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 SUN CITY WEST

# INDEPENDENT

YOUR HOMETOWN NONPARTISAN NEWSPAPER – YOURVALLEY.NET

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 INDEPENDENT  
NEWS MEDIA  
Celebrating & Connecting Our Communities

# Seniors playing prominent role for foster children



The annual backpack drive is hosted by Aid to Adoption of Special Kids, where approximately 500 backpacks are given each year to kids in foster care [Aid to Adoption of Special Kids/submitted photo]

## Nearly 14,000 children in care

By Jennifer Jimenez  
INDEPENDENT NEWS MEDIA

With nearly 14,000 kids in Arizona's child welfare system in Arizona, there are many roles individuals can take on, and lately some of those roles have been falling on seniors.

And a common role seniors play includes kinship caregivers and volunteers. Josie Gaieck, community engagement specialist for Aid to Adoption of Special Kids, said

kinship caregivers take care of a relatives child, typically grandchildren. And nearly 50% of youth placed in foster care are in a kinship foster placement.

"Without these grandparents, many of these youth would have a difficult time finding placement within their family. These familiar relationships help with stability and also allows the child to stay connected to their own heritage and traditions," she said.

According to statistics from the Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center, 4% nationally are in some kind of kinship care with a family member that could include grandparents. In Arizona, about 5% of children under age 18 overall have their grandparents as a primary caregiver.

With more than 1.64 million children under that age as of 2019, that means more about 82,100 children have grandparents as

their primary caregiver.

Officials said seniors can provide more support to youth without being caregivers. Gaieck said seniors help with mentoring youth through the AASK program that focuses on youth living in non-family settings such as group homes. Youth are paired with a mentor to build a relationship, and this helps the youth to

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# Children

• From page 1

build better relationships with others, achieve goals and find stable housing and employment as an adult.

Several agencies exist around Arizona, with the mission to provide resources to families who have adopted or have children in foster care, as well as through in kinship roles. Nancy K. Williams, executive director with Arizona Association

for Foster and Adoptive Parents, said many times grandparents have grandchildren show up at the front door with nowhere else to go, and her organization is there to support.

“Most seniors are on a fixed income. And when kids show up, they are expensive and need lots of support. So we do get calls about that and we can share what our organization and many others do to help support them,” she explained.

In addition, volunteering to help children in foster care through various tasks makes a big impact. Williams said everything from sorting pajamas, serving at the backpack and shoe event or using mechanical skills for bicycle refurbishment are different ways to help.

Currently, many seniors assist with refurbishing used bikes, an upcoming opportunity that will take place every Saturday during October in Goodyear.

AASK provides interactive sessions to show prospective parents what the

## Kids in care

14,000 total kids  
6,000 teenagers  
Source: Arizona Department of Child Safety

process is like to get licensed and other steps. Once the family is licensed, AASK staff is there to help from questions on paperwork, resources to find toys, clothes or activities for children, as well as connection between current and former foster and adoptive families to support.

While getting a license is not necessary for a kinship foster parents, AASK can license the family to get the same benefits as those not caring for a relative's child.

There is no specific length of time kids remain in foster care, and the ultimate goal has been family reunification, officials said. If not, the next target is to find a permanent, stable home.

“The goal is to act in the best interest of the child which may be reunification

with the biological parents, it could be finding and then placing them with a relative, or it could be finding a permanent, adoptive home and so much more in between,” Gaieck said.

To obtain a foster or adoptive parent license can take four to six months. Gaieck said youth age 0-4 are typically placed with family members, while teens may have a harder time finding a home. She explained the goal is to work in the best interest of the child and finding the right family.

Williams said the Arizona Association for Foster and Adoptive Parents staff, is not a foster licensing agency, but a place to go for support. The organization supports more than 500 families throughout the year.

The association has several focus areas including the children and basic needs program and gave 4,547 backpacks, pajamas and shoes in 2021 and almost 1,700 toys and bikes. There were 587 families connected, including 997 parents



The Arizona Association for Foster and Adoptive Parents gives children in foster care the opportunity to pick out a pair of new shoes. [Arizona Association for Foster and Adoptive Parents]

and 2,731 children through the family connections program.

In the area of family support services, 139 parents were training and more than 100 parents in various groups. The big community awareness event put on by the association, brought out 685 parents and children to celebrate.

There are no government contracts or state or federal funding. The organizations are funded through private

donations, grants and sponsorships.

Recently Republican Gov. Doug Ducey signed bill H.B. 2274, which increased support for families. The kinship stipend increase, according to an Arizona Department of Child Safety Press Release, is for those families taking care of a relative's kids, jumped from \$75 to \$300 per month.

Reach reporter Jennifer Jimenez at [jjimenez@iniusa.org](mailto:jjimenez@iniusa.org).

## Donate

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