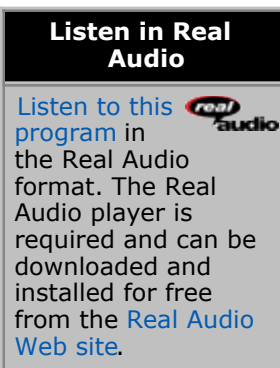


Kinship Care: An Unmet Challenge for the Greater D.C. Area

Urban Institute, Jennifer Ehrle Macomber

KOJO NNAMDI: "America's Cities," a part of our ongoing collaboration with the Urban Institute. Today we talk about kinship care in the Washington area, kinship care being the practice of relocating abused and neglected children with relatives rather than to a foster care situation that may involve living with strangers. In the District alone, some two-thirds of the children in foster care are in the care of relatives in Virginia and Maryland. That seems to be a staggering number. And in this region, it would appear everybody is dealing with the issue of kinship care somewhat differently.



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To what extent there is collaboration and cooperation? We'll find out during the course of our next hour with Jennifer Ehrle, a research associate with the Urban Institute.

Welcome.

JENNIFER EHRLE: Welcome. Thank you.

KOJO NNAMDI: Also joining us is Mildred Gee, she is manager of the special projects unit with the Maryland Department of Human Resources, the Social Security Administration, which handles kinship care.

Mildred Gee, welcome.

MILDRED GEE: Thank you.

KOJO NNAMDI: Also joining us is Siobhan Grayson, who is supervisor of foster care for Arlington County.

Hi, Siobhan.

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: Hi.

KOJO NNAMDI: You can join us at 1-800-433-8850. You can e-mail us at pi@wamu.org.

Jennifer Ehrle, just how much do we know about the extent to which kinship care is handled differently in different jurisdictions in the Washington area?

JENNIFER EHRLE: Yes. Thanks, that's an important question. The Urban Institute has done research in this area for about five years now, and has done a fairly extensive survey of state policies. And we do know that states are treating kin very differently from non-kin parents in terms of licensing, in terms of the way they define kin, in terms of how they pay kin, and this can be an issue because we also know from our National Survey of America's Families that kin face different issues than non-kin in terms of poverty—they often have less education, they're single parents—and so they have different needs than the non-kin providers.

KOJO NNAMDI: Let's talk a little bit about what goes on in your jurisdiction, Siobhan Grayson, in Arlington County. Do the officials of Arlington County favor kinship care over non-kinship care?

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: Well, actually we don't have necessarily a policy or any kind of driven formal kinship care, as you call it. We do address it on several different fronts, and we certainly believe that relative care is certainly the best when children have to be removed from homes. We try to do that at the first tier, and that's when there is protective service involved, and they try to locate family to care for the child if they have to be removed because of imminent danger.

If we do take custody of the child and a relative comes forth, then certainly we will address that relative in a way that we do with anyone, and that's to do a home study, talk with them, and see really what their situation

is, because we don't want kids to go back into a situation that may be as unsafe as the one that they came out of. And we do some concurrent planning in terms of that. The way in which the permanency plan laws are set up, the state certainly requires—and the feds require—that we do that concurrent planning so that if a child cannot return home, then we're looking for relatives as the next step to provide care. While we don't call it kinship care, because one of the things that is important to us in Arlington is making folks independent and self-sufficient from our agency or from the child welfare system, we do provide supports within the community, make sure that they have those kinds of supports. And so we try to address it in various ways.

We also have some foster parents who became foster parents specifically for their relative, whether it's a niece or a nephew.

KOJO NNAMDI: Do they undergo different kind of standards of scrutiny than those who are solicited by the county?

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: No, because we require that they go through our 10-week training course in order to become foster parents. They go through the same kind of licensing regulations in order for that to happen. Now, if—

KOJO NNAMDI: Whether or not they were carrying for those children before?

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: Before, correct, because for some reason that disrupted. So, we need to get to the bottom of that and figure out that it's going to become a more stable placement.

KOJO NNAMDI: In the Washington area, we're talking about kinship care, even though it isn't called specifically that in Arlington County. You know what it is, it means relatives who are taking care of children who for some reason or the other don't have their parents on hand, often the result of neglect or abuse. And in the Washington area, I know just about everybody knows at least one such family.

You can join our conversation, especially if you want more information about this or if you have your own stories to tell or questions to ask, 1-800-433-8850. You can e-mail us at pi@wamu.org.

