority of attendees learn about the conference through attending AAA grandparent support groups and Human Services kinship groups. Other ways they learn of the event are by contacting AAA Information and Assistance initially for other reasons, or through case management personnel and family or friends. Fewer than 5% reported that they attended based on advertising in the newspaper.

### **The Conference Day**

The conference day begins with registration at 8:30, then light refreshments and a keynote speaker, followed by time to visit with community resource providers. The keynote speaker is selected based on his or her expertise and engaging presentation style. The keynote topic is usually related to grandfamily relationships, as that subject is consistently of interest each year. Throughout the planning process, task force members seek door prize donations from community businesses and services. These prizes are given throughout the conference day, which provides a great deal of fun and a short break from some of the heavier topics covered in the sessions. Donated door prizes include gift cards for groceries and gas, as well as children's toys, school supplies, and tickets to family entertainment venues. Centerpieces of flowers or plants are also given as door prizes so that someone at every table is sure to get something. A provided lunch is held between concurrent sessions, and the day ends by 2:30.

### **Community Providers: The Resource Roundup**

In order to provide as much information as possible in one day, we invite various nonprofit agencies and organizations to bring information about their services. A separate room is set up with tables, and each year agencies (n=12-18) bring personnel who visit and share materials about their services with grandfamilies at a time set aside for that activity between presentation sessions. Grandparents have expressed appreciation for learning about supportive services all in one place and being able to meet face to face with individuals who work in those organizations. Attendee evaluations suggest the community resources most grandfamilies plan to connect with after the conference include county social services, grandparent support groups, the county AAA, legal assistance, financial help, medical care for grandchildren, the library district for homework help, counseling and strategies to manage family relationships and conflict, education mentoring, and activity programs for the children. Attendees indicated they were less

likely to seek out resources that had high or ongoing costs or would require a great deal of long-term grandparent commitment to a resource, such as 4H involvement.

### **Expertise: Sessions and Presenters**

In past years, attendees could choose among several concurrent sessions according to their particular interests. Conference topics are chosen by task force members based on current research on the most pressing grandfamily issues, task force member observation of needs of those whom they serve, and most importantly, grandparent suggestions and requests for information. Presenters are found through task force member contacts and outreach with local professionals and practitioners, including law enforcement, human and social services, private and public sector counselors and program facilitators, university faculty, school district personnel, university extension specialists, legal services, and others. Over the years, evaluation results consistently show four themes about which grandparents are interested in learning; 1) how to deal with difficult family relationships, 2) how to help grandchildren emotionally, 3) keeping grandchildren safe, and 4) how to find community-based resources and information, including financial and legal assistance, health care for grandchildren, working with the schools, and emotional support for themselves.

A short, anonymous written evaluation is collected from attendees at the end of each conference and used for planning future conferences. Results consistently indicate that all topics covered in the sessions have been of some interest to most attendees. The most successful sessions are those led by high-energy presenters, who get attendees involved in discussion or activities during the presentation. This personalization has been done in various ways. For example, a presenter may ask attendees to write down their most pressing difficulty about being a parent, then randomly choose several responses to address during the session. Another presenter came in character as “Supernanny” and engaged attendees in strategies to handle specific discipline difficulties with their grandchildren. In a stand-out session, a local school security officer gave a straightforward presentation on strategies to keep grandchildren safe and out of trouble at school.

Demonstrating specific strategies to deal with problems yet balancing that with time for audience questions is a characteristic of successful sessions. The least successful sessions were those that relied on 45 minutes of informational lecture with no opportunities to address questions from the audience. For example, many of today’s grandparents have heard of, but aren’t knowledgeable about cyberbullying, and successful conference sessions on this topic have included asking attendees to briefly describe their concerns. The engaging presenter addresses those specific concerns and then follows with information on how to spot cyberbullying, who to contact, and what might be done at home about it. Another highly rated session had adults who had been raised by their grandparents as children come and speak about their appreciation for grandparents who had loved them enough to take them out of difficult parent situations. The end of this session consisted of tears and hugs all around, with some grandparents commenting that connecting with these successful adults was comforting and inspiring and gave them more confidence that they were doing the right thing for their grandkids.

### **Revising the Conference to Meet Preferences**

The conference day has evolved over the years. Evaluation surveys indicated that attendees had difficulty choosing which concurrent sessions to attend because they were interested in all of them. Accordingly, the format was changed so that all grandparents would attend each session together. Even though some of the sessions are not applicable to all grandparents (e.g., a session focused on teen relationships with parents was not as relevant for those who were raising toddlers), we found that because many of the same grandparents attend for several years, most topics become relevant to everyone over time. This format also allows grandparents, not all of whom attend support groups, more opportunities to visit with each other and share information and experiences. Time to visit with each other informally is now built into the conference day, as we observed how much attendees enjoyed this time together, especially those who were new to raising their grandchildren. The conference day was also shortened to accommodate grandparents needing to pick up grandchildren from school, and today, the conference ends after lunch, by 1:30 PM

### **Conclusion and Implications**

In the United States, grandfamilies are not generally considered a “normative” family structure (Hicks Patrick, Stella Graf, Nadorff, & Hayslip, 2015), and formal community infrastructures have been slow to develop accessible resources, especially for informally constructed grandfamilies (Dunifon et al, 2014). Although recognition is now occurring at the legislative level, direct financial support for grandfamilies, when available at all, is still a matter of complex navigation through existing social and human service systems that were not created to accommodate this family structure. That is the next step that needs to take place. In the meantime, communities that recognize needs other than financial may come together to provide grandfamilies with a source of recognition for what they do and provide creative resources on a local level.

An implication of this practice brief is that service providers who find themselves working with grandfamilies may use this example to reach out to individuals within other agencies and organizations in the community who are willing and able to include grandfamilies in their services or able to carve out specific services for grandfamilies. Support groups, social events, and informational conferences are only a few of the ways that task forces or coalitions may come together to support grandfamilies. The annual grandfamily conference described herein continues to provide valuable information and support for the grandparents raising grandchildren in our community. This conference is among the various other events and resources offered to families, which include contact points with AAA programs, support groups, a summer get-together, and a holiday party for grandparents and their grandchildren. The conference is a more formal event, and attendees have told us that they appreciate their concerns being taken seriously enough to warrant a special day of topics relevant for grandfamilies, along with the chance to learn, to visit with each other, to exchange ideas, and to know that they are not alone.

Although resources for grandfamilies are available in some communities, it remains difficult to reach out to and find local grandfamilies as yet unaffiliated with agency or organizational support. The passage of the *Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act* at the Federal level in 2018 may bring nationwide attention on grandfamilies to the public, for example, through media. The federal task force/advisory council will gather and disseminate findings on best practices in communities, such as the conference described in this practice brief.

With such national attention, more agencies and organizations may find a public more aware of and in support of resources for grandfamilies.

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