

# Grandparents raising kids get help

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By **Kate Lewis** | Staff Writer

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At 57, Margaret Chishom's days of toilet-training, story-reading and curfew-enforcing should be long past her.

But instead of looking toward retirement, the Augusta resident is raising five of her 16 grandchildren.

Ms. Chishom, the legal guardian of her "grands," who range from 3 to 14 years old, has cared for them all their lives and last spring took them in "full time," she said.

"It really is a tough task, but me loving children and loving them in particular, it's kind of a joy," said Ms. Chishom, a bus driver for the Richmond County Board of Education. "It really is a joy to me. I love them. That keeps me going knowing that they are safe."

What also helps keep Ms. Chishom going is a local program providing assistance to men and women caring for their grandchildren in Richmond and Columbia counties.

The Medical College of Georgia School of Nursing's Healthy Grandparents Program offers resources to grandparents to better care for themselves and their grandchildren.

During monthly support meetings, grandparents learn training skills and socialize with other grandparents who share similar life experiences, said Mike Patton, a project coordinator with the program.

And thanks to a \$50,000 grant from the Georgia Department of Human Resources and the CSRA Regional Development Center Area Agency on Aging, a program extension called the Kinship Care Center is now available to 12 counties neighboring Augusta.

The grant also provides assistance for nonparental relatives besides grandparents who are caring for children younger than 16.

"All I have to do is ask and they'll direct me to the sources I need to go to," said Ms. Chishom, who depends on monthly visits from a program nurse to monitor her and her grandchildren's health. "It really has made me stronger knowing that there's someone out there that can help and guide me."

Drug use, incarceration and having children too young are some of the reasons why 3,312 families in Richmond County and 825 families in Columbia County are headed by grandparents raising children younger than 16, Mr. Patton said.

In Ms. Chishom's case, her son and daughter-in-law gave her guardianship when the mother decided she wanted to pursue her military career and the father wanted his children to have a stable home.

The duty to raise their grandchildren is one many grandparents feel strongly about, even though the financial burden can sometimes be overwhelming, Mr. Patton said.

"Their grandchild going into foster care or living with someone else is just not an option," he said.

Thanks to the recent grant money, the Kinship Care Center will provide many of the same services to aunts, uncles, siblings and other relatives caring for children in neighboring counties, he continued. In Richmond and Columbia counties, the Healthy Grandparents Program works with 130 families and more than 300 grandchildren, Mr. Patton said.

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## About The Program

The Healthy Grandparents Program recently received a grant to extend its services from Richmond and Columbia counties to other nonparental relatives caring for children 16 or younger in Burke, Glascock, Hancock, Jefferson, Jenkins, Lincoln, McDuffie, Screven, Taliaferro, Warren, Washington and Wilkes counties. For more information on new services available through the Kinship Care Center, please call (888) 284-2273. In Richmond and Columbia counties, contact the Healthy Grandparents program at 721-9626.

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