Mildred Gee, talk a little bit about how it's handled in the state of Maryland.

MILDRED GEE: Maryland is one of the few states that has an established kinship care program. It started in the late '80s, and it was known as services to families, services to extended families with children. And in 1995, the legislation was introduced where a state department was mandated, officially named the Kinship Care Program. Maryland recognized that kinship care is a very important resource for children who have to be removed from their parents. Maryland has been very aggressive in providing resources and support for kinship caregivers in Maryland, particularly in Baltimore City, where 92 percent of the caregivers reside. We have, in collaboration with—

KOJO NNAMDI: Allow me to ask you to back up for one second: 92 percent of caregivers statewide reside in the city of Baltimore?

MILDRED GEE: Yes, in Baltimore City.

KOJO NNAMDI: That is an amazing statistic.

MILDRED GEE: Yes. And in recognition of that, the Social Services Administration, in collaboration with Compton State College Community Center of Nursing, developed a resource center to provide services to those families residing in Baltimore City. We have funded kinship care support groups to provide support services to caregivers. We have also provided funding so that kinship care support groups could provide respite and daycare services for kin. So we are looking towards developing kinship care support groups in the public school system. We have just completed an RFP with the intention of funding at least 13 support groups in the Baltimore City school system.

KOJO NNAMDI: An RFP being a request for proposal?

MILDRED GEE: Yes.

KOJO NNAMDI: Again, you can join us at 1-800-433-8850, or e-mail us at pi@wamu.org.

Joining us by telephone is Sondra Jackson. She is the acting receiver of Child and Family Services Agency in Washington, D.C.

Sondra Jackson, welcome.

SONDRA JACKSON: Welcome. Good afternoon.

KOJO NNAMDI: It's very difficult to discuss kinship care in the District without discussing the current status of foster care overall. The agency was taken into receivership. The receiver, as I recall, resigned in November of 2000. What's the situation now?

SONDRA JACKSON: Well, today, they just announced—the mayor just announced, in fact, the new director of the agency, which is one of the requirements to get the agency out of receivership, and so we're excited about that.

KOJO NNAMDI: Who is the new director?

SONDRA JACKSON: Olivia Golden has just been announced five minutes ago the new director of the agency.

KOJO NNAMDI: Well, it was reported prior to this that Olivia Golden would be the new director, wasn't it? I thought it was reported before, maybe I'm wrong.

SONDRA JACKSON: Well, today was the official announcement.

KOJO NNAMDI: So we have a new head of the agency, director of the agency. And what step is that in the process of getting out of receivership? What does the agency have to do now?

SONDRA JACKSON: They have to accommodate licensing for foster homes and group homes. She has to pick a new team, of course. And then, the rest of it should be—they should be able to bring the agency under municipal controls.

KOJO NNAMDI: Okay. Let's talk to Sondra Jackson and everybody else, frankly, about the process of children getting into foster care, starting with the District of Columbia. It's my understanding that in the city it virtually has to be by court order?

SONDRA JACKSON: Yes. Children are committed to the agency by court order, yes. Most of our children in the agency in the District are placed with relatives.

KOJO NNAMDI: And there are some 2,700 children in the District in foster care?

SONDRA JACKSON: There are about 2,000 children in kinship care, about 3,000 children in foster care, yes.

KOJO NNAMDI: Okay. I wanted to talk about how that compares with other jurisdictions. It's my understanding, Siobhan Grayson, that in Arlington County children do not have to come through the court system in order to get into foster care?

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: That's not correct. They do. Sorry, they do have to, it does have to be by court order.

KOJO NNAMDI: Well, I guess what I'm looking for is, Jennifer Ehrle, is there any kind of system of early intervention, where without a court order kids can get into foster care in the Washington area?

JENNIFER EHRLE: In terms of meaning prior—like a diversion-type program so that they don't have to come into the foster care system?

KOJO NNAMDI: I guess an early intervention program?

JENNIFER EHRLE: No, that's an important point, because there are many children who are living with relatives outside of the child welfare system who have been abused and neglected. In fact, in the National Survey of America's Families, we found there are about 300,000 of these children nationally. And we define these children as children [in whose cases] the state has become involved due to abuse and neglect, placed the child with a relative, but has not taken the child into state custody. And we do note that 39 states are participating in this practice, so it is fairly common.

