

“I Screamed for Help”: A Case Study of One Grandmother’s Experience with Voluntary Kinship Care

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this qualitative single case study is to explore one grandmother’s experience with voluntary kinship care and child welfare services. Voluntary kinship care is pursued as a viable option when out-of-home placement is imminent. Research indicates that voluntary kinship care, as an alternative living arrangement, helps to maintain familial and community attachments as well as to minimize trauma and upheaval in a child’s life. This case study identifies four major themes relating to the participant’s experiences: life altering events, gaining control, daily challenges, and looking to the future. Implications for public and child welfare practice are discussed. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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The purpose of this article is to present a case study of one grandmother's experiences with voluntary kinship care and child welfare services. In 2003 it was estimated that 2.4 million kinship care providers were grandparents raising their grandchildren, of which 1.5 million were grandmothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Child welfare agencies aim to prevent out-of-home placement of the child by involving grandparents in either an informal kinship care arrangement (also referred to as a voluntary), or a formal kinship foster care arrangement. Arrangements can be made formally by the courts, or informally between the child welfare worker and relative (NAIC, 2005). Many of these living arrangements are the result of child protection services involvement, where a birth parent has been found to be abusive or neglectful to his or her child (ren) (Urban Institute, 2003).

Voluntary kinship care is considered a viable option for a number of reasons, the most important being that children placed with relatives help to maintain family and community attachments (Crumbley & Little, 1997) and this arrangement is less traumatic for the child (Geen, 2000), second, children are kept out of the "entanglement" of the child welfare system (Ehrle, Geen & Main, 2002; Black & Brooks, 2004) minimizing county and state oversight, and lastly, the financial costs to the county and state are minimal, if at all, as the cost of raising the identified child(ren) falls to the caregiver (Black & Brooks, 2004; Geen, 2003).

Researchers are finding that voluntary kinship care is a population in need of services due to health related problems, impoverished living conditions, and challenging parenting issues (Casper & Byson, 1998; Fuller-Thomson, 2000; Ehrle & Geen, 2002). Malm and Geen (2003) found that "thirty-one percent of children in voluntary kinship care and 43 percent of children in private kinship care live in families with incomes less than the federal poverty level" (p.1). Some grandparents, depending on income and need, are able to receive the TANF basic child-only benefits (Shlonsky, S., 2004). Mayfield, Pennucci, and Lyon (2002) identified not only lack of financial and social service support as a problem, but also the inability of caregivers to access services due to a "complex and confusing bureaucracy"(p. 1). Geen (2003) found that child welfare workers perceive kin as needing fewer services, but

acknowledge that kin may also be unaware of available services, or they are intimidated by the child welfare system, thus avoiding contact.

More specifically, Szolnoki and Cahn's (2002) literature review on family supports for African American caregivers identified four specific issues for service providers to be cognizant of when serving this population: changing family roles and social isolation, financial burden, emotional and psychological stress, and physical health (pp. 3-4).

The large amount of research in the kinship care field has clearly identified the needs of voluntary kinship care providers. Although researchers call for policy changes providing more support to this population, there continues to exist significant service gaps (Hornby & Zeller, 1996). This qualitative case study begins to identify gaps through one grandmother's experiences in providing voluntary kinship care to her four grandchildren. Two focal questions guided this study: (1) How did this grandmother become involved with the child welfare system and what has been her experience? (2) What has been this grandmother's experience as a kinship care provider?

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This single case study utilized a naturalistic, qualitative methodology to explore one grandmother's experience with voluntary kinship care and child welfare services. Naturalistic inquiry is grounded in the belief that knowledge can be developed inductively using methods that are emergent and flexible to change (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Stakes identifies "the unique case" as an intriguing puzzle and one that "we seek to understand," and "hear their stories" (1995, p. 1). Although single case studies cannot be generalized to the population, we "can learn much that is general from single cases" (Stakes, 1995, p. 85). The key inquiry of this research was to learn from Elaina her experiences as a voluntary kinship care provider, and her involvement with the child welfare system.

Data Collection

Elaina (fictitious name) is an African American grandmother in her mid-40s raising four of her six grandchildren. She has one daughter, Marisa (fictitious name) who is in her mid-20s and the birth mother of

six children, the two younger children she is raising on her own. It is not known whether Elaina has ever been married, as she did not share this information. The grandchildren living with Elaina range in ages from 4 to 11, two boys and two girls. Elaina chose voluntary kinship care in order to prevent her grandchildren from entering into the foster care system.

