

MIND THE GAP

GRANDPARENTS

RAISING

GRANDCHILDREN



Janet Woodcock

Boston's GrandFamilies House, the first housing in the nation developed specifically for grandparents raising grandchildren, is a special model for a special population. On March 20, 2002, legislation to encourage development of similar projects was introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives.

by Kristin Kanders

Beatrice Allen is among a growing population of grandparents putting retirement dreams aside for parenting realities. Her plans for relaxation and travel dissipated when she decided to take in and raise her four great granddaughters who range in age from 4 to 14 years old. But the 64-year-old Allen, who has raised the children full-time for eight years, is happy to provide an alternative to foster care.

Since 1998, Allen's family has lived in the GrandFamilies® House, the nation's first housing development designed for the needs of grandparent-grandchild families.¹ Located in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood, GrandFamilies House is an apartment building that provides affordable housing and social and educational activities for 26 grandparent-headed families. It came into existence because three local nonprofit organizations, Boston Aging Concerns – Young and Old United (BAC – YOU), YWCA Boston, and the Women's



Institute for Housing and Economic Development, wanted to address the particular problems faced by a growing demographic of “skipped generation” families.

TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Grandparent-headed families, especially grandparent-headed families lacking parents, began attracting attention during the 1990s when their numbers significantly expanded. According to the U.S. Census, families headed by both grandparents and no parents rose by 31 percent from 1990 to 1997; grandmother-only families increased by 27 percent. Grandparent-headed families

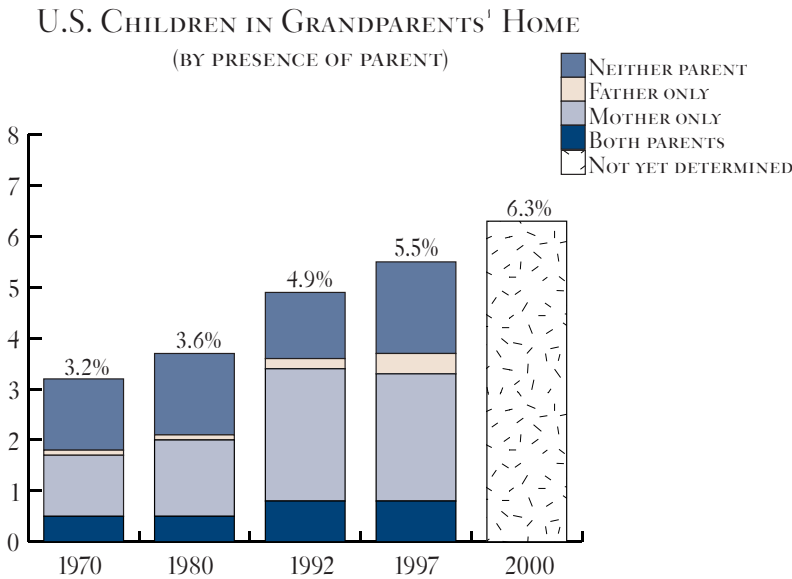
with parents present grew slower at 13 percent. Likewise, the percent of children living in their grandparents’ homes without parents grew during this time (see chart below).

The increase of grandparents raising grandchildren has been attributed to the crack-cocaine epidemic, AIDS, and incarceration.² Grandparents may become responsible for their grandchildren for other reasons as well, such as parental death or neglect. Children raised by their grandparents, rather than their parents, are more likely to be poor, live in the inner city, lack health insurance, and suffer health problems such as

hyperactivity, poor eating and sleeping patterns, and asthma.³

At the GrandFamilies House in Dorchester, almost all of the families are headed by single grandmothers, a demographic that fares worse, according to the U.S. Census, than any other grandparent-headed household. While most grandparents who are responsible for their grandchildren are married and not poor, nearly 60 percent of grandmothers solely raising their grandchildren in 1997 were poor; just over one-half described their health as “fair” or “poor,” and nearly one-half had not completed high school. Grandmothers single-handedly raising their grandchildren also tend to be black (54 percent) whereas other grandparent-grandchild households are primarily white.

