

The Central Coast Children's Foundation, Inc.

Occasional Paper # 5

Ties That Bind: Supporting the Growing Ranks of Family Caregivers

by Adam Joseph

Imagine a 2:30 A.M. call from a local law enforcement officer: "Can you come pick up your grandchildren?" The police have arrested both parents for drug involvement, leaving your three grandchildren, Janet, age 6, and the twins, Michael and Mary, age 2, without a home. You're the only safe relative identified to take the children...immediately. If you don't, they will go into emergency foster care in different homes, may be separated from you and from each other, and you may lose any future control over what happens to them.

You are a 58-year-old widow living in a one-bedroom apartment. How will you feed them, house them, find child care while you're at work? The problems multiply. They have no medical insurance. They're already having trouble at school, which is on the other side of town. Predictably, there may be emotional problems stemming from neglect or even abuse But the kids are family; and you take them in.

The reasons may vary: illness, drug addiction, imprisonment, death. But whatever the causes, the numbers are growing, in Monterey County, in California, throughout the United States. Aunts, uncles, cousins, even young adult siblings are stepping up to the plate when birth parents become unavailable, but most are grandparents, and most of them are grandmothers. (Two and a half million grandparents in America are now rearing their grandchildren.) One out of every five of these caregiver families is in California; and most of them are poor. More than 95,000 California caregiver families are at or below the poverty level; and they receive no public assistance to meet the needs of the children in their care. Who can step in to help these caregivers who have intervened at a crucial moment in the lives of these children? Who will provide them with that crucial lifeline they so obviously need?

In Monterey County, it's Kinship Center's Family Ties program that is leading the way in helping to fill in the gaps for these caregiver families- the lack of public assistance, the need for resource and referral services, respite care for the caregivers, parenting education, assistance in obtaining guardianship or adoption, support groups, mental health and tutoring services for the children, and on and on and on. And, while providing these crucial supports to hundreds of individual relative caregivers, Family Ties is also providing a valuable model for other agencies who are beginning to cope with this difficult and rapidly growing issue throughout the state and the nation, agencies who need

to ask not just "How can we help support caregiver families?" but also "How can we help support caregiver families more effectively?"

Background: Since 1984, Kinship Center has helped create and support families for thousands of children who could no longer remain safely with their birth parents, by providing adoption, foster and relative care, and mental health services to the children and families of California. Over the years the agency has identified a variety of specific needs to support permanent families for children, and has created programs to meet those needs. Today, the agency offers education, counseling and other post-placement support services to nurture success in children and families.

For its first 12 years, Kinship Center's services were concentrated on the Central Coast of California, in Monterey and San Benito Counties. Then, in 1996, in response to a documented need for adoption-related services to children in Orange County, Kinship Center opened an office there. Greater expansion followed with the addition of child development and mental health clinics in Orange County; and additional offices in Pasadena and Redlands increased services in Southern California. In 2001, Kinship Center added specialized post-adoption services in Santa Clara County. Kinship Center now provides services from offices in Salinas, Monterey, Hollister, San Jose, Santa Ana, Pasadena and Redlands; and it will soon be adding services in San Luis Obispo. In 2002 Family Ties, which was already providing relative caregiver support services in Monterey County, joined the Kinship Center family of services.

The incorporation of Family Ties into the growing array of Kinship Center services has proved significant both because of the rapid expansion of caregiver families throughout the state and the nation, and because of Kinship Center's unique status among organizations that serve children who can no longer remain safely with their birth parents. The benefits of Kinship Center's innovative programs extend far beyond the children and families who receive direct services. The agency has taken a leadership role in the child welfare community, it has come to be recognized as a model of innovative excellence, and many of its programs have become models throughout the country. This groundbreaking influence has resulted in systemic changes that are dramatically improving the outcomes for children who cannot safely remain with their birth families. The effective and innovative elements of the Family Ties program have thus become far more accessible to other agencies who are beginning to respond to the rapidly growing need to support relative caregiving.

