

HAWL Begins Children's Kinship Care Assistance Project



by Susan W. Fox

Martina is a 59-year-old disabled woman who wants to adopt her 9-month-old grandson, Eric. Eric was born with a crack cocaine dependency and was placed with Martina at birth. Although he was born premature and weighed only 2 pounds, he is now plump and healthy. Eric's mother was battered during pregnancy by the biological father; he was jailed on aggravated battery charges. Another man signed the birth certificate as father. Eric's mother and the father who signed the birth certificate will consent to adoption. The social worker has commenced a "diligent search" to allow constructive service of the true biological father. Martina needs an attorney to handle the adoption proceedings.

Julio is a disabled man whose sister was murdered in New York. He is raising his two children, ages 7 and 9, and now, he has his sister's two children, ages 8 and 10. The children were placed with him by the New York dependency court. He wants to find out about benefits available.

Paolina has court-ordered custody of her granddaughter, Sophia, age 3 and her granddaughter's half sister, Miranda (no blood kin to Paolina), age 5. The children's mother is an exotic dancer who works nights and has had multiple drug relapses. The state is proceeding with plans to terminate her parental rights. Miranda's father wants to regain custody of her. Paolina wants to adopt Sophia. Paolina's son (Sophia's father) is too immature to raise a child. She wants an attorney to monitor the termination of parental rights proceedings and adoption of her granddaughter. Paolina works part-time cleaning houses and cannot afford an attorney.

These are just a few of the Hillsborough County clients who have called the "Warmline" and have been referred to HAWL's Kinship Care Assistance Project. HAWL is inviting other FAWL chapters to expand the assistance project to their communities.

The Florida Kinship Center (FKC) at the University of South Florida is HAWL's partner in this program. FKC is a statewide support program for kinship care providers.

Kinship caregivers are on the frontline of caring for abandoned or neglected children in Florida, but generally have little or no access to legal services. "Kinship care" refers to full-time care and nurturance of a child by a relative other than the biological parent. Kinship care is often the best way to safely maintain a family unit for a child whose parents are absent. Grandparents, most often grandmothers, are the family members who generally provide such care.

In Florida, nearly 350,000 relative caregivers are providing care for children whose parents are absent and who would

otherwise be in foster care. This shocking number reflects a variety of social factors including neglect, abandonment, substance abuse, non-marital childbearing, mental illness, HIV/AIDS, emotional difficulties, teen pregnancy, incarceration, parental death, divorce, unemployment, and general familial dysfunction. Most of the kinship caregivers are at or near the poverty line; many are elderly or disabled; and all are overwhelmed with taking on the task of rearing children who are not their own and who have special needs due to their loss of parents. Kinship caregivers do not receive the same monetary benefits available to foster parents, and thus, the arrangement almost always imposes an additional financial hardship on them.

Kinship caregivers face a variety of unique challenges which the FKC has endeavored to address through its "Warmline," 1-800-640-6444. The Warmline provides emotional support, information and referral. However, FKC has found that most of the calls to the "Warmline" involve legal questions. Accordingly, the FKC/HAWL partnership will enable FKC to provide legal guidance through its "Warmline." Many of the questions are as simple as "How do I register the child for school?" or "How do I get medical care for the child?"

In HAWL's Kinship Care Assistance Project, FKC is prescreening calls to the "Warmline" and handles all calls that do not involve legal questions. Callers who require legal information are given a specific time (based on the volunteer schedule) when their call will be returned. The volunteer attorneys then return calls involving general legal questions. Volunteers are being asked to serve two hours per month, in one or two hour time blocks that will be tailored to their schedule. The program is being conducted similar to HAWL's award-winning Domestic Violence Assistance project through which volunteer attorneys serve two hour shifts at the courthouse, assisting applicants for domestic violence injunctions. Volunteers who do not wish to return calls can