However, the concern there is that this is a vulnerable group of children, because we know they have likely been abused or neglected, but we also know that they may not be receiving the same level of service and states are treating these what we call "voluntary" cases rather differently.

KOJO NNAMDI: Mildred Gee, how does it operate in the state of Maryland?

MILDRED GEE: In Maryland, we have a number of family preservation programs that are geared towards preventing children from coming into care—Intensive Family Services, Families Now—and what these programs do is get involved with the family, provide intensive counseling; [they have] very small caseloads, oftentimes you may have a worker and an aide with only five or seven cases. And [their mission] is to work very hard to ensure that the family makes it through the crisis and prevent child from entering foster care.

KOJO NNAMDI: So that happens if maybe a neighbor, maybe another interested relative, files a report; on that basis the social service agencies can start looking at the case and can start counseling and other programs for that family?

MILDRED GEE: Yes, immediately.

KOJO NNAMDI: Anything of a similar nature in the District of Columbia, Sondra Jackson?

SONDRA JACKSON: We also have an intensive program, family services program, that operates in the District to prevent children from going into care. We also have neighborhood collaboratives, and we rely very, very heavily on those community groups to work with families who are at risk of placement. And they have stepped up to the table many, many times to prevent children from coming into care, to work with the family, and to say to us, "Agency, you do not need to place these children in care, we will do what we can to support this family."

KOJO NNAMDI: Siobhan Grayson, Arlington County?

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: Yes. I just wanted to say that I kind of missed the boat on that one. Yes, we do have a family preservation program in Arlington as well that gets involved early on when our screening assessment determines that an assessment of the family means the kids need to be placed elsewhere while we're serving the family to reunify. So we do have that as well.

KOJO NNAMDI: Siobhan Grayson is supervisor of foster care with Arlington County; Mildred Gee is the manager of the special projects unit of the Maryland Department of Human Resources, which handles kinship care; and Jennifer Ehrle is a research associate with the Urban Institute. Sondra Jackson is the acting receiver

of Child and Family Services in Washington, D.C., for the District of Columbia government. And you, you can join us by calling 1-800-433-8850, or e-mail us at pi@wamu.org.

We've got to take a short break. We'll be right back.

(Program break.)

KOJO NNAMDI: Welcome back to our conversation on kinship care, when relatives take care of children because their parents either cannot or are not available to do that, and whether or not those relatives involved in kinship care are in private kinship care or in public kinship care, the difference between being in the foster care system and, if you will, just doing it on your own.

You can join the conversation at 1-800-433-8850, or by e-mailing us at pi@wamu.org.

Jennifer Ehrle with the Urban Institute, talk about how the Washington area jurisdictions compare with the rest of the nation in terms of handling kinship care.

JENNIFER EHRLE: Certainly. I think that this group illustrates well that there are tremendous differences between how states handle and treat kin providers. Federal policy has encouraged states to give preference to kin when finding placement for the child, and almost all do. However, the federal government has been somewhat silent on how states should actually treat kin in terms of licensing and payment.

And just in terms of licensing, we do know that 10 states require kin to meet the same licensing standards as non-kin before they can care for a child. Yet 41 other states provide or offer a separate approval or licensing process. So what we heard before was that Virginia is one of the 10 that requires kin to be licensed according to the same procedures as non-kin. Yet Maryland and D.C. would be [among] the 41 states that offer a separate process. And the reason this is important is because the way kin are licensed or approved is often tied to how they are financially compensated.

KOJO NNAMDI: Well, let's talk about how that is done differently in the District of Columbia with Sondra Jackson, acting receiver of Child and Family Services Agency in Washington.

Good to have you in the studio finally.

SONDRA JACKSON: Thank you.

KOJO NNAMDI: Talk a little bit about the standards we established that differ between kin caretakers and non-kin caretakers.

SONDRA JACKSON: Well, I guess we have something that's formal and informal. Formal kinship care means that people go through the exact same process as people who take foster children. The unfortunate thing is that people have had to go through home studies, and have the same process to get the funding, to get the same amount of money that foster parents get. We have some maybe 500 of our relatives get foster care payments because they elected to go through this process. We have another group, maybe 1,200 to 1,300, who do not go through this process, and so they don't get the foster care payment. It is unfair, in my opinion. We should have a system that rewards relatives for caring for their children based on the needs of the children.

KOJO NNAMDI: Well, if they decide, if the relatives decide that they don't want to become formal foster parents, are they still eligible for TANF payments, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families?