The emotional pressures grandparents and grandchildren face in these situations are tremendous. First, both generations are coping with parental loss because either the parent has died, or because the parent can no longer take responsibility. For many children whose parents are alive, feelings of parental loyalty conflict with the desire to adjust to life with their grandparent. Second, some children’s situations are exacerbated because they have been subjected to neglect or abuse, sometimes in utero.



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS 2000 AND CURRENT POPULATION REPORTS, SPECIAL STUDIES, BRYSON, K. AND L.M. CASPER, "CORESIDENT GRANDPARENTS AND GRANDCHILDREN," MAY 1999.

Barbara Abraham, who runs a support program for grandparents raising grandchildren at the Consultation Center in New Haven, Conn., says nervousness about the new situation can be pervasive among grandparents and grandchildren alike. She adds that some grandparents harbor doubts about their parenting skills while others are not sure they have the energy, having already raised their own children. These stresses

Similarly, grandparents who work in the labor market may find that their increased family responsibilities prevent them from working outside the home. Grandparents who are not legal guardians for their grandchildren – because they hope the parent will someday be able to reassume responsibility – often encounter difficulties enrolling grandchildren in school and health insurance. Indeed, over one-half of

hold chores, and the elevator makes delivering children to the in-house preschool and after-school programs run by the YWCA Boston simple. (The average age of grandparents at GrandFamilies House is in the low 60s.)

A highlight of GrandFamilies House is that it is not just an apartment building; it also provides residents with educational and social activities. In the lower level, YWCA

WHEN CHILDREN ARRIVE AT THE COLORFUL PLAY AREAS AND CLASSROOMS, GRANDPARENTS TAKE MUCH-NEEDED RESPITE.

have been documented by researchers, who note that grandparents raising grandchildren are twice as likely to be clinically depressed as grandparents without parenting roles.⁴ To mitigate some of these challenges, Abraham says grandparents need support, respite, education, and “solid information about benefits.”

Logistic, economic, and legal issues can also prove burdensome. Many grandparents who take in grandchildren may need to find new housing, either to accommodate the larger family size or because they are no longer permitted to live in senior housing. They may have difficulty paying for housing due to unanticipated caregiving expenses.

children living in dual-grandparent, no-parent households lack health insurance.⁵

CUSTOMIZING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Shuttered for 20 years, the onetime nursing home at 214 Harvard Street was a neighborhood eyesore before it opened as the GrandFamilies House. Now, says Stephanie Chacker of BAC – YOU, it is a community asset. The four-story brick and clapboard building houses 26 families plus a live-in house manager, and the facility is customized for young and old. Safety features such as electrical outlet-covers and grab bars in the showers protect both age populations. Laundry facilities on each floor ease house-

Boston leases 4,000 square feet of space for its preschool and after-school programs. An adjacent computer lab is home to the YWCA's computer-focused program that encourages intergenerational education. These programs, plus the parenting and arts and crafts classes available to grandparents, are called Generations Learning Together. But most of the time, when children arrive by elevator at the colorful classrooms and play areas, grandparents take much-needed respite. The YWCA even serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner to children enrolled in programs – the costs of which are reduced by fundraising, child-care vouchers, and a sliding fee scale. (Meals are provided by the



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GRANDPARENT-AS-PARENT FIGURES

2.4 MILLION GRANDPARENTS ARE PRIMARY CAREGIVERS FOR THEIR GRANDCHILDREN

19% ARE IN POVERTY

36% HAVE BEEN IN CHARGE FOR 5 OR MORE YEARS

57% WERE IN THE LABOR MARKET DURING THE PREVIOUS YEAR

73% ARE MARRIED

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS 2000 SUPPLEMENTARY SURVEY

Greater Boston Food Bank.) During summer months, nearly all children are involved in organized programs.