Charles Chambers, Family Ties Program Director, began his career in social and human services over 20 years ago, working for Catholic Charities in Santa Clara. He has been with Family Ties since 2002. "Children have been raised by relatives in place of birth parents since the beginning of time," Chambers says. "There are about 6.5 million children nationwide being raised by relatives." "There are no typical caregivers," Chambers adds. To illustrate, he cites three examples of recent Family Ties' clientele: an 18-year-old girl caring for her three siblings, as well as her own infant child, a grandmother caring for ten of her undocumented grandchildren, and an 84-year-old woman caring for her great-grandchildren.

There may not be a "typical" caregiver profile, but there clearly is an obvious trend: 550 Monterey County children have been placed with their relatives, primarily grandmothers, due to a parent's illness, drug addiction, imprisonment, or death, resulting in that parent's perpetual absence. Many of these care-giving grandmothers are single women with personal medical needs and severely limited incomes. Over the past two years, some 753 children in Monterey County living with relatives have received services from Family Ties.

Family Ties' clients are placed into two categories: the relative caregivers are the primary clients; and the secondary clients are the children. Clients are referred by a variety of sources including social services, police departments, school districts, and other state programs. Others find Family Ties through brochures placed at locations around Monterey County, or at fairs and community events. The only criterion that must be met is that the child must be living with a non-birth-parent caregiver, who may be a grandparent, sibling, aunt or uncle, or even a neighbor.

Every caregiver and child is assigned a case manager to assess and coordinate the particular services that would be most beneficial to the family. These services can include legal assistance to help establish permanency for children living with relative caregivers, and information, referrals and collaboration to provide comprehensive support. Family Ties staff members work with public and private agencies to create awareness of the special needs of relative caregivers and their children, and to advocate for changes that will strengthen these families. Basic supports such as a clothes closet and food bank, emergency funds for medical needs, transportation vouchers and respite are available. Family Ties offers parent education classes and support groups for caregivers, and activity groups for children that focus on emotional support, self-esteem building, and peer support. Mental health services are available for children, adolescents and their caregiver families.

An important component of the program is the no-cost or low-cost recreational events that bring relative caregiver families together and give children experiences that would otherwise be unavailable to them. To date, some 830 children have attended camps and recreational programs. Since most families in the program struggle mightily to meet just the basic needs of children in their care, Family Ties encourages community donations, gifts and meals during the holidays and at other times.

Many children who enter the foster care system may have relatives potentially capable of caring for them. It's often impossible, however, for many of them to accommodate the financial, physical, and emotional needs of the child without help. Because Kinship Center believes that children need permanence to thrive, Family Ties offers a viable alternative to the foster care system, by helping relative caregivers meet needs that they might otherwise find too difficult to handle.

Community Partnerships: Charles Chambers stresses the importance, indeed the necessity, of "community partnerships." Through partnerships with local organizations, the Family Ties staff makes referrals for their clients for medical, mental health and

educational services. Kinship Center operates a state-of-the-art mental health services clinic out of its new state headquarters building in Salinas and will be adding a clinic in San Luis Obispo in the summer of 2006. Family Ties staff can also refer clients to Monterey County Behavioral Health Services. California Rural Legal Assistance and Legal Services for Seniors have assisted 122 families in obtaining legal guardianship through their organizations. The Food Bank and the Clothes Closet are currently used by over 300 family clients of Family Ties. Other Family Ties' community partnerships include parenting classes taught through Hartnell College and the Salinas Adult School, funding for support to senior caregivers through the Area Agency on Aging, and a Senior Aide employed by the Alliance on Aging and assigned to work with the Family Ties program. Chambers foresees future partnerships that might include the Volunteer Center of Monterey County, and more parent education classes through collaboration with the Monterey School District.

Affiliated with Kinship Center since 2002, Family Ties has also more recently strengthened its ties with the Monterey County Department of Social Services. The Kinship Support Services Funds (KSSF), a state allocation of 1.5 million dollars reserved for any California county that had at least 40 percent of its foster children already living with a relative, began in 1998. That year, 22 programs began within 11 counties that met the state's 40 percent criteria. Family Ties has two of those 22 programs.