SONDRA JACKSON: Yes, they are.

KOJO NNAMDI: They get those payments.

SONDRA JACKSON: Yes, they get those payments, which, quite frankly, are a lot less money than the foster care payment.

KOJO NNAMDI: How is it in Maryland, Mildred Gee?

MILDRED GEE: It's similar to how it is in the District. And one of the reasons I think that we look at informal placements a little differently is because you're looking at—and I think the literature supports this—that for the majority of relative caregivers they are poor, they are living in housing that may not need foster care standards. However, what the whole notion of kinship care is to keep children connected with family. It is to strengthen and to preserve family ties.

KOJO NNAMDI: And, you know, nobody can really argue with that. But there does also seem to be an argument for what is practiced in Virginia, and that is families having to undergo the same kinds of training and scrutiny.

To what extent do you find families that object to that because the standards of life in their family units may not be able to meet the standards for foster care?

SIQBHAN GRAYSON: Well, Arlington is pretty unique. So I would say that we don't have that happen very often. I think that, you know, when relatives do step up, especially if they're local, then they're willing to go through that. One, because it gives them the supports that they need in order to manage or maintain a child. And the disruptions that do occur in those situations, because children can become difficult, we know that there are a lot of issues that these kids bring, they have the supports and directions given to assist them. So they, I think, enjoy that piece of it.

KOJO NNAMDI: And, of course, we do have to deal with the issue of cross-jurisdictional foster care, which occurs a lot in this area. But first there may be some practical situations with our listeners, and our first caller is Iris in Washington.

Iris, you're on the air. Go ahead please.

CALLER: Yes. I am a current and former kinship provider. I happened to adopt the first child that I had, and of course now his younger brother. They're my grandnephews and are again living with me because their mother is incarcerated. My comment changed somewhat because Ms. Jackson from the District talked about the compensation that kinship care providers in the District receive. And not that I was looking at this for monetary reasons, but my mother, who is 82, has raised two girls, and is a kinship care provider. Those are her great-granddaughters, same family. And I just find it interesting that somehow it is supposedly cheaper for a family member to provide for these children than it is for a total stranger under foster care. And I would only add that my mother was never given the opportunity, nor I, to apply or be "approved" through the foster care system, and we both have these children through court orders.

KOJO NNAMDI: Okay, allow me to have Sondra Jackson respond to you.

SONDRA JACKSON: Yes. I think what the general public really needs to understand is that kinship care was never one of the regular child welfare systems. I mean, child welfare did not include relatives taking care of children, primarily because people felt that leaves don't fall far from the trees—[in other words,] people believe that if you abuse your child, then your mom must have abused you, which is not necessarily the case, as we all know. It's been very difficult for the child welfare system to develop a program that meets the needs of relatives. There are people still who believe that you should not pay relatives for caring for their children—this whole thing about family values and family responsibility—but we know that a lot of this kinship care came as a result of drugs, and a lot of relatives were not prepared for caring for their relatives.

KOJO NNAMDI: Iris, were you and your mother reluctant or prohibited from filing for foster care?

CALLER: It was not—we were told that we were not eligible for it, quite frankly.

KOJO NNAMDI: Why not?

CALLER: We are relatives, that was the story.

KOJO NNAMDI: Is that still the situation?

CALLER: Excuse me?

KOJO NNAMDI: I'm sorry. I was going to ask Sondra Jackson if that is still the situation.

SONDRA JACKSON: No. In fact, we just started a subsidized guardianship program where we're looking to give relatives payment for children, and we have sort of a means test, and it will help people who make over \$28,000 a year aren't eligible. So if you make less than that, you're eligible to receive payment.

KOJO NNAMDI: Jennifer Ehrle?

JENNIFER EHRLE: Yes. I think it should be noted that there have been federal court hearing decisions have noted that relatives who meet licensing standards, the non-kin standards, are eligible to receive a foster care payment. But I think the caller has an important point, that often relatives aren't aware that this is an option. And our research has also shown that they often aren't receiving the payments and services that they need.

KOJO NNAMDI: Sondra Jackson, with whom does Iris need to get in touch with to get her own situation remedied?

SONDRA JACKSON: She needs to get—she can call me, that probably will be the quickest way to handle this. And my number is (202) 442-6010. And we'll see what we can do to address your needs.

