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Refuge in hard world -- grandma

Drugs, other troubles force older adults to take in grandchildren

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Keith Griffin was a toddler in September 1999, when his father was gunned down in an East Side parking lot.

The boy was barely 7 in December 2003, when his mother was stabbed to death in their Fairport Avenue apartment.

Now he's 9 and the center of a court battle between his maternal and paternal grandmothers.

That two unrelated slayings made Keith an orphan is rare. But grandparents seeking custody is not.

Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court judges have heard nearly 500 cases involving grandparents in the past 18 months. The 2000 census found 186,000 grandparents in Ohio raising grandchildren.

"In Cuyahoga County and all over the country, the court system is seeing increasing numbers of grandparents providing permanent care to their grandchildren as a result of substance abuse, divorce, abandonment, teenage pregnancy, death, AIDS, unemployment, incarceration and mental health problems," said Judge Joseph Russo, administrator of the Juvenile Court.

"All result in a great deal of responsibility for the grandparents who want to, or are forced to, take on the task."

A number of local, state and federal programs have been created to help. The latest begins Monday, when grandparents and other kinship custodians can apply for up to \$3,500 per child from a \$10 million pot of state and federal money. County children's services agencies have the applications.

Recipients will need a court record, dated July 1 or later, that gives them custody or guardianship of the children in their care.

Crack cocaine ravaged a generation of parents, and "crystal methamphetamine may do the same to the next," said Susan Stauffer, a local Legal Aid Society family law expert.

That leaves juvenile court judges trying to determine what long-term relationships will be in the best interests of children. Often, that's Grandma.

"Extended families are vital resources for children," said Barbara Riley, director of the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services. "It allows them to live in familiar surroundings with people they love."

Feuds between maternal and paternal grandparents are inevitable. Many judges employ mediators when disputes arise. Mediation didn't work in Keith's case.

He had lived with his paternal grandmother, Joyce Griffin, for more than four years before his mother's

boyfriend killed her. After her death, his maternal grandmother sought custody and won.

Griffin appealed, but then "it got so stressful for Keith to be caught in the middle, I stopped putting him in that position," she said.

She has stopped fighting for custody. Instead, she wants a judge to give her and Keith's half-brothers a few weeks each summer with Keith, at her new home in Orange Park, Fla.

The court battle has been expensive and frustrating, Griffin said. But, "you do what you have to do for your grandchildren."

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