

KINSHIP PROGRAM TO CONTINUE AT LORAIN COUNTY OFFICE ON AGING

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Lorain County Office on Aging has received a federal grant of \$47,485 for three years to expand and enhance its Kinship Navigator Program. The grant, which is one of six competitive grants in the nation, was awarded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Child Welfare Division, as a part of the Fostering Connections to Success Act to the Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO) and seven collaborating counties which include our Office On Aging in cooperation with Lorain County Children Services and the Children Services Agencies in six other Ohio Counties. Consultants and evaluators of the programs are members of the Human Services Research Institute based in the State of Oregon.

A goal of this funding is to demonstrate the effectiveness of Kinship Navigator Programs in seven high need areas of the state. Kinship Navigator programs guide grandparents and other relatives who are raising children in their extended families to services within the community. They provide information & referral, follow-up services to relative caregivers to link them to the benefits and supports that they or the children need. Each of the seven county agencies involved will provide Kinship Navigator services to a broad population of Kinship caregivers even if the families have no involvement with the child welfare system. These agencies include Ashtabula Children Services, Clark Children Services, Crawford Children Services, Harden Children Services, Portage Children Services, Richland Children Services and Lorain County Office on Aging.

Crystal Ward Allen, PCSAO Executive Director, said "We are excited about the opportunity to better serve Kin-caregivers. Research with these and other Ohio counties show that enhanced support to relative caregivers, before they get deeply involved with the child welfare system, diverts these children and families from traumatic and costly unrelated foster care. Furthermore, children fortunate enough to be cared for by safe kin caregivers have better outcomes than their peers in unrelated foster care."

The grant was awarded just in time to assure that the Kinship Navigator Program initiated in 2001 at the Lorain County Office on Aging, would survive and be enhanced. State budget cuts in mid 2009 cut over \$60,000 of Lorain County Job and Family Service Temporary Assistance to Needy Families discretionary dollars which had been used for the past seven years to fund the LCOOA Kinship Navigator Program through a purchase of service contract from LCDJFS. This loss of dollars resulted in an aggressive fund raising effort by the Office on Aging to save the program, included seeking and receiving ongoing funding from the Lorain County Children Services, Nord Family Foundation, Nordson Corporate Foundation, as well as funds from the National Brookdale Foundation and the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging. Because of the federal grant, LCOOA was able to increase the Kinship Navigator staff hours. Navigators Helene R. Stone, MSSA, LISW-S, and Michele R. Stoller, MSW, LSW, are master level

state licensed and trained social workers. They have extensive experience working with Kinship caregivers and knowledgeable about the problems the caregivers face.

Executive Director Patricia Littleton secured the initial Kinship Navigator grant in 2001. She hired Independent Contractor, Helene R. Stone several months later, a social work administrator with 30 years experience working with frail elderly, low income minority populations. Ms. Stone developed the program working closely with Ms. Littleton to serve additional needed resources for the kinship clients. I.e. legal assistance, a kinship food bank, support and educational groups, emergency resources, help to access some hard goods such as beds, dressers, and appliances. In 2006, Michele Stoller joined the Kinship Navigator staff. She brought 14 years prior work experience concentrating on the MRDD population and adoptions.

The federal grant will increase the LCOOA Kinship Navigator Program links to the county 211 systems, provided by United Way, as well as promote increased community outreach efforts. The funds will supplement other resources available to assist kinship caregivers including critically needed access to legal assistance. The Kinship Navigators will reach an increased number of Lorain County Kinship caregivers to provide increased information about access to needed services and supports including support groups, educational resources, financial assistance and respite care. It is anticipated that at least 150 new kinship caregiver families will add to the 700 plus families and over 1,400 children presently being served by the Kinship Navigator program within the next year. An additional strength of the federal grant is the development of strong state and local advisory groups which will promote system level collaboration creating effective inter-agency partnerships to strengthen and sustain service delivery systems supporting kinship families.

The Lorain County Office on Aging Kinship Navigator Local Advisory group met for the first time in December. Members include representatives from Lorain County Children Services, Lorain County Job and Family Services, Lorain County Mental Health Board, Lorain County Metropolitan Housing Authority, Lorain County Juvenile Court, El Centro de Servicios Sociales, Lorain County Children and Family First Council, Blessing House, United Way of Greater Lorain County, a Kinship Caregiver and a teen who has been raised by her grandparents and a local family law attorney who has made significant contributions of both pro bono and paid legal assistance to our kinship caregivers.

Beyond providing enhanced services to kinship families, PCSAO Director Allen said the grant “will include rigorous process and outcomes evaluation which will also inform improvements for child and family outcomes”. Through comprehensive evaluations, the grants will further our knowledge base for ensuring children have the opportunity to grow in safe family homes.