

Grandparents, family members protest over cuts to state assistance

Saturday, March 21st, 2009, Gabrielle Fimbres.

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250 petitions demand state restore funds for kin caregivers



ABOVE: Protesters march from Armory Park to the State of Arizona Administration Building, 400 W. Congress St., in opposition of budget cuts they say are hurting children.

Some needed canes and walkers.

Others pushed strollers.

Grandparents and other family members raising children took to the streets Friday to protest state budget cuts they say are hurting their kids.

“Fight, fight, fight for grandparents’ rights,” participants chanted as they marched.

Carrying signs that read, “Not on the backs of children,” “No more budget cuts” and “Old people rock,” dozens marched the seven blocks from Armory Park, where they held a rally, to the State of Arizona Administration Building, 400 W. Congress St.

About 100 caregivers and children delivered 250 petitions, demanding that legislators restore 20 percent cuts in aid to families caring for the children of relatives. The cuts, made by state legislators last month, impact more than 10,000 Arizona children, according to organizers.

Most often, the reasons that parents cannot care for children include incarceration, addiction, mental illness or death.

“We need all the help we can get, and the Legislature needs to realize it’s cost effective for us to raise good citizens,” said Mary Bliss, 62, who is raising her 14-year-old grandchild.

At the state building, Alice Strosser, 84, handed a box of petitions to Jo Grant, legislative coordinator of the southern Arizona office of the Arizona state Senate and House of

Representatives. Grant told Strosser she would deliver the petitions to legislators. Five other caregivers delivered boxes as well.

Strosser raised three grandchildren, and two still live with her and her husband, Robert. They moved in after their mother died of a heart attack at age 37 a dozen years ago. The Strossers spent their life savings raising the kids. She wants to make sure budget cuts won't hurt other grandparents.

"We're trying to help other grandparents who come after us, so they won't have to go through what we went through," she said.

Not all marching were seniors. Single mom Jymelle Mason, 37, adopted four of her sister's children and has guardianship of a fifth, along with her own child.

Mason's sister is in prison, and the children would be in foster care without her.

The cuts will "demolish me," she said.

"There are other ways out there they can get this money," she said.

Several suggested that cuts to the corrections budget would better serve the state.

"They are taking the money away from the children, not from the people who put them in this situation," said Mary Glover, 45, who adopted three great nephews. "Most of their parents are in prison, and they still get their money."

Dillon Bledsoe, 14, and his brother Dakota Bledsoe, 9, spent part of their spring break marching. "It's to stop the cuts," Dillon said.

Their grandmother, Becky Brown, 63, said the boys' father is in prison and the mother "can't even take care of herself."

She said her grandsons would be in foster care had she not taken them in seven years ago.

Budget cuts have resulted in her getting \$50 less per month, money she spent on groceries and clothes for the boys.

Angel Johnson, 4, carried a sign nearly as big as he is as he marched with his grandmother, Carmelita Sanchez, 69.

Rosa Borbon, 62, is raising her granddaughter, Mary Rose Borbon, 8, whom she adopted. The two marched side by side.

"They are our future," the grandmother said.

At the rally before the march, Fred Chaffee, president and chief executive officer of Arizona's Children Association, encouraged kin caregivers to stand up for their rights.

He said the KARE Family Center in Tucson, which provides support to kin caregivers, tracked the 2,100 children and families served in 2007. Of them, 70 percent of the children were not in state care, saving the state \$4.2 million, Chaffee said.

Jim Murphy of the Pima Council on Aging said grandparents need financial assistance.

"It is the right thing to do to support grandparents raising grandchildren," Murphy said.

BELOW: Tyler Niehaus,10, (left foreground) and his brother, Clinton Niehaus,6 (right foreground) carry protest signs.