With 49 children (20 of them teenagers) living under one roof, life at GrandFamilies House could potentially be a loud and hectic experience. To prevent this from happening, BAC – YOU employs a full-time resident services coordinator. Through the coordinator, outside speakers, such as those from the Roxbury Defender’s Office, are booked to address groups of teens and other age groups. A LISC AmeriCorps member serves as a youth coordinator, helping children with homework and other issues. Teen and GrandFamilies House resident councils also take charge to plan events, field trips, and holiday festivities. As Chacker describes, GrandFamilies House aims to be a “housing community, not just a housing complex.”

In addition to the numerous services available onsite, BAC – YOU also arranges for a social worker from Parents’ and Children’s Services to

visit the House three times a week to assist grandparents in navigating systems such as foster care, juvenile court, and social security. A child psychologist also visits with residents. To facilitate residents’ transportation needs, the GrandFamilies van shuttles teenagers to weekend movies and grandparents to the grocery store; it also makes special trips for cultural outings and family events like the circus.

FROM A SHELL TO A HOME

Through a survey commissioned by BAC – YOU in 1994, the nonprofit learned that a major issue challenging grandparent-grandchild households was finding appropriate and affordable housing. There were no models to follow, but BAC – YOU, which develops intergenerational housing to strengthen communities, wanted to address the need.

Together with the Women’s Institute for Housing and Economic Development, the nonprofits spent a couple of years pulling together financing for the \$4 million renovation. Equity

and debt financing was assembled from public and private sources including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), state housing funds, low-income housing tax credits, foundations, and a Boston bank. Anne Gelbspan of the Women’s Institute for Housing and Economic Development explains that because future residents couldn’t “afford the [development’s] operating costs even if it were debt free,” the nonprofits lobbied the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development and the City of Boston to provide rent subsidies. After much negotiation, the two agencies agreed to a demonstration program whereby 100 tenant-based Section 8 vouchers were allocated for grandparents raising grandchildren.

When the GrandFamilies House opened in 1998, 24 of the 26 occupant families were using Section 8 rent vouchers (most of them newly acquired) to keep rent payments within 30 percent of their income. For most of the families, the move represented a major improvement. For example, eight of the families were previously homeless and eleven were spending more than one-half of their income on rent. Others were living in substandard housing or in housing that did not accommodate their health conditions, because of stairs or other inconveniences.



BEFORE



AFTER
FRONT VIEW



AFTER
REAR VIEW

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

About a dozen other cities, according to Generations United, a national organization that promotes inter-generational policies and programs, are looking to create housing for grandparent caregivers. There are many barriers, however, to developing such housing, including incorrect information and, ironically, the Fair Housing Act. First, nonprofits working to develop GrandFamilies-type housing have encountered difficulties because there is a misperception that grandparents without legal custody do not qualify as “family” and, therefore, do not meet Section 8 eligibility requirements. Second, the Fair Housing Act prohibits using preference in allocating housing; this extends to specifying affordable housing for grandparents raising grandchildren.

To address these issues and to stimulate affordable housing development for a growing demographic, the LEGACY Act was presented on March 20, 2002 to the U.S. House of Representatives. The legislation, which stands for Living Equitably, Grandparents Aiding Children and Youth, was drafted by Generations United and introduced by Massachusetts Congressman Michael Capuano (D) and Maryland Congresswoman Connie Morella (R). The legislation encourages demonstration projects (though HUD’s Section 8 and 202 programs) of GrandFamilies-type housing.⁶ It also aims to increase awareness about the demographic of grandparents raising grandchildren.

