

When parents are not able to raise their children, it is often the grandparents who step in to assume this responsibility. Many take on this role to “keep the family together” rather than having their grandchildren grow up in the foster care system. Unlike traditional foster parents, many grandparent caregivers who informally assume this responsibility are offered no training to raise traumatized children and receive limited financial assistance to meet their basic needs.

**Project Healthy Grandparents (PHG)** was founded at Georgia State University in 1995, and is housed within the Byrdine F. Lewis College of Nursing and Health Professions. With a mission to improve the health and well-being of families in which grandparents are raising their grandchildren in parent-absent homes, PHG provides comprehensive health and support services and improved access to community resources. Since its inception, PHG has served more than 3,000 individuals, including grandparents and grandchildren and, on average, grandparent participants have 2.4 grandchildren in their care. PHG’s comprehensive services include monthly home visitations by registered nurses and social workers, parenting education classes and support groups, legal service referrals, as well as early intervention services for young children. In many cases, referrals are made to other healthcare or community service providers, and transportation services are available, if needed.

*Our goal is to empower the grandparents by teaching them how to navigate the often bewildering maze of financial, healthcare and social services needed to keep their families together.*

To be eligible for services, the grandparent(s) must be responsible for at least one grandchild age 16 years or younger, the child’s parents must be absent from the home and the family must reside in Fulton or DeKalb County within a 20-mile radius of downtown Atlanta. Grandparents are referred to PHG by a variety of social service and childcare agencies in metro Atlanta, including primary care clinics, day care centers, public schools and child protective services. Once enrolled, participants have access to all of PHG’s services free of charge for one year. The program is currently structured to serve between 40 and 45 families at any given time and approximately 200 grandparents and grandchildren are served during the course of a year. After the 12-month intervention, grandparents are encouraged to attend PHG’s monthly grandparent support groups, and may continue to receive referrals for health and social service needs as they arise.

Although the majority of the children in the program receive benefits through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), most grandparents that PHG serves do not qualify for health insurance programs, either because their low wage positions do not provide private insurance or it is too expensive, or they are not old enough to qualify for Medicare or poor enough for Medicaid. The vast majority of clients are low income, African American women between the ages of 37 and 84. More often than not, the grandmothers are widowed, divorced or separated and, therefore, without the support of another adult in the home to help raise the grandchildren.

*Because of the financial and emotional challenges related to raising grandchildren with limited resources, grandparent caregivers frequently disregard their own health care needs. In response, PHG offers home-based nursing and social work services to create an integrated intervention plan that addresses the multiple and unique needs of grandparent-headed families.*

Approximately 25% of PHG’s clients have diabetes, 50% have hypertension, and 60% meet the CDC’s criteria for obesity, while another 30% meet the criteria for overweight. PHG’s registered nurses provide in-home healthcare support services for grandparents, including blood pressure monitoring, glucose screening, cholesterol screening, mental health screening, vision screening, weight monitoring and nutrition counseling. Through caring discussions with grandparents, nurses provide advice on many health issues and make referrals to primary care physicians and mental health providers, thus promoting strategies for addressing the specific

challenges facing PHG's target population: management of chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, physiological stress and access to quality healthcare services. PHG's health partners include Good Samaritan Health Center, Mercy Care, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta and Grady Memorial Hospital. Our continued partnership with Pharmacy Home Delivery has been instrumental in providing PHG's clients with affordable and often no-cost access to essential prescription medication. This service allows many clients who live with chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease to obtain critical prescription medications. When clients are able to manage their chronic illnesses with proper care and medications, they are less likely to use emergency departments for health care needs.

PHG's social workers provide parenting information, family support, consultations on benefits, such as TANF, and referrals to handle critical housing, food and legal needs. PHG's community partners include the Division of Family and Children Services, Fulton DeKalb Hospital Authority, Emory Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinic, Family Matters Counseling and Psychological Services, Atlanta Housing Authority, Atlanta Legal Aid Society, Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP, Literacy Action, Easter Seals, Atlanta Public Schools and United Way of Greater Atlanta.

*Program results reveal that PHG's grandparents experience statistically significant improvements in general health, both mental and physical, as well as in social and emotional functioning.*

As PHG staff became more familiar with the grandchildren's emotional, medical, developmental and behavioral problems, they recognized the need for specialized services for children being raised by their grandparents. PHG launched its Early Childhood Intervention program in 2000 to serve children who are at risk for developmental delay due to prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol. Through this program, all grandchildren between the ages of birth and five years receive an initial developmental screening conducted by our Early Intervention Specialist. Children whose results indicate possible developmental delays are referred for a comprehensive evaluation by Neurodevelopmental Clinic at Emory University School of Medicine. It is the only program in the Southeast that specializes in children impacted by prenatal substance exposure. Based on recommendations received and interventions prescribed by the clinicians, PHG's staff help the grandparents identify, access and acquire any necessary intervention services to address the grandchildren's developmental needs. The Early Childhood Intervention program serves approximately 20 children during the course of a year. A significant proportion of the children referred for evaluations are diagnosed with one or more disabilities.