KOJO NNAMDI: Do you have that, Iris?

CALLER: Yes, I do. And it's not for me, because, you know, my husband and I, we're fine. We make enough money to care for these children. But my mother is 82, on a fixed income, she has put one child, her oldest child is in college now. But she still has one in high school. It's unfair for people like her, as you well know. But the other point is that, the reason these children are in kinship care is because we were horrified at the thought of them going in the District government foster care system. We thought we might never see them again. And that is why they are in our home, and probably why many other kinship care providers, at least in this city, have their children.

KOJO NNAMDI: And, as you may have heard, Iris, the District is on the way to getting its foster care program out of receivership, its entire Family Services Division out of receivership. And I guess it is everyone's fervent hope that that, in fact, means that the system is now being run more efficiently.

But Iris's call raises another issue, and I should have asked her before I let her go, and that is, let us presume that Iris and her mother are both the legal guardians of the children in their care; does that change in any way the payments that they can receive?

SONDRA JACKSON: Well, that's why we have the subsidized guardianship program. If they're not legal guardians, we'll try to make them legal guardians, and they won't have to go through what a child in regular foster care, won't have people meeting them every month, and the services will be provided as needed.

KOJO NNAMDI: Mildred Gee?

MILDRED GEE: I just wanted to mention also that Maryland has the assistant guardianship program. And approval was granted by Health and Human Services in April 1997. And what Maryland is doing is providing subsidized guardianship as another permanency option for children in state custody. And to date, we have a little over 220 children who have been approved and receiving; their relatives are receiving subsidized payments for them in the amount of \$300, which is higher than the TANF rates that they would have gotten per child.

KOJO NNAMDI: And the number to call 1-800-433-8850. The e-mail address is pi@wamu.org, as we discuss the issue of kinship care.

Back to the telephones, here's Bill in Washington, D.C.

Bill, you're on the air, go ahead please.

CALLER: Yes. This is a very important topic. You know, it's been a long time that myself and my sister—I lost my older sister back in '97, and she had four young kids. I have my two nephews, and my younger sister has two of her daughters. I had a son of my own, and I'm a single parent. And, right now, I receive, well, we both receive the same amount, I receive \$340 a month for my two nephews. And the thing is, we didn't want my sister's kids to go into foster care because we thought we would never see them again, and we didn't know what may happen. It wasn't a thing with drugs or anything like that. My sister had breast cancer, and she passed away. And her husband is one of the deadbeat dads, and no one knows where he is. So we took it upon ourselves because family being family, we decided to take care of our own, you know. But the thing is, it's a monetary thing, because I have to change my lifestyle. My son, who was doing okay, has to change his lifestyle. Now he's not doing as well, and it's a really a financial burden on me. And there's nowhere to turn. And now I'm hearing about these programs. I'm wondering what [Prince George's] County has. The young lady talked about you receive \$300 per child. I don't care, but \$340 for two kids, and I'm a single parent—

KOJO NNAMDI: Where do you live, Bill?

CALLER: Prince George's County. I live out in Fort Washington.

KOJO NNAMDI: Okay. Well, we will have Mildred Gee respond to you, and then we do have some cross-jurisdictional issues we need to talk about.

MILDRED GEE: Since the assistant guardianship is a demonstration project which lasts for five years and participants are randomly selected to participate, it's not a project where a family can come to apply; we're hoping that if it proves to be successful, we're hoping that the state will incorporate this as a means of improved financial support to caregivers, which would include P.G. County.

KOJO NNAMDI: And onto Siobhan Grayson?

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: Yes. I just want to say that in Virginia, because we have the condensed permanency planning kinds of statutes, kinship care isn't something that we necessarily focus toward, because we're looking for a permanent plan for a child. And if that permanent plan is going to be with relatives, certainly we support that, and we will make sure that they're well engaged in the community resources that are available to them.

However, we don't have what's called a continuation of children just being on foster care status. We're looking towards making a permanency plan either being with relatives, either having parental rights terminated so that they can be adopted, depending on their age, so we're really coming up with some kind of comprehensive plan to deal with that part of it.

KOJO NNAMDI: Sondra?

CALLER: We went through the court system, and we both have guardianship. See, but the thing is, where do you turn for additional help?

KOJO NNAMDI: Here's Sondra Jackson.