Despite the obstacles facing organizations that want to develop Grand-

Families-type housing, Boston’s Housing Authority is earmarking 15 units in its Franklin Field development for grandfamily households. The Buffalo, New York, municipal housing authority also set aside units for skipped-generation families within its public housing. In New Haven, Conn., the community organization Casa Otoñal is busy gathering financing to build a 30-unit housing development for grandparent caregivers. Preliminary designs, says Executive Director Patricia McCann Vissepo, call for 30 units with a mixture of townhouses and flats. The project, which has been in the planning since 1999, will be for grandparents 55 years and older who have low incomes and permanent custody of their grandchildren. Casa Otoñal has developed 107 units of housing and provides social services, primarily to the Hispanic community. Construction of the first housing in Connecticut for grandparents as parents, Casa Familia, is planned for early 2003.

Organizations looking to develop housing for grandparents raising grandchildren would be well served to read the reports produced by the Gerontology Institute of the University of Massachusetts – Boston about the GrandFamilies House. The reports detail the successes of the development and ways things might be better accomplished, considering a host of issues, ranging from grandparent selection to activity expectations to housing design. As the first such housing in the nation, GrandFamilies House has made waves, and public recognition of its achievements is swelling.

RESOURCES ON GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

- U.S. Census: Reports and statistics of grandparents as parents, available at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/grandparents.html.
- AARP: Information for grandparents raising their grandchildren, www.aarp.org/grandparents.
- Generations United: National organization devoted to promoting inter-generational strategies, programs, and policies, (202) 638-1263, www.gu.org.
- Grand Parent Again: Support resources, www.grandparentagain.com.

RESOURCES ON GRANDFAMILIES HOUSE

- Boston Aging Concerns – Young and Old United, (617) 266-2257, or e-mail, bacyou@mindspring.com.
- Reports by the Gerontology Institute of the University of Massachusetts – Boston are available online at www.geront.umb.edu.

ENDNOTES

1. GrandFamilies House is a registered trademark of BAC – YOU.
2. Minkler, M., 1998. “Intergenerational Households Headed by Grandparents: Demographic and Sociological Contexts.” In Generations United (eds.) *Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children: Background Papers from Generations United’s Expert Symposiums*. Washington, DC: Generations United.
3. Bryon, K. and L.M. Casper, “Coresident Grandparents and Grandchildren,” Current Population Reports, U.S. Census Bureau, May 1999.
4. Minkler M, E. Fuller-Thomson, and D. Driver. 1997. “A Profile of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren in the United States.” *The Gerontologist*, 37 (3), 406-411.
5. Bryon, K. and L.M. Casper, “Coresident Grandparents and Grandchildren,” Current Population Reports, U.S. Census Bureau, May 1999.
6. In Massachusetts, the demonstration program of Section 8 vouchers (sponsored by the City of Boston and Mass. Department of Housing and Community Development) supported the project.

MULTIGENERATION HOUSEHOLDS

Multigeneration households (of which grandparent-as-parent households are a subset) have been on the rise since 1970. They are still rare, however, at 3.7 percent of all households nationally. They are most common in areas with high concentrations of recent immigrants, unwed mothers, and expensive housing. In California, for example, over 5 percent of all households are multigenerational. States in New England, such as Vermont and Maine, have some of the lowest percentages of multigeneration households in the nation (see below).

MULTIGENERATION HOUSEHOLD PERCENTAGES AROUND THE NATION					
STATES WITH HIGHEST		NEW ENGLAND STATES		STATES WITH LOWEST	
HAWAII	8.2	CONNECTICUT	3.2	NORTH DAKOTA	1.1
CALIFORNIA	5.6	MAINE	1.7	IOWA	1.6
MISSISSIPPI	5.2	MASSACHUSETTS	3.1	MINNESOTA	1.6
LOUISIANA	4.8	NEW HAMPSHIRE	2.2	NEBRASKA	1.6
TEXAS	4.8	RHODE ISLAND	3.2	VERMONT	1.6
		VERMONT	1.6		

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS 2000 BRIEF “HOUSEHOLDS AND FAMILIES.”