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THE GOOD LIFE

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Support Available for Grandparents at Back-to-School Time

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Summer is flying by and folks are starting to think about children returning to school. Back to school can be a challenging time for many reasons; reconfiguring and reacclimating to school schedules, collecting necessary supplies, securing clothes for the upcoming winter, school physicals, and so many more logistics. It can be even more daunting for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. According to 2021 Department of Labor statistics, 2.3 million children were being raised by their grandmother, with 1.3 million being raised by their grandfather. This equates to 3.7% of children in the US being raised by a grandparent who was responsible for most of their basic needs. All accounts indicate this number growing by their next report.

Raising children is full of challenges no matter who is caring for the child. Grandparents, however, can face even more challenges as they step up and step into this role. Many people wouldn't think to turn to LifePath for support at back-to-school time. While we primarily serve older adults, those living with disabilities, and their caregivers, we do have programming to support grandparents raising their grandchildren, and we have a team of knowledgeable and friendly resource consultants in our Information and Caregiver Resource Center (ICRC) who can provide helpful information on support, services, and resources available to them.

A consistent challenge that we hear is that grandparents feel alone. They often experience shame and embarrassment based on their particular circumstances. Community Action Pioneer Valley (CAPV) is a strong and active local organization who understands our community. They offer a remarkably wide range of programming, including their Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Support Group. This welcoming and nonjudgemental group gives individuals the opportunity to meet other grandparents, learn about available services, make connections, and develop a personal network of support. CAPV also offers a variety of programs for youth, which can create a more holistic approach to supporting children and their caregivers. CAPV is also a local resource for winter clothing; can provide advice for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) programs; and operates its own food pantry.

Another frequent challenge is a knowledge gap around technology, making it difficult for grandparents to support their grandchildren in our technology-rich school environments. A technology deficit can also make it difficult to research or sign up for services and support. Several Senior Centers and Councils on Aging in our area provide educational opportunities and technological support to help people gain comfort and

enhance their skills. Greenfield Community College (GCC) partners with Cyber-Seniors, a national organization, to provide older adults with technology training and support using an intergenerational volunteer model at GCC and Franklin County's YMCA.

The United Arc is another admirable local organization who offers resources and support to grandparents or other relatives raising a family member by offering twice-monthly meetings, home visits, and check-in calls to grandparents living in Franklin County. As part of their programming, this great resource provides regular activities and get-togethers for grandparents and their grandchildren.

There are also state and national resources dedicated to grandparents raising grandchildren. For anyone in this situation, the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, at www.massgrg.com, is a comprehensive resource, and one you may want to engage with early on. They offer a series of tip sheets in multiple languages on various topics such as Legal Resources, When the Department of Children and Families is Involved, and Talking to Grandchildren about their Parent's Use of Alcohol or Drugs, among other resources. AARP is a leader in recognizing this new grandparenting dynamic and offers

resources on their website, and grandfamilies.org is another useful website that offers fact sheets, information on laws and resources, and a library of topics of interest.

Educational success is a concern for caregivers across the age spectrum. Our local United Way offers resources and support around literacy

for those who may need help in that area. Many local libraries offer programming to support not only reading, but also activities that allow children and caregivers to connect with one another. Communication is key. Reach out to the student's school to ask questions or express concerns about their performance. Each school is different, but all have internal ways to provide additional support and assistance. Some students may be on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which opens up additional support programs, both through the school and with community resources and government agencies. And, schools know very well the resources available in their districts and how to connect with them.

All situations are unique, requiring different approaches to best serve all involved. If you are a grandparent caring for a grandchild, I encourage you to call our ICRC department at (413) 773-5555. We can help with answering questions, locating resources, connecting with various community partners and agencies, and making suggestions. Speaking with one of our resource consultants can also help you to learn what services you yourself may be eligible for, as the grandparent, in addition to support geared towards children. Some individuals may prefer to meet in person, and we are happy to schedule those meetings.

LifePath would like to acknowledge, recognize, and thank all of the caregivers and parents out there, not just grandparents, who are doing their best to raise the children of our community. It is an entire job unto itself, with many challenges but just as many rewards.

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