Since the state assistance program began, there has been no increase to that initial 1.5 million dollar allocated amount. With the family caregiver population growing exponentially and the need for community services expanding, 1.5 million dollars is hardly enough to meet the needs of the state's relative caregiver population. An increase to five million dollars is currently being considered by the state legislature; and eliminating the 40 percent criterion has been proposed, which would enable more counties to establish modest programs. Despite its severely limited funding, and the dim prospects for funding increases, Family Ties has provided impressive outreach over the past several years, and continues to deliver crucial services to its clientele. (In 2004, Senators Hillary Clinton and Olympia Snowe introduced the Kinship Caregiver Support Act [S. 2706] as a way to address the needs of the millions of kinship caregivers nationwide who are caring for children whose parents are unable to do so. Congress has so far taken no action.)

Key Staff: One key to the growing success of Family Ties, and to its value as a statewide and national model, is its small but carefully selected staff. Chambers' savvy leadership is complemented by the utilization of outreach and office workers who have "been there, done that" themselves. For example, Charlene Alexander was introduced to Family Ties as a result of her own experience as a caregiver spanning nearly 35 years. At one time she cared for nine children, including her own three biological children and a grandchild.

Now a Family Ties outreach worker, Alexander does intakes and home visit referrals. "I give referrals for legal custody, cash aid; and sometimes a client will want me to go to their custody court hearings as support," Alexander says of her duties.

Alexander not only knows what it's like to be a caregiver, she knows what it's like to live without birthparents. "When I was 13, my father died and my mother had a mental health breakdown, so I lived with my brother for one year."

The support groups Alexander runs at Family Ties are sometimes educational and sometimes they're relaxation groups. "A group of us will meet at the Monterey Sports Complex and do our exercises and talk in the pool," she says of the "relaxation groups."

Currently, Alexander cares for three children, 14 and 18 year-old girls, her second cousins, and her ten year-old nephew. Her first cousin and her sister, the biological mothers of the children she currently cares for, continue to battle drug addiction and mental problems. "I love it (working at Family Ties) because I can relate. Sometimes all people need is someone to listen. I let them (caregivers) know that I've been there; and it's not that bad," Alexander explains.

Patricia Ramirez provides another example. Two years ago, she was hired as an administrative assistant at Family Ties. Coincidentally, she also became the new caregiver for her two-year-old nephew, Alex. Ramirez, already a mother of three, says she received a phone call in the middle of the night informing her that her younger sister's four children were being removed due to an abusive boyfriend creating a "neglectful home environment."

"After being referred to Family Ties, I came in to do intake; and the woman talking to me continuously had to excuse herself to answer phones. Apparently, an administrative assistant had just quit; so I ended up getting the job," Ramirez says.

Ramirez takes phone calls regarding legal guardianship, does data entry, and she's the one who answers the phone when a potential caregiver first contacts Family Ties. "When a caregiver calls in the middle of the night, they're scared about all the responsibility they're about to take on so suddenly. Being a caregiver, I can relate, and they see that as a good thing. I help them go from worry to ease; I mean I'm the first voice they hear and I'm a relative caregiver," Ramirez says of her vital double role. Family Ties employs two other women who are also caregivers.

Ramirez calls Family Ties a "blessing." "It's unique because they help you get counseling, guardianship, and provide support." Her other sister, who lives in Salinas and is also a caregiver, took two of the removed children and has raised them as her own along with her other four children. Over the past two years Ramirez's sister, with Family Ties' guidance, has received legal custody as well as social security referrals for the children, both of whom struggle with ADHD. Ramirez describes the Thursday pot luck luncheons as her favorite activity sponsored by Family Ties. Grandmothers and other caretakers get together for lunch and to give each other support, while the children play games. The unity fostered by support groups was especially clear last year. After many months of arduous fundraising, the caregivers raised enough money for a first-ever family trip to Disneyland.

