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COVID-19 HITS VULNERABLE SENIORS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

*Innovative Solutions for Disadvantage & Disability (ISDD)
wants to help more of them through these serious times*

The “Hidden Foster Care System” of grandparents caring for children is an overlooked population which is at extremely high risk during the Covid-19 pandemic. The age and underlying health conditions of these caregivers along with their poverty, food insecurity and proximity to children that they cannot be isolated from, is creating a dire situation which is largely unrecognized.

“It is scary because, if they get sick, odds are it will be serious and result in hospitalization. The statistics indicate that half of them WILL die in that event,” explained Rainie B. Jueschke, ISDD’s Executive Director. “Many of these families have been overlooked, so far, by school food distribution programs. Overlooked because they didn’t make provisions for grandparent caregivers who do not have transportation or the physical stamina to stand in long lines. Never mind the risk to their health in doing so. These families are often very isolated. They think they are alone because their peers are not raising children and social systems just don’t understand them or their needs.”

“ISDD wants to help additional kinship or grandfamilies that include children with special needs who are struggling during this crisis. We are here for them, able to help and want to expand our reach to those who may not be aware of our services. We are very worried about the families that don’t know about us and need help.”

Innovative Solutions for Disadvantage & Disability is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit serving the Atlanta Metro Area with services to support disadvantaged families with children who have or are at risk for disabilities. With the mission is to create healthier outcomes for vulnerable children and families, ISDD is the largest provider of kinship supportive services in the Atlanta Metro Area through Project GRANDD (Grandparents Raising And Nurturing Dependents with Disabilities).

The grand or kinship families ISDD serves are part of a growing subgroup of older adults who are raising grandchildren, grandnieces and nephews with special needs. In Georgia, there are 253,127 children in grandparent care. Within the greater Atlanta metro area, there are nearly 50,000 grandparents raising grandchildren (according to the last US census conducted 10 years ago.) This number is likely to be much larger today. Children end up in kinship care due to parental drug abuse, mental illness, incarceration, neglect, abuse or death. More than half of the children have experienced at least four Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), that will impact their health for the rest of their lives.

Most of the families served by ISDD are overwhelmingly poor. They receive a fraction of the support that “stranger” foster parents receive. They struggle to provide the basics of food, clothing and shelter to grandchildren at a time in their lives when they were not expecting these responsibilities. The average age of ISDD’s caregivers is 60 and many have underlying health conditions, such as diabetes or hypertension, that put them at particular risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many do not have personal automobiles and rely on public transportation. Grandfamilies are often isolated – with no one to help them – they have no safety net. Grandparents usually ARE the safety net.

“We are terrified for the grandfamilies throughout the Metro Area. Because of the high health risk posed by COVID-19 to this population, the serious impact death will have on the children in their custody (with no one else to step in) and the increased challenges of their food insecurity. These are families that literally depend on the free school breakfasts and lunches they now don’t have access to. Right now, we are helping our families cope with these challenges by buying and delivering food to their homes, providing computers so children can continue their educations online, conducting online support group sessions for the grandparents and keeping in close contact with each of the 103 families (with 300 children) that we currently serve. We’ve been blessed with cash donations from individuals and foundations to support these efforts and hope to see those donations continue,” says Jueschke. “We know there are many grandfamilies out there that we still need to reach. We have the resources and services that can help them with the challenges they face today – because of the coronavirus – as well as in the future. We hope they will call us or visit us online to learn more about ISDD and our organization.”

ISDD provides the following services at no charge (group and in-person services are currently suspended or provided by phone/videoconferencing):

- **Support Groups** - for children and adults meet regularly. Separate groups for adults, children aged 8-12 and teenagers. Registration is required.
- **Education and Training** - to address emotional, educational, medical/developmental and legal needs as well as promotion of personal well-being and relationship building.
- **Parenting enrichment workshop series**- specifically for kinship caregivers.
- **Case Management** - addresses family needs including emotional, social, financial, educational, legal and healthcare concerns for grandparents and grandchildren.
- **Home Visits** - providing assessment of family needs and individualized case plans.
- **Monthly Newsletters** - provide useful information for grandfamilies including children with special needs.
- **In-home tutoring** – children with IEPs can receive up to 10 sessions.
- **Family Fun Day** - Annual outing for participants.
- **Material Assistance** - Assistance with food, clothing and other necessities to registered program participants.

Grandparents or other relatives responsible for raising a child with special needs can call (404) 310-3452 or email lauraw@isdd-home.org for more information and to become enrolled in Project GRANDD.

Photo link: <https://www.isdd-home.org/covid-19>

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