Elaina was recruited as part of a larger child welfare study that focused on power dynamics and the working relationship between workers and parents. Elaina was one of twenty-five participants recruited for this study. Participants were recruited from one of two large private, not-for-profit child and family services agencies in upstate New York. Participants responded to a letter sent through the mail written by the researcher and accompanied by a letter of support from the director of home-based family preservation services. Elaina called the researcher directly to learn about the study. The researcher explained the intent of the study emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation and confirmed that she could withdraw at any time for any reason. Prior to the start of each interview Elaina received a cash stipend with the understanding that she could end the interview at any time and keep the stipend. Elaina was informed of her rights through informed consent procedures. Elaina participated in three interviews for a total of 3 hours. All three interviews were tape-recorded with Elaina's permission. Institutional Review Board approval for the study was given by the University at Albany.

Although Elaina was recruited as part of a larger study, she was excluded from the aggregate data analysis from the onset of the study. The researcher did not realize that Elaina was a grandmother when the interview was set up. Upon learning this, it was decided to continue with the interviews utilizing a single case study design to learn about the uniqueness of her situation. As Stakes writes, "Sometimes, we are given [the case], even obligated to take it as the object of study" (p. 3). Elaina's experiences presented serendipitous opportunities to learn what it is like to be a grandmother raising four grandchildren and to be involved in the child welfare system.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured, repeated interviews. Beeman (1995) found that repeated interviews helped to build rapport between researcher and participant. Interview questions are structured to the extent that pertinent information is obtained on the subject, yet flexible enough to allow participants to respond and participate easily as in a conversation, encouraging their own thoughts and feelings to emerge (Beeman, 1995). Interview questions focused on Elaina's

experience as a grandmother, and her experience with the child welfare system, in particular child welfare workers. Key questions in the first interview included: (1) Please tell me about yourself and your family, (2) How did you become involved with the child welfare system? The second interview focused on key questions such as: (1) The relationship between your worker and your family is a working relationship intended to make things happen: can you describe your role in this? Can you describe your worker's role? And the third interview asked one key question: (1) Would you be willing to share with me your experience of being a grandparent and raising grandchildren at this point in your life?

Data Analysis

Audio-taped interviews were transcribed and analyzed using ATLAS.ti software. The constant comparison method was applied to the data after codes and categories had been established. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define unitizing [also referred to as coding] and categorizing as two essential operations in the data analysis process. Coding involves sorting through the data and distinguishing units of information that would eventually be placed into categories. As categories emerged they were constantly compared and analyzed to identify similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). As Stakes states, the goal of analysis is to “understand [the] behavior, issues, and contexts with regard to our particular case” (1995, p. 78).

Throughout the coding and categorization process the goal was to focus on emergent themes and patterns in the data. The findings are discussed in relation to four major categories: life altering events, gaining control, daily challenges, and looking to the future. Each category provides a narrative description that provides the reader with an understanding of personal events for one grandmother. Although this case study cannot be generalized to other cases, the comparison with like cases “is inevitable” (Stakes, 1995, p. 134).

FINDINGS

Interviews with Elaina provided rich data for learning about the complexities of voluntary kinship care. Four major themes emerged from the data and are discussed: life altering events, gaining control, daily challenges, and looking to the future.

Life Altering Events

Elaina's decision to become the legal guardian for her four oldest grandchildren transpired after a series of events involving her daughter, Marisa and child protective services. At the time of this research, Marisa was 27 years of age and had six children, four girls and two boys, ages 1-11 years of age. Prior to these events Elaina held a full time job, contributed towards a retirement plan, had medical coverage, life and health insurance.

Involvement with the child welfare system. Elaina describes that the onset of problems first began when one of her grandchildren received second and third degree burns. Marisa was then indicated for child neglect; the child protection worker on the case called Elaina regarding the child stating, "Well, you know, you can take her or we can put her in a foster home." Elaina said that she reacted strongly to this "because I'm a product of foster homes" so at that point she shared her decision to "take care of them. And that's how I got involved."

Elaina said that Marisa moved in with the children and together they shared parenting responsibilities. Due to child neglect charges, Marisa could not be alone with the four older grandchildren resulting in Elaina needing to take a more active role. Once Marisa moved in, Elaina described her as becoming less responsible in her parenting:

She would just take off and she would just go for days on end. And with the children entering the school system you have to have letters and notes saying that you have the right to do this, you have the right to sign for this, and immunizations, to go to the doctor. You have to have letters for all of that stuff and I told her, "You know, if you're not going to be here to raise these children, I need clearance to do for them what needs to be done. And if you're not going to, I'm going to take them from you."