SONDRA JACKSON: Yes. We want the public to understand that the children we're talking about are children who have been victims of maltreatment and have come to the attention of the child welfare system. In the District of Columbia, for example, we know that there are about 25,000 children who live with relatives. They are not all in our system. All of them have not have a report of abuse and neglect, and so they're not eligible for these kinds of services that we're talking about. So I want to make that really clear that the program that we're talking about really relates to an alternative to children who have been abused and neglected, reported to the agency: They either go to a foster home, or they go to a relative. It is good for children to go to relatives, I believe, because it furthers their self-esteem: "You look just like your mama, your daddy," they get. And, as you pointed out, families take care of families. This is not new. Historically, families have cared for their kin.

So I just want to make sure the public understands that we're not talking about all children living with relatives.

KOJO NNAMDI: And, Bill, I guess that does seem a bit unfair to you.

CALLER: Yes. Suppose we couldn't take them and then they go to foster care, and then they're just taken care of by someone else. And they'll be financially supported. I just don't understand.

KOJO NNAMDI: Jennifer Ehrle.

JENNIFER EHRLE: I think the caller raises an important point in that we do know that 1.3 million children are living with kin outside the child welfare system. And that's actually the majority of children in kinship care. There are 1.8 million children in kinship care, so 1.3 [million] are outside the child welfare system. And our research has also shown that these families face similar challenges and hardships [to those faced by] the relatives involved with the child welfare system.

So the fact that they are receiving fewer services and have access to fewer services is an important policy concern.

KOJO NNAMDI: And apparently an ongoing problem not only at the national level, Bill, but personally in your family.

CALLER: Yes.

KOJO NNAMDI: I don't know if there's any other assistance we can provide for you, but thank you for sharing your story and underlining one of the aspects of the problems having to do with kinship care.

CALLER: And keep up the good work, Kojo, because you've been a blessing, trust me.

KOJO NNAMDI: Thank you very much. Without you, I couldn't be.

The number to call 1-800-433-8850. You can e-mail us at pi@wamu.org. We're talking with Siobhan Grayson, supervisor of foster care for Arlington County; Mildred Gee, manager of the special projects unit with the Maryland Department of Human Resources; Jennifer Ehrle is a research associate with the Urban Institute; and Sondra Jackson is acting receiver of the Child and Family Services Agency of Washington, D.C.

We're going to take a short break. We'll be right back.

(Commercial break.)

KOJO NNAMDI: Welcome back to our conversation. It's about kinship care in the Washington area. A conversation you can join by calling 1-800-433-8850, or e-mailing us at pi@wamu.org.

We got an e-mail from Evelyn, who says, "I'm a court-appointed lawyer in the D.C. neglect system. There is, unfortunately, a huge gap between the number of D.C. children removed from the home and the number of home—foster, third-party, and kinship—available to place them in. We have to fall back on relatives, foster parents, et cetera, in the suburbs. Normally, when a child is placed across state lines, it's necessarily to complete a home study by both jurisdictions under the Interstate Compact on Protection of Children. This can take as long as a year, which is a long time in the life of both a child and a case. I would especially like to hear from the Virginia and Maryland panelists on what can be done to speed up the process."

For Arlington County, Siobhan Grayson.

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: I had attended that meeting some time ago in terms of the Interstate Compact, and I think they recognize that with our shortened time frames, we don't have up to a year for them to complete a home study on someone who is not in the jurisdiction. And if the Interstate Compact is interpreted correctly, there are ways in which the court can require that a home study be expedited, and that's under our Regulation 7. Now, we've only used that, I think, once during my tenure in Virginia. But it says to the court that in whatever locality it is, that we need to have this done so that we can get these children to relatives as quickly as possible.

Interstate Compact is a very intense way in which we do business, but it's set up for not only the protection of children, but for the protection of family members, so that they have an understanding of what it is that we're requiring them to do, and allows them to find out what the resources are within that jurisdiction. And I think that happens more in this area because of D.C. and Maryland being so close to us, that we do that quite often.

KOJO NNAMDI: Mildred Gee, Maryland?

MILDRED GEE: Maryland is very much aware of the importance of the Interstate Compact on the placement of children, and has been meeting regularly with the District of Columbia to enhance the speedy placement of kids in both jurisdictions, if necessary. I think it's also recognized that the Interstate Compact serves as the way to monitor the children when they're placed in other jurisdictions, and also to enhance the funding that's supposed to follow these children in the various school—particularly in reference to the school placements, because I know that has been an issue.