Foundation Support: As a local foundation with relatively limited resources, the Central Coast Children's Foundation (CCCF) seeks opportunities to support activities where the need is great, the impact is clear, and the solutions may provide valuable examples to others dealing with similar problems or issues. Harvey Pressman, president of the Monterey County based philanthropic organization, views Family Ties as a program that is using "cutting edge" methods and new approaches to help put a dent in a widespread problem that is only likely to grow in scope and significance. Lacking the support of the federal government and in the absence of increased state aid, Family Ties and similar kinship programs must rely increasingly on both community partnerships and private support.

Before investing in a community organization, the CCCF board asks, "How can we make the most impact?" at a local, state and national level. Pressman foresees the idea of kinship care spreading rapidly, and believes that the perceived value of a model that squeezes as much impact as possible out of every scarce dollar available is likely to grow exponentially. CCCF has taken one step further, by identifying the unique composition of Family Ties staff as especially worthy of reinforcing, and targeting its support to their continuing education and skill development. After evaluating the various activities of Family Ties, Pressman and the CCCF board chose an area that they believed to be an especially good investment. (Pressman believes that philanthropists should invest strategically, and involve themselves beyond just writing checks.)

The CCCF has supported Family Ties through contributing funds for the development of its employee training programs, and, most recently, by providing a DVD library for loans to clients, staff training and the "encouragement of staff effectiveness." Training a staff already well suited in many areas has the potential to promote even greater effectiveness and impact on the part of staff.

"Family Ties is clearly at the forefront for kids who can't live with their birth parents; and we (CCCF) see them not just as a worthy charity, but also as a good model for others. All we (CCCF) are able to do is to provide a relatively small amount of help, but we like to make targeted investments with potential for broader impact. It takes a lot more (for philanthropists) to work proactively and strategically," Pressman says. "We especially like the fact that so many of the Family Ties staff have had their own hard-knocks training through personal life experiences. We understand that Charles' staff is crucial to providing the relative caregivers and children with the kinds of support needed for stability."

Patricia Ramirez agrees with Pressman: "We (staff) could all benefit and learn from more staff training." Of Family Ties' recent collaboration with CCCF, Chambers says: "CCCF is commendable in that it is unique to the community; they address and recognize needs in great and original ways."

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Central Coast Children's Foundation, Inc.

About the Central Coast Children's Foundation

The basic purpose of the Central Coast Children's Foundation is to help make those agencies already serving children on the Central Coast of California more effective and successful in carrying out their missions. The Central Coast Children's Foundation, Inc. (CCCF) fulfills this basic purpose by providing an array of supports and services, primarily to area nonprofit agencies that serve children with disabilities and/or children from low-income families. Technical assistance services are provided in response to specific requests for support, as well as through ongoing research and identification of local needs.

CCCF provides support to local nonprofit agencies serving children with disabilities and children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in the following ways:

- (1) by making monetary contributions to agencies that meet effectiveness and significance criteria as established by the CCCF board, primarily in the areas of child welfare, child health, and education;
- (2) by providing technical assistance to these agencies; and
- (3) by providing program planning and development support based on the foundation's research into exemplary practices in other communities.

To accomplish its specific purposes, CCCF also conducts a variety of activities in support of (primarily local) nonprofit agencies, individuals and others serving the needs of children with disabilities and children from low-income families on the Central Coast of California, including:

- (a) support for education programs, including tutoring, service learning, improved schooling, and other activities leading to improved academic achievement for children with disabilities and children from low-income families;
- (b) technical assistance regarding assistive technology for children with disabilities;
- (c) support for health related services, including nutrition, dental health, obesity prevention, and medical services;
- (d) support for programs aimed at improving the general welfare of children with disabilities and children from low-income families on the Central Coast.

[Further information about CCCF is available by writing Central Coast Children's Foundation, Inc., 1 Surf Way, #237, Monterey, California 93940]