Elaina filed for and was granted full custody of the four older grandchildren. Marisa was granted "liberal visitation rights but she [was] not allowed to be left unattended with [the children] because of irresponsible actions." Elaina then decided that living together was not working and perhaps it would be best if Marisa moved out with her youngest child:

When we first started doing this, I told her . . . she was living home, so quite naturally she was going to see the children every

day on a daily basis, you know, but when she kept going and getting babies and getting pregnant and bringing them home, I was like, “You know something. You’ve got to spread your wings and fly darling. I cannot keep doing this.”

Conflicting responsibilities. During this period of time Elaina continued to hold a full time job while caring for her four grandchildren. The two boys began to have problems at school and Elaina began receiving frequent phone calls at work from the school authorities. Elaina then described the events that resulted in the clash of a job and parenting responsibilities:

I was at work and it was on a Sunday. I was doing mandatory over-time. My child care provider was on vacation. I had no other child care, but [my daughter]. She was just right there, right across the street. So I was okay and it is mandatory over-time, so I can’t tell them no. So alright my back was against the wall, [so I asked Marisa] would you watch [the children], stay here with the kids while I go to work. I’m only going to be working like 5 hours and I’ll come straight home. In the meantime, her two babies’ daddy was trying to . . . wanted to control her and wanted her to forget that she had four other children, so what he did was he called child protection because he knew that it was suppose to be supervised visitations. So in any case, child protection called my job. It was like, “You need to leave. You need to get home. Because if you don’t, we’re removing the kids.” I was like, oh my God. I was like, okay, this was on the phone.

In order to prevent the children being removed from the home Elaina needed to take the next week off due to her day care provider being on vacation. Elaina said she was getting calls from work, “Well, when are you coming back?” Elaina described her stress level, “I was totally stressed. I mean ’cause they were stressing me on that and then Child Protection is stressing me over here and they want me to come to this meeting, they want me to come to that meeting, and then [Marisa] was pregnant with [her baby].”

Elaina described her life as:

Just spiraling down, kept spiraling down. And what ultimately happened was I wound up with pneumonia. I was out for two weeks and they wanted me to come to work and I told them I cannot come to

work. I was sick for a lot of it and caring for the kids and look here I can't even go to the hospital because I don't have no one to leave the kids with and I'm like, look I have a 104 temperature, I'm on Prednisone, the side effect from Prednisone is anxiety, so I'm loaded with anxiety, then they take me and put me on Zanax to calm the anxiety down and then I'm like oh, you guys really don't want me there, you really just don't want me there. And they're, "Well, you need to come in, you need to come in." So I was like, "Listen, you know what? Talk to my doctor."

Upon returning to work Elaina was told that "we've got to fire you." Elaina shared that struggling to find a day care provider, dealing with her health problems, parenting, job, and transportation issues was the just the beginning of her problems, as "it all came to a head, it kind of went full circle and that's not even the beginning of it." The real challenges for Elaina were centered on gaining control of her grandchildren who began exhibiting severe behavioral problems.

Gaining Control

Elaina in a short period of time assumed full custody of her four grandchildren ranging in ages from 4 to 11 years of age, two boys and two girls. During this time period when Elaina was struggling with daycare, custody, and job issues, her oldest granddaughter began running away from home, and her grandson was fighting in school and was caught stealing. Elaina shared that she was dedicated to raising her grandchildren and to avoiding foster care placement. In order to gain control over the children's behavioral problems Elaina described what she needed to do for her grandchildren to know that she was in charge.

At-risk behavioral problems. Elaina went to great lengths to gain control of her granddaughter:

My 11 year old, [granddaughter], was going through some changes concerning boys and sneaking out at night, and trying to grow up before her time, and it came to the point to where I had to have her arrested because she was really being very resistant and she was being very rebellious. And at 11 years old, I'm like, you know, that's just too soon. You know what I'm saying? So at that point I screamed for help and . . . that's how I got involved with Julie [fictitious name/child welfare worker].