KOJO NNAMDI: Sondra Jackson.

SONDRA JACKSON: Well, as Mildred says, we've been working on this particularly with Maryland, because we know that many of our relatives—grandparents, aunts, and uncles—moved to Prince George's County for the District. And to me, it's so sad to place a child in regular foster care while we wait for an Interstate Compact. So what you do is disrupt a child, place them with a stranger, and then we have to wait until we've gotten all the paperwork done so that the relative's home in Maryland can be approved. That is one of those issues that exists in government. They are the rules, and we have to stand by them. But in my opinion, children get hurt. And Maryland has been trying to work with us.

KOJO NNAMDI: It's my understanding that you have an agreement that says it should take no more than 30 days.

SONDRA JACKSON: Thirty days, but you can't get an Interstate Compact done in 30 days because of the requirement to do the FBI checks on the families. There are requirements that we can't—we thought we could expedite and get them done, initially, when we entered into this agreement. But now we've found that there are so many of them, we can't get them done.

KOJO NNAMDI: And if, of course, it doesn't take less than 30 days, it means the child may have to be placed in foster care until such time as the process is completed, and there seems never to be any real certainty when that's going to happen.

Jennifer Ehrle, any other examples of how other jurisdictions handle this differently, and maybe more efficiently?

JENNIFER EHRLE: Well, I think that this is a new issue that is coming to the attention of child welfare agencies, and it is something that the research community is just beginning to look at. But I think one other issue of importance here is not only the actual placement of the children in care and the home study that needs to be done, but actually the ongoing services that are provided to a child once they're placed across states, because that can present logistical issues. Social workers often are only licensed to practice in their state. So a D.C. social worker can't necessarily go into Maryland and visit the child and make sure that placement is going well and that the services the child needs are being provided. So not only placement is going to be an issue with the Interstate Compact, but also how ongoing services will be provided.

KOJO NNAMDI: Sondra?

SONDRA JACKSON: Well, there are other examples. I mean, for instance, I'm told New Jersey has a border agreement with New York; that Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri—just some examples of border agreements, where we could come together on what a home study should be and how we could do this.

The other thing is that in the District, we have child agencies, private agencies, who have child placement licenses in Maryland; for example, Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, and a few others. And what we're trying to do to solve this problem, Kojo, is really to look at whether we can get those private agencies to do the actual home study and do the monitoring of the homes. And Maryland has opened the discussions about that with us. So we're looking for solutions. We've also talked to Congress about this in trying to get the senators from our respective states on board. So hopefully we will work this out. But you can see the importance of this as an issue for children.

KOJO NNAMDI: Just from a clearly technical standpoint, what is it that decides the residency of the child? Is it the parents' residency that decides the residency of the child?

SONDRA JACKSON: Yes.

KOJO NNAMDI: Okay. Well, that's simple enough. How about the situation where one state may possibly offer more benefits to a kinship care provider than the jurisdiction from which the child is coming; does that cause issues, if you will?

SONDRA JACKSON: Well, I think that it can cause issues.

KOJO NNAMDI: You know, [for example,] you don't want to go stay with your aunt in Maryland, you want to go stay with your uncle over in Arlington County because they get more money.

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: Well, I don't know that they get more money in that way, but I can say that we've had situations where in other states, such as Ohio, where we've had relatives come to want to obtain custody, and their licensing is different from ours in that they don't have the requirements that we have, and yet we're required to pay whatever our fee is. And certainly it's based on the age of the child. So we tend to negotiate. We tend to negotiate the length of time that payment will be made, as they try to transition that family into their community and the resources there. So we try to frame it so that we meet everybody's needs.

KOJO NNAMDI: When you talk about the state of Maryland, you're talking about, as you mentioned earlier, Baltimore City having most of the foster care situation there, but you're also talking about a lot of children from the District of Columbia having relatives in the state of Maryland with whom they're going to stay. How are benefits for the kinship caregivers decided on in those situations?

SONDRA JACKSON: The benefits are the same. These are state benefits and they do not vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

KOJO NNAMDI: However, it varies with the District of Columbia children coming over to the state of Maryland. What benefits do those children get: the benefits that would have been provided in the District of Columbia?

SONDRA JACKSON: Yes. Before this really became an issue—and I used to work in Maryland, so I know that this is a long-standing issue—we had been paying for these children in Maryland. So whatever we would pay in the District, we pay that payment to Maryland. So we have foster homes in Maryland, we have kinship homes in Maryland, and we pay them whatever we pay the District.

