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I am a retired teacher who has been kinship provider for 20 years. I have a granddaughter that I have raised since she was 3 and she is now a junior in college and also have a 96 year old mother. I am truly a member of the sandwich generation.

I have a support program in Chittenden County for kinship families. I do it strictly as a volunteer to help families and children and provide some of the information and support that wish I had had 15 years ago.

I am here to share my experiences as a kinship caregiver and give you a peek into the world of a kinship caregiver. Shopping for prom dresses, and visiting colleges and helping a nervous excited teenager pack the car to go off to college are rare experiences for a 70 plus year old grandmother. The fun of attending sports events, helping with homework, and hearing about the joys and trials of junior high have kept me actively involved in the world of the under 30 crowd.

The challenges are of being a kinship caregiver are also extensive. I found the caregiver role lonely. My friends were going out for a drink and dinner after work. I was picking a child up from after school care and doing dinner , homework and an 8pm bedtime.

Relatives raising children don't have the connections or networks that were available to them when they were raising their bio children. The lack of support and isolation made my caregiving job a challenge. The same challenges face caregivers today.

This past couple of weeks I have worked kinship families who were told by DCF workers that they were not eligible for Reach Up grants, free school lunch and daycare support. That children with IEPs can't change schools. That the only way relatives can have children of relatives live in their home is if they adopt them. That there is no such thing as guardianship for children.

, In one case the reach up grant was canceled because the shelter form that was sent in with the reach up grant form was misplaced. Another family was told that they needed to fill out a form child support form but the worker didn't know how to find it online and that the worker couldn't email or fax her a copy but she would request that a copy be sent by snail mail and the family could expect to receive it in a couple of days. This past week I heard from a Vermont family that has called DCF 20 times to try to get information about a child and it took a contact from me to get a return phone call.

All of these situations cause families additional stress.

The kinship caregivers could use support and help navigating the systems for example the field of education has changed, what type of child care is available, what summer programs are available for the children. I have tried various types of support groups but the rural nature of the state, the lack of transportation, the widely varying needs of families have made it a challenge. I did sponsor a very successful afternoon at pizza putt for kinship families from all over the state for several years but I ran out of cash to continue.

Children raised in a kinship situation do as well or better than children in the foster care system and the cost to taxpayers is about is about half. I hope that in the future state employees receive the training to help and support children and families in Vermont. Hopefully they will come from a strength based position and develop plans for children that include input from all family members so the child feels that the whole village is surrounding her and is willing to be involved in her future.