Elaina described in details what it was like to involve the police and the extent of the behavioral problems her granddaughter was exhibiting:

I wanted to make my point to her that I care enough about you to keep you from hurting yourself. So I called the police and she wouldn't go with the police and she just kept going and going and "no, no, no," just total rebel and I was like, "Take her." And when she realized that I said take her and they were going to take her, she panicked. And she began to scream, "No, grandma, no, grandma. I'm sorry." And I'm like, "Take her. Take her. I'll meet her down at headquarters." You know, so, and she was still very defiant, 'I'm going to do this and I'm going to do this.' I was talking with the youth officer and they was like, "Well, what do you want to do?" And I said, "You know something? She needs to taste this. Keep her overnight." I want you to keep her. And because she is a runner, she ran, she bit the cop, she threw rocks at the cops. They chased her for seven blocks. They chased her and she beat them up, I was like, "shackle her. She wants to know what the real world is like out there in the street . . . being a street girl, being a rebellion." So they shackled her hands and they shackled her feet. And it hurt me like crazy . . . but I needed to make my point. You know she needed to know that I had the upper hand. She needed to know that the law has the upper hand. She needed to know that I'm not going to let you ruin yourself. A lot has gone into you. And I will not watch you destroy you.

Elaina shared that the process of gaining control of her grandchildren was exhausting and she found herself asking: "Oh, where is my support? You know, Help, help. You know, I've taken on too much. I've bitten off too much. I can't do this."

I'm not alone. Elaina also shared the extent she went to in order to turn her grandson around when he was fighting and stealing. Elaina described her involvement with child welfare services as providing her with the strength to go on and deal with the difficult issues. Elaina shared that she found social services to be very responsive. "I think that it's the fact that I'm a grandmother and I am young. And not to be arrogant, but I am quite well-spoken." Elaina describes the help from her child welfare practitioner to be very supportive:

It's going to seem a little strange, but it's a security to know that there's somebody there that's on my side. That my grandkids get

the message that I'm not alone. That there is somebody that will back me up. If I tell them that they need to be in the house at 8 o'clock, getting ready for bed by 8:30 and in bed by 9:00 and that's not done, and it becomes continuous to where it's causing me stress and causing me aggravation and they are cutting up, I can pick up the telephone and I can say, "Help." And they'll come.

In the third interview, Elaina expressed her concern that social services would end the services she was receiving as she was told by her DSS worker:

“. . . it seems like you guys are pretty solid here, you know, you don't really need me here." You know, but so I was like, "You know something, don't leave because at this point, I'm insecure because I have many fears." You know my biggest fear is that [the oldest will go] out and I need something in place that I can say, you know something, there's somebody on my side and if you're cutting up and you're acting crazy and you're disrespecting me and you're running out of the house and all the rest of this stuff, all I have to do is pick up the telephone and your butt is had. So what that's doing is giving me the upper hand.

Elaina was able to gain control over her grandchildren's acting out behaviors with the support of child welfare workers and through her own sheer determination. Elaina said that "most people would see [child welfare services] as a hindrance or a threat. But I guess it's a service because I cried out for it." Also, Elaina's childhood experience of growing up in the foster care system propelled her to do what she needed to do. Fortunately, Elaina was able to obtain services, support, and at the time of this research her grandchildren were doing well. However, by Elaina's own admission each day was a challenge.

Daily Challenges

With the support of child welfare services, Elaina was able to assert and gain control as the custodial parent. Elaina discussed a number of challenges she faced on a daily basis: meeting her family's basic needs and her relationship with her daughter.

Meeting basic needs. At the time Elaina sought out child welfare services, she was also the victim of identify theft. Elaina says that not only

was she able to obtain supportive services, but she also obtained housing services:

Well, I contacted the county. The county came in and saw the situation that was going on, not to mention the fact that I got robbed and my landlady wouldn't fix anything.

Elaina describes the situation where she was robbed:

The person just walked in my house, took all social security cards, took all birth certificates, okay. It was at tax season. She claimed each and every single one of us on her tax return. When it was time for my taxes to come through, I couldn't get my taxes because she had already gotten the check and cashed the check. And [she] had written a check on my checking account and wiped that out. I was able to get my income taxes back and I had to put everything on hold in the bank and restart everything with a new account, new numbers, new account numbers, and all the stuff there.

Elaina blamed her landlady for the theft:

If she had fixed [the problem] 'cause the doors were completely off the hinges, the windows were completely out in the front door, in the front hallway, the entrance hallway, my apartment door was completely off, so the person that robbed me just walked in, you know, while we were out. Okay, and went in my filing cabinet and got all the stuff that she needed.