KOJO NNAMDI: If a child is in either a kinship care or foster care situation in Maryland—let us assume it is a public or former kinship care situation—what are the licensing standards that the caregiver, the kinship caregiver, has to observe: those that apply in the state of Maryland, or those that apply in the District of Columbia?

MILDRED GEE: They are supposed to observe the licensing standards of Maryland.

KOJO NNAMDI: Okay. So that would mean your social services agency would have to inspect those homes.

MILDRED GEE: That's the protocol.

KOJO NNAMDI: Now, it's my understanding that both the District and Maryland offer incentives to kinship care providers to become legal guardians. Could you explain what those incentives and benefits are?

MILDRED GEE: Yes, we just talked about how we have a subsidized guardianship program where we will pay relatives who apply for the subsidy. And the reason we want to do that is, we want to establish this as a permanent living arrangement for the child. We know that too many of these people are in our system only for the payment. So they really don't need a social worker coming out to visit them, they really don't need a lot of things that we provide or children in regular foster care.

KOJO NNAMDI: Talk about Arlington County for one second in terms of that, Siobhan Grayson; that is, suppose I happen to be living in Arlington County, I am a relative taking care of a child, but I am not the legal guardian. How do I get licensed?

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: Well, the first thing that I would say to folks is, you need to go to court and become the legal guardian, because that is going to open up the doors for a whole lot of things in terms of that you're going to be able to access in terms of services, enrollment in school, participation in some kind of health care. So that would be the route to take if you're not the legal guardian.

I can't—I would not encourage anyone to just take on a child without having some kind of court involvement, and that would be so that you would have that court, that monitoring, and the courts can do that without custody being with DHS per se.

KOJO NNAMDI: This is Public Interest. I'm Kojo Nnamdi.

It does seem to me, though, Jennifer Ehrle, Sondra Jackson, Mildred Gee, that there are a whole lot of families in the Washington area who do take on the care of relatives' children simply because they're kind of dropped off on them at a time when the relative is in some kind of crisis situation. What advice do you give to those relatives in addition to making sure you become a legal guardian?

SONDRA JACKSON: Well, first, I would just like to go back and clarify that for the most part, relative caregivers who have custody and guardianship of a child usually get that after the child has been committed to the local department of social services, so that you can become eligible during the time the child is in your care.

What I would recommend is that, you know, families get connected to the resources in their community. There are a number of support groups—Generation United, there are so many other areas of resources that may not be in the formal system—but we're recognizing that they are being developed and implemented in the informal system.

SIOBHAN GRAYSON: In Virginia, you don't necessarily have to—we don't have to have custody of a child in order for a relative to obtain custody. Anyone can actually go to court and petition the court for custody of a child. And that, I'm saying, is a help in that it allows you to have documentation that you actually have custody of this child and, therefore, you are able to access whatever services are available. And that takes a lot of pressure off DHS in terms of what it is that we have to comply with in terms of the guidelines of the federal government and the localities in terms of the permanency plan and piece. You can make that permanency plan with your family having the courts say you are the caretaker, and these are the kinds of services that are available.

KOJO NNAMDI: I guess I was just thinking of so many people who may be listening to this broadcast who are, in fact, providing private kinship care, and looking for some kind of assistance some place and trying to figure out how to get it.

Jennifer?

JENNIFER EHRLE: Yes. And as I noted before, there are many, many children outside the child welfare system living with relatives. And, yes, one way is to petition the court for custody, but also some states recognize written notarized permission from the biological parents for that person to be the acting caretaker and to make decisions on behalf of the child. So that's another way. Because with families it's often complicated to take over custody of a relative's child.

But I do want to note that the Generations United organization has compiled tremendous lists of resources for those inside and outside the child welfare system in terms of how you can access services in your community, and they have a Web site that provides that information.

KOJO NNAMDI: Jennifer Ehrle is a research associate with the Urban Institute in collaboration with whom we're doing this series on Urban America. Sondra Jackson is acting receiver of the Child and Family Services Agency of Washington, D.C. Mildred Gee is the manager of the special projects unit of the Maryland Department of Human Resources, which is in charge of kinship care. And Siobhan Grayson is the supervisor of foster care with Arlington County.

Thank you all for joining us. This has been Public Interest. I'm Kojo Nnamdi.

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