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Winter 12-15-2017

New York's Daily Foster Care Reimbursements

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New York's Daily Foster Care Reimbursements

Capstone Abstract:

Foster parents in New York say financial support from the government to care for the state's most vulnerable kids has lagged, impacting the care they are able to provide.

In Philadelphia – a nearby city with a significantly lower cost of living -- foster parents get more government aid than in New York. Philadelphia officials raised the city's foster care reimbursement rates by a third this year.

New York foster families have been fighting for raises for years. And there is some hope. A coalition of foster care agencies sued the state in 2010 in federal court in Brooklyn alleging New York's low reimbursement rates violate the Child Welfare Act. The state is fighting the suit, which has been dragging on.

In this audio series, reporter Mariah Brown examines New York's daily pay allowance for foster parents and the impact on children.

Part 1

Photo

Audio 3-6 minutes

New York City's daily reimbursements for foster parents lag

By Mariah Brown

Government support for foster parents has been flat nationwide. In a city like New York with spiking costs of living, some foster parents are trying to stretch every dollar.

Sandra McNulty and her husband live in Queens with her two foster sons – two-year-old Robert and nine-year-old Joseph. She said it's rewarding caring for the kids.

"We were just apple picking and pumpkin picking," says McNulty. "My hyper little man was just jumping on pumpkins because he thought that's what you're supposed to do."

As much as McNulty enjoys fostering, it isn't always easy to meet the needs that arise with just her husband's income. Foster parents in New York get \$20 to \$23 a day from the government for kids ages 11 and under. She says the reimbursement covers about half of the kids' expenses and the rest is from her budget.

Advocates say the high out-of-pocket costs can deter some foster parents from taking in kids.

"They realize the reimbursement rate is way less than they actually spend every month on their own kids. They really have to think second thoughts," says Irene Clements, the executive director of the National Foster Parent Association based in Texas.

As foster agencies work to retain and recruit foster families, they can't help but bristle at the old myth that foster parents take in kids for government money.

"I often hear people say that foster parents are in it for the money. Trust me. No foster parents getting rich on the stipend that they get from us,"

says Bill Baccaglioni, the CEO of the foster care agency New York Foundling.

Unlike New York, Philadelphia raised its rates by a third this year to help out its foster parents. Philadelphia pays \$28 a day for kids under five. That's \$5 more than New York's reimbursement, and it will increase \$2 in each of the next three years.

Philadelphia's reimbursements hadn't been looked at in over a decade, according to Cynthia Figueroa, the commissioner of Philadelphia's Department of Human Services.

"These are families who are supporting and serving some of the most vulnerable children in our community," says Figueroa. "We know the costs of living and the challenges of the financial burden of caring for kids."

More support is good news for longtime Philadelphia foster parent Vivian Shine-King.

"I didn't set out to do this though, but this where I got stuck and my feelings and passion had got in it so, so deep. These are children that didn't ask to be born, and they need somebody to take care of them," says Shine-King.

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services denied a request for comment about its foster care reimbursements. They say it is the subject of pending litigation.

Part 2

Photo

Audio 3-6 minutes

A federal lawsuit examines New York's daily reimbursements for foster parents

By Mariah Brown

The cost of living in New York just keeps going up and it's particularly hard on some foster parents. That's because the amount of money they receive a month from the government hasn't kept pace with inflation.

In a long-running legal feud – that could remake New York's foster care system – child welfare advocates are calling for foster care reforms..

Cynthia Patterson has been a foster parent for more than two decades. She's currently caring for six kids ranging from ages six to 10.

"It's been very rewarding for me and very rewarding for them also, to know that someone out there cares about them," says Patterson.

Much of the kids' expenses come out her own pocket. She says it's affordable but other parents may struggle. Foster care reimbursements cover about 40 percent of the costs to care for the kids, she said. Still, she tries to do fun things for them, like throw parties during the summertime.

"I set up the backyard. I plan balloons and food and candy and cookies and popcorn and potato chips. I do all of this stuff to make them feel good about themselves," says Patterson.

Patterson said much of that cost comes out of her own pocket.

coalition of foster care agencies is trying to change that. The New York State Citizens' Coalition for Children filed a federal lawsuit in Brooklyn in 2010 against the New York State Office Children and of Family Services. (The coalition has since changed its name to the Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition.)

A 2007 University of Maryland study found New York had some of the lowest reimbursement rates for foster parents in the country.

Much hasn't changed, according to the organization's attorney.

"New York has chronically underpaid what are called foster care reimbursement rates under the federal child welfare act. They've done this for years," says Adam Hunt, the coalition's lawyer.

Richard Ortiz, the organization's executive director, says it's a systemic problem.

"It should be done in compliance with federal law in a way that really supports foster parents, foster families and most importantly the children who are in foster care," says Ortiz.

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services sets a maximum rate that counties can reimburse foster parents, but does not set a minimum.

"The counties can pay less if they want to. And some counties upstate pay less than the maximum for them," says Jim Purcell, the CEO of the Council of Child Caring Agencies.

Court records show rates were set in 1978, two years before the passing of the Child Welfare Act and haven't accounted for some of the legislation's standards.

In the federal lawsuit, the foster care coalition wants the state to set minimum rates. The state argued the organization didn't have the standing to bring their claims. But the court sided with the group, allowing the case to proceed.

If advocates win it would be a big deal.

"The rate hasn't been raised significantly in a long time. The rates are probably low, so it could have a big impact," says Marcia Lowry, a child welfare lawyer based out of New York.

State officials wouldn't comment because the case is ongoing. However, in the case filings the state says that reimbursement rates have kept pace with inflation over the years.