

# 'I've never not been a parent'

Lynn grandparents share stories of struggle raising grandchildren

**LYNN**

By **ROBIN KAMINSKI**  
THE DAILY ITEM

Thousands of grandparents in Lynn are struggling on a daily basis to take care of their grandchildren in what are supposed to be the golden years of their lives.

Some say their son or daughter suffers from a mental illness, others a substance-abuse problem, rendering them unable to take care of their child. Whatever the reason, more than 5,000 grandparents in the city have become burdened with raising their grandchildren and are in dire need of assistance.

On Tuesday night, a handful of those women gathered together to talk about the growing issue and share stories about their troubles.

"I feel like I've been a mom since I was 23 years old," said Lynn resident Peggy Heffernan. "I've never not been a parent and it's hard."

Heffernan previously had custody of her daughter's three children when her daughter suffered from a debilitating substance-abuse problem. Since then, she has lost her home, two jobs and now lives with her daughter in a small apartment, where the two struggle to provide for the children.

"The past couple of years have been nasty," she said. "I wake up every day thinking today's going to be a better day, but it has yet to happen."



ITEM PHOTO / REBA M. SALDANHA

LHAND Director of Planning and Development Norm Cole speaks during an informational meeting for grandparents raising their grandchildren, at Lynn Housing Authority Tuesday.

According to Lynn Community Connections, a Union Street non-profit, roughly 2,700 grandparents were raising grandchildren in the city in 2002. That number has since doubled and continues to rise. Because of that, the Connections group has joined together with Lynn Housing Authority and Neighborhood Development (LHAND) to study the feasibility of providing housing for grandparents raising grandchildren.

The idea stems from "grandparent housing" through the Boston Housing Authority, which is designed for residents 60 years or older who are raising grandchildren.

"We're very concerned about grandparents and appreciate everything you're doing for your grandkids and want to help you in any way we can," said Norm Cole, LHAND Director of Planning and Development. "Many are

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**PEGGY HEFFERNAN**  
*Lynn resident*

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under housed and living in a one-bedroom unit when they should be in a two- or three-bedroom (apartment). So, collectively, I think we can do much better."

In order for that to happen, however, Pam Freeman of Community Connections said those in need have to come forward so that firm numbers can be presented to the Hous-

ing Authority. Language barriers, fear of deportation and not believing they are eligible for housing are just a few of the reasons many at the meeting say grandparents aren't coming forward for help.

Freeman urged those attending the meeting to get the word out to fellow grandparents about the program and to fill out a questionnaire so that LHAND can get the ball rolling on the potential housing project.

Just the thought of housing brought a feeling of renewed hope to Ann Mitchell, 44, a grandmother of 12. She currently has custody of her 24-year-old daughter's 5-year-old boy, along with taking care of her own 17 year old. Two of her children had babies at the age of 14.

The group's next meeting has been scheduled for March 22 at 5:30 p.m. at LHAND on Church Street.