

# Kinship Support Group welcomes guest speaker Cafaro

BY STEFANIE WESSELL  
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**ASHTABULA TOWNSHIP** - The Ashtabula County Children Services Kinship Support Group welcomed a special visitor during its meeting on Monday, Feb. 1.

Ohio Senator Capri Cafaro spoke to the group about current legislation affecting kinship providers and seniors during its meeting at Ashtabula County Children Services. During the meeting, the kinship providers also had an opportunity to tell Cafaro the concerns they have as caregivers.

The Kinship Support Group is a support group for people who are taking care of children who are not their biological children, such as nieces, nephews, grandchildren or their friends' children, Community Service Coordinator Kathryn Whittington explained.

The Kinship Support Group meets from 5:30-7 p.m. on the first Monday of each month, Whittington said. While the adults meet, the Children Services Board provides age-appropriate child care and activities for teens, including activities dealing with life skills.

The children are split into age groups, with Help Me Grow providing activities for children ages birth to six years, Children Services staff providing activities for children ages six to 11 years and Whittington meeting with the teens.

While the caregivers meet, the children enjoy snacks and participate in age-appropriate activities, such as coloring pictures for the younger children, making bird feeders for the children aged six to 11 and guest speakers for the teens, Whittington said.

For example, on Monday the teens were talking about what kind of speakers they wanted to invite, and they were interested in learning about careers, specifically inviting someone involved in justice studies, Whittington said.

"They're starting to think about careers,"

Whittington said.

The Kinship Support Group offers emotional and informational support for the caregivers, who often receive little financial support for taking in someone else's children, organizers said.

"That's why we're coming together - to help ourselves the best we can," Kinship Coordinator Katie Lane said.

One person involved in the Kinship Support Group is City of Ashtabula resident Debbie Sanders.

Four years ago, Sanders took over the care of her two great nephews who were living in North Carolina. The boys are now five and 10 years old.

Their biological mother, Sanders' niece, intended to turn her children over to children's services, so Sanders' sister called and asked her if she could take in the children instead.

With her own child already grown, Sanders agreed to take in the children.

"They're my family and they didn't have anybody," Sanders said.

Also motivating Sanders was the realization that her sister, now deceased, would have done the same for her if she had been in that situation.

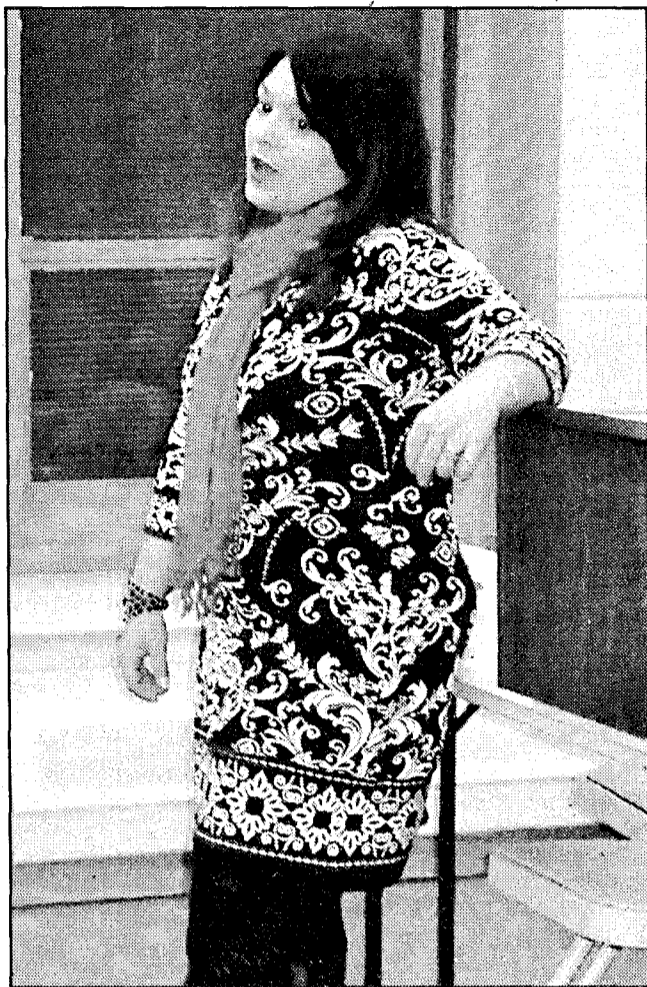
Sanders said she became involved with the Kinship Support Group because of the help it provides to her and other caregivers. She said the group lets her know about the kinds of financial help she can receive.

The group and Children Services also help the caregivers with fundraisers and giveaways, like grant money they received for book bags.

The emotional support the caregivers receive from each other also is valuable, Sanders said.

"We all can relate to raising someone else's children," Sanders said.

Caregiver Dyan Michalski, also of the City of Ashtabula, agreed. Michalski and her family took in her niece in April 2006, with legal custody being awarded in December of 2007. It was at that time that she became in-



PHOTOS BY STEFANIE WESSELL  
Ohio Senator Capri Cafaro spoke to the Kinship Support Group about current legislation affecting kinship providers and seniors during its meeting at Ashtabula County Children Services on Monday, Feb. 1.

involved with the Kinship Support Group.

The girl's mom had hit a rough spot and wasn't able to care for her and asked us to take the child in for a couple of months, Michalski said.

A couple of months turned into a couple of years, and Michalski said her niece hasn't seen her biological mother since April 2008 and last spoke to her on the phone on her fourth birthday in January of 2009. Michalski said that, at this point, she wouldn't want to return custody to the girl's biological mother.

Although her niece knows her biological mom is out there, she now calls Michalski and her husband mom and dad. Michalski also has four biological sons of her own, ranging in age from three to 14 years old, as well as a stepson who lives with his mother.

Michalski said the main reason she attends the Kinship Support Group is for the support and someone to talk to.

Michalski said the big struggle of being a caregiver is knowing what to tell her niece when she asks where her mother is.

"I don't want to lie to her, but I don't want to tell her the truth, either," Michalski said. "It's really nice to hear how others handle it."

After nearly four years, Michalski said she considers her niece to be her own daughter.

"There's no difference," Michalski said.

During her presentation, Cafaro attempted to answer the caregivers' questions and update them on current legislation.

The caregivers particularly were interested in learning why cash assistance is mostly reserved for caregivers who are blood-related to the children they take in.

Cafaro said that issue has been discussed, and the reason why has to do with the government purposefully limiting eligibility to contain costs.

She urged the caregivers to let their voices be heard about changing the requirements.

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Cafaro said that issue has been discussed, and the reason why has to do with the government purposefully limiting eligibility to contain costs.

She urged the caregivers to let their voices be heard about changing the requirements.

"I want to commend you for stepping up," Cafaro told the caregivers.

For information about the Kinship Support Group, contact the Ashtabula County Children Services Board at (440) 998-1811.

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Kinship Coordinator Katie Lane talks with members of the Kinship Support Group on Monday, Feb. 1.