Therefore, in order to create a safe home environment Elaina did the following:

So ultimately I hired an electrician to fix the electricity in the house because of some faulty wiring and it was dangerous. I hired a contractor and a carpenter to come in and put the doors in and put the window back in the front door and a locksmith to come in and, you know, replace the locks and everything, which ran me about \$785. Okay. And I called an exterminator because there was an infestation of roaches and she would not do anything. So ultimately what happened was when the county came in, the county saw the situation that the house was in and I couldn't afford to keep . . . because it's not my house for starters, it was her responsibility to do

this. So they was like, "Okay, first off, we need to get you out of here." You know, so I was like, "Okay, whatever you have to offer."

Elaina's financial struggles occurred when she assumed care and custody of her grandchildren. Elaina found she was eligible "to get food stamps" and "financial assistance [for] the kids" known as child-only grants. Elaina expressed a belief that this was her county's form of kinship care. Elaina was also receiving unemployment at the time of the interviews. However, with her limited income and welfare support Elaina expressed the frustrations of raising children:

You know it's just the providing part is the part that I get really, really frustrated. [My oldest granddaughter wants me to] buy very hoochie clothes and very thuggish, you know, being the age she is and the time that she lives in and . . . for church. And I'm like, "No, you can't not wear this to church." And then she'll get frustrated with me and then I'll be like, "Okay, you don't get it." If I had the means and the funds to do what I was suppose to do, you know, they would go appropriately.

Despite these challenges Elaina presented as light-hearted women with an easygoing attitude, and a quick sense of humor. Elaina attributes her spiritual belief as providing her strength to get through the daily struggles:

Spirituality is very important to me. It's my function, it's my . . . it's what gets me through, it's what keeps me going, you know, and it's most important that I install that into my grandchildren.

Mother-daughter relationship. The other daily struggle for Elaina was dealing with her daughter's role in the family. When Elaina was granted full custody, her daughter was given "liberal visitation":

You know, and we never changed that whole liberal visitation, you know, to limit it to a certain time a week or a month or whatever, so she comes and she goes and she disrupts the household and I get a headache and I kick her out. You know, which makes me feel really bad because she has two other small children that she tells me that I don't acknowledge them, you know, and I do acknowledge them.

Elaina has described a relationship with her daughter that was complicated by Marisa's need for attention, immature choices, and wanting to be her mom's friend. Elaina described a conversation with her daughter regarding her care of her children:

I think she believes that it's something I suppose to do, you know, because she said to me often times, "You don't need to have any more babies, I'm your baby. You don't need to have no more babies. My children are your babies." You know and if . . . when she was little, well she was an only child. And when she was growing up, if anybody else would come around, she would be like . . . I'll give you an example. A little girl named E__ was a playmate of hers, whose mother had breast cancer, and on her birthday, her mother passed on to glory, and the little girl came to me, she was so upset, you know, so I gave her a card. It was her birthday, so I gave her a card and I put \$10-20 in it, you know, "Happy Birthday," with a little porcelain piggy bank. And Marisa went bananas. She was like, "How dare you come in my house and get my money from my mother? You get out," and crushed the little girl. I mean she literally crushed her and she had just lost her mom.

Elaina also seems to be very aware of her daughter's fragility as an adult. When Elaina was granted full custody she was concerned about her daughter's emotional state, and intentionally did not pursue custody of the two younger children:

I wasn't willing to watch her totally lose it. Because the two she has now, I feel personally are the two that's helping her hold it together.

Looking to the Future

During the first interview Elaina stated that she "didn't adopt the children" nor did she have any interest in adopting. However, by the third interview Elaina shared "I've even considered adopting them." However, "I haven't really discussed it much." This change of heart appeared to correlate with Marisa that saying she was getting married to a man that Elaina "loathes." Elaina has also expressed her motivation and investment in parenting:

I don't want them to lose them. I think because they are great kids, you know. And I think if they went with their mom, they would lose you know all that's been taught to them.

Along with Elaina's focus on what is best for her grandchildren she also shared, in the last interview, her child welfare worker's encouragement to begin taking care of herself:

My goal is (laughs) . . . she's [worker] is suppose to ask me this today when she comes out, you're suppose to take a day and do something for yourself.

Elaina concluded the interview by sharing her dreams for the future:

The kids get through school without a whole bunch of drama. Graduate, go to college. I'm really just trying to get them to realize their potentials, you know, and to capitalize on it, you know. And that some day I'm set up, the American Dream, white house, picket fence business (laughs). You know I don't even think the American Dream exists anymore unless you're rich, but it's a hopeful, you know.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this case study was to illustrate from one grandmother's perspective her experience with the child welfare system and with providing voluntary kinship care. The findings of this case study indicate the increasing needs of an at-risk population of grandparents voluntarily raising their grandchildren without financial supports. The probability is high that this population will become involved in the welfare system either through public assistance (i.e., food stamps, housing, child only grants) or child welfare services. Unfortunately, the welfare system is extremely complex for consumers and it takes a persistent person to get what they need from the welfare system. In this case, it took Elaina literally "screaming" to child welfare professionals that she needed help.

