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When their children get hooked on opioids, more 'grands' stepping up to raise their grandchildren

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(<http://www.philly.com/philly/business/retirement/addict-opioid-grandparent-grandchildren-foster-grands-20180730.html?viewGallery=y>). [View Gallery](#)

SOWN

Philadelphia grandparents support each other as members of SOWN, Supportive Older Womens Network, as they raise their grandkids for adult children addicted to drugs.

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Judy Baughn thought she was done raising children – her three sons and daughter are all adults now.

But the West Philadelphia resident now cares full time for her granddaughters, ages 9 and 11, due to the city's ever-expanding opioid epidemic. Her son and his wife are addicted to heroin.

“My son was supposed to go to rehab, but he never did,” and his two young girls were sent to foster homes in 2015, she said. Baughn petitioned to adopt them from foster care, a process during which “I literally had a heart attack from the stress.”

Baughn is raising the girls by herself. Now, however, she has some help.

“My oldest granddaughter has special needs, so I quit my teaching job and devoted all my time to caring for them,” said Baughn. “I love them so much, but I had to get used to having two little people in the house – and a guinea pig.”



📷 COURTESY JUDY BAUGHN

Judy Baughn adopted her two granddaughters, Carly and Nevae, as their parents are opioid addicts. Baughn said a new task force for “grandfamilies” affected by the opioid epidemic would help centralize resources.

Last year, Baughn found out about SOWN – [Supportive Older Women's Network](http://sown.org/grandfamily.html) (<http://sown.org/grandfamily.html>) – which provides support groups, telephone conference calls, and respite care for grandparents who have taken in their children's children. More than 100,000 Pennsylvania children are being raised by grandparents or other relatives.

About 2.6 million children in the U.S. are being raised in grandfamilies, and [experts told Congress last year](https://www.aging.senate.gov/hearings/grandparents-to-the-rescue-raising-grandchildren-in-the-opioid-crisis-and-beyond) (<https://www.aging.senate.gov/hearings/grandparents-to-the-rescue-raising-grandchildren-in-the-opioid-crisis-and-beyond>) the number is rising as the opioid epidemic devastates communities across the country.

Grandfather and Pittsburgh resident Martin Sirbu told lawmakers at the hearing that at 71, “I'd been thinking about retirement, but now I have to put it off because I need health insurance for my granddaughter.”

He's raising the children in place of his adult daughter, who has struggled with addiction for a dozen years.

Sen. Bob Casey (D., Pa.) cosponsored legislation asking a task force to centralize resources for America's “grandfamilies.” Put forth with Sen. Susan Collins (R., Maine), it's called the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act ([S. 1091](https://www.aging.senate.gov/press-releases/collins-casey-) (<https://www.aging.senate.gov/press-releases/collins-casey->

introduce-bipartisan-bill-to-support-grandparents-raising-grandchildren-as-opioid-epidemic-increases-their-numbers)) and proposes a one-stop-shop of information for seniors. The bill was signed into law this month.



📷 COURTESY SEN. BOB CASEY'S OFFICE

Philadelphia grandmother Judy Baughn (second from right) spoke at a roundtable in June with Sen. Bob Casey, addressing grandparents raising kids for their adult children addicted to opioids.

Drug abuse increasingly affects older residents as addiction in the younger generation tears families apart. Pennsylvania had 4,600 overdose deaths between 2015 and 2016, and the cost in 2016 from the epidemic was over \$53 billion, Casey said in an interview. That included costs in fatalities, health care spending, addiction treatment, criminal justice and lost productivity.

In Ohio and Pennsylvania, fatal opioid overdoses rose by more than 400 percent from 2006 to 2016, while Oregon and Washington actually saw decreases over the same period. Nationally, the White House Council of Economic Advisers estimates the cost at \$504 billion, or 2.8 percent of GDP, in 2015 alone.

When addicts stop parenting, grandparents often pick up the pieces.

Generations United's (<https://www.gu.org/>)2017 State of Grandfamilies Report (<https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2018/05/Grandfamilies-Report-SOGF-2017.pdf>)found that 30 percent of children in foster care nationally (or 127,819) were being raised by relatives. That's up from 24 percent in 2008. For every child in foster care with relatives, there are 20 children being raised by grandparents or other relatives outside the foster-care system.

That's why SOWN operates the GrandFamily Resource Center, a place for older caregivers, including the grandparents who increasingly are stepping in to raise their grandchildren instead of leaving them in foster care.

"No grandchild lives with a grandparent for a happy reason – whether it's opioids, incarceration, illness, the economy, or foster care," said Arlene Segal, program coordinator of the GrandFamily Resource Center, part of SOWN. "We help 'grands' figure out how they can parent at age 75, everything from potty training to talking to kids about sex. There's power in meeting other 'grands.' They're tigers in getting services for their kids." Instead of spending time at a senior center or going to the movies, "they don't fit in with their friends who are retired," Segal said.

SOWN's oldest member is 93, a great-grandmother to a 17-year-old boy whom she's raising. Grandparents don't receive financial assistance in Pennsylvania for taking in grandchildren, Segal noted.

"The opioid epidemic has a much greater impact on older adults than you might think," said Kevin Ryan, an Ambler-based private investigator hired by families of addicts.

Ryan has been working with the parents of Amanda DeGuio, a heroin addict whose disappearance he's helping investigate. DeGuio, a 28-year-old mother of two, was last seen in June 2014, and her parents, Joanne and Jon DeGuio, care for Amanda's children at home in Drexel Hill.

"The hardest thing about having a grandparent kick in all over again is the way times have changed. There's so much friction now with social media and gaming, whereas years ago we didn't have the internet. It's that much more difficult for the generation gap. I applaud the people who step up and become guardians," Ryan said.



VINNY VELLA / FILE PHOTOGRAPH

Upper Darby Township Police Superintendent Michael Chitwood speaks alongside Joanne DeGuio (center) and investigator Kevin Ryan at a news conference May 7. DeGuio's daughter Amanda disappeared in June 2014.

Families break up quickly due to the speed of the addiction, he added.

"It's easy to get hold of pills, like Percoset or Oxycontin, which is how the addiction starts. Any addict will tell you, they start with a routine surgery, they're suddenly addicted and try something more like street heroin, which is cheap," Ryan said. Heroin laced with fentanyl is also killing addicts in Philadelphia more rapidly than in previous years.

What would Baughn, 67, tell other grandparents raising young grandkids?

She spoke at a roundtable hosted by Casey last month, and "I was able to tell my story. The goal is to put all the information for grandparents, everything in one place if you need help."

"It might be scary at first, but I look at those little faces, and I rely on God to help me through. When they're yours, they love you back," she said. Her older granddaughter suffers from cerebral palsy and learning disabilities, so Baughn acts as the parent seeking help from the school system for her issues.

Baughn encourages other grandmothers and grandfathers to "keep up your hobbies, like crocheting and making jewelry are mine. Take time for yourself, some alone time, or getting your nails done or being in nature. That makes you whole again."

If you're concerned about yourself or a loved one facing drug addiction, call the PA Get Help Now Hotline, 1-800-662-HELP.

In New Jersey, call 9-1-1 or for addiction related services call the state's 24-hour hotline: 1-844-ReachNJ (1-844-732-2465).

For information about SOWN, call 215-487-3000 or visit the website: sown.org (<http://sown.org>).

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