The literature clearly reflects the ambivalence kinship care providers experience in asking for help. Elaina was extremely motivated to keep her grandchildren out of foster care; however, she had enough trust in the child welfare system to ask for help. Although many grandparents

may be aware of what services social services agencies offer, research indicates that “most kinship caregivers expressed dissatisfaction and distrust of the system and the caseworkers assigned to them” (Geen, 2003, p. 222). Elaina’s experience is perhaps unique in that she knew she needed services and support to gain control over her grandchildren’s acting out behaviors.

The greatest tragedy for Elaina, similar to other kinship care providers, is that she was at one time financially stable. She did not have a high paying job but was able to maintain a sufficient income, receive health insurance, and contribute to a retirement fund. When Elaina assumed custodial responsibilities and was subsequently fired from her job she lost her secure financial standing. Poverty is clearly one of the variables that place this population at risk. The importance of coordinated efforts between public and child welfare services is essential in order to potentially identify grandparents at risk and in need of services. Providing early intervention services may be more cost effective and help to ward off more serious problems in the future.

Asking grandparents to provide kinship care to their grandchild that would otherwise be placed in the foster care system helps decrease the burden on a system that is already stretched to its limit. Therefore, to identify voluntary kinship care as another at-risk population fills an already overfull quota of persons in need of child welfare services. Therefore, it raises more questions than it answers: Can this population be served with minimal supports and intervention? Do some grandparents, especially single grandparents, need to know that they are not alone and that support is one phone call away? Is it possible to develop and nurture a support system within individual communities? Perhaps, there is a way to begin providing this population with supports that do not overwhelm the system, especially a system that is struggling to provide effective services to a current clientele.

Is there a predicted course of events that grandparents experience when they assume caregiving responsibilities of their grandchildren? Elaine’s story unfolds through a series of events involving child protection services, loss of her job due to demands of parenting and child care, loss in financial security, unsafe housing, acting out behaviors of grandchildren coping with life altering events, and then the story begins to change when she is able to obtain child welfare services and support along with safe housing. She then ends her story with the researcher by reflecting on future events: adoption and taking care of herself. Clearly, more research is needed to determine if Elaina’s story is a familiar story. If so, would public and child welfare practitioners be better prepared to

meet the needs of voluntary kinship care providers? By understanding the “normal” course of events and issues that occur in abrupt care giving of grandchildren, perhaps public and child welfare workers will have a better understanding of how to be proactive versus reactive? Proactive interaction would involve assuring kinship care providers that they are not alone and that supports exist. Granted, more research is needed to determine if this approach is oversimplified or right on target.

Regardless of the course of action taken by public and child welfare workers, the reality is that a course of action is needed for this population. Unfortunately, this is not new information as Miller (2004) has identified four steps needed to support kinship caregivers: listen to the voice of relative caregivers, develop training materials for workers so that they can better recognize and meet the needs of caregivers, and foster the development of informal community networks (p. 36). In the literature, scholars have identified a number of solutions for addressing the needs of this population (Geen, 2003; Szolnoki & Cahn, 2002), yet this case study clearly reflects the struggles for one kinship care provider.

CONCLUSION

Voluntary (informal) kinship care unlike formal kinship care is somewhat invisible in the sea of child welfare problems, although slowly this is changing as the needs of this population become clearer. Voluntary kinship care is a viable permanency option for child protection workers but unfortunately, supportive follow-up services do not exist if the caregiver does not request them or seek them out. Lack of follow through and request of services exist for numerous reasons: mistrust of the system, a system that is too complex and uninviting, or lack of awareness that potential services exist. Yet, this case study reported a different experience for one grandmother. What about the grandparents that do request services? What is their experience? Is it similar or different to Elaina's? Elaina shares a positive, supportive experience with her child welfare workers. Perhaps her experience can help to inform other parents and workers.

Clearly, a bridge is needed between research and practice. Researchers have identified the needs of voluntary kinship care providers yet there exists a gap in practice implementation. Perhaps future research that includes the voices of voluntary kinship caregivers will provide a gauge as to the status of the “bridge” and whether services and supports

are considered to be valuable to the consumer, in this case the grandparent caregiver.

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