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### Life at GrandFamilies House: The First Six Months

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# **Life at GrandFamilies House: The First Six Months**

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March 2000



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## The First Six Months

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## **Life at GrandFamilies House:**

### **The First Six Months**

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

GrandFamilies House, in Dorchester, Massachusetts, represents the first apartment building in the country specifically designed for grandparents raising grandchildren. GrandFamilies House was co-developed by Boston Aging Concerns-Young and Old United, Inc. (BAC-YOU), a nonprofit agency dedicated to addressing intergenerational housing needs, and the Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development. The dwelling contains 26 apartment units that are fully accessible with safety features for elders and children. In conjunction with the development of GrandFamilies House, the city of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts issued new Section 8 federal housing certificates for specific use by older kinship caregivers who have permanent custody of their grandchildren. Many residents are recipients of these housing vouchers. Eligibility was limited to families who met specified income limits and whose head of household was at least 50, with preference given to household heads who were age 62 or older. Racial composition reflects that of the community from which most residents had moved to GrandFamilies House--over 90% African American.

Researchers from the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston Gerontology Institute conducted interviews with 20 of the 26 grandparents living at GrandFamilies House. The purpose was to document the grandparents' initial experiences as a baseline for long-term evaluation efforts of the GrandFamilies House. Grandparents who were interviewed described their

reasons for moving to GrandFamilies House, their expectations about the move, and their experiences and opinions regarding the facility, programs, and evolution of a grandfamilies community.

The families at GrandFamilies House vary widely--both in terms of family composition and experiences. Grandparents ranged in age from 48 to 73 years (average 62 years). The children in their custody ranged from toddlers to young adults (average age, 9 years), and included a sizable group of teenagers in middle school or in high school. Most grandparents moved to GrandFamilies for economic reasons (receiving a Section 8 certificate, thus making housing affordable) or quality of life reasons (improved safety and housing conditions).

Grandparents described their expectations about the building, programming, and living in a community of grandparent families as well as the extent to which these expectations had been realized within this short time period. Many grandparents had looked forward to and were happy about living in a new apartment building. These grandparents appreciated particular features of the building such as the quiet, the convenience (the building's accessibility, the in-house washers and dryers), the playground, and the security. Other grandparents mentioned concerns they had not anticipated, including poor maintenance, noise, the lack of air conditioners [at the time of the interviews], insufficient building security, fire protection, and resident privacy.

Prior to their move, grandparents had high expectations in terms of the availability of children's programming. They had expected preschool, after-school programs, teen activities, computer training, tutoring, and adequate outdoor space. At the time of the interviews, the YWCA Boston preschool program had been in operation for several months and all age-eligible children were attending it

although there were unanticipated delays in acquiring vouchers. The after-school program opened during the interviewing period. Grandparents whose grandchildren attended these programs expressed a high degree of satisfaction. Other grandparents expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of programs or activities for teens. Additionally, they mentioned the need for tutoring, computer classes, a garden in the contiguous empty lot, and a youth worker.

The grandparents had quite varied expectations in terms of building a sense of community. Some did not want a “community” -- just a residence with other families in their situation (grandparent caregivers). Others wanted to make new friends and be neighborly (participate in mutual caring) with like-minded individuals. Most grandparents found the community they had expected. Some, however, were disappointed -- they either found too little sense of community or thought residents were too “nosy.” Beyond the social level, a few grandparents had expected and wanted less oversight from BAC-YOU and more tenant-driven decision-making.

The program sponsors have taken steps to respond to the residents of this new GrandFamilies’ housing initiative and had, by October 1999, addressed many concerns of the residents (such as the after-school program, computer learning center, resident council, and installation of air conditioners). Other issues raised by these grandparents may also be important to address--both for the current project and future GrandFamilies’ projects. If older children and teens are to be included as residents, there must be programming planned for them. Many grandparents need access to activities to address the social isolation they may experience as caregivers. Residents recommended that future replications of this model should include greater input from the potential residents in the planning of programs, policies, and building design features at each stage of the program development and implementation.



## INTRODUCTION

Recent reports cite estimates of more than two million children in the United States who are currently living in kinship care arrangements; 10% or approximately 200,000 of these relationships are children in foster care (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). Much kinship care is done by midlife and older persons who are finding themselves assuming new responsibilities associated with parenting their grandchildren, typically for a period of two years or more (Minkler, Fuller-Thomson, & Driver, 1997). This is a social phenomenon that cuts across all socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups. There are many challenges facing these nontraditional families including healthcare, income security, education, social support, and housing. Public and private partnerships are beginning to take shape to respond to some of these challenges. This report describes the first six months of one initiative that was undertaken in Massachusetts to begin to address the need for supportive housing.

### GrandFamilies House Site Description

GrandFamilies House, owned and managed by Boston Aging Concerns-Young and Old United, Inc.(BAC-YOU), is an apartment building specifically designed for grandparents raising grandchildren. Located in Dorchester, Massachusetts, this supportive housing initiative is the first of its kind in the country. GrandFamilies House was co-developed by BAC-YOU and the Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development. YWCA Boston is a collaborating service partner. Planning for the house, playground, and programming included active input from BAC-YOU's GrandFamilies Task Force, of whom 10 participants are current GrandFamilies House residents. YWCA Boston provides the Generations Learning Together preschool, after-school, and computer learning center programming for grandparent families (both residents and neighborhood-dwelling) using activity space located in the lower level of the building. The building opened during fall 1998, and was fully occupied by January 1999.

GrandFamilies House has 26 apartment units on four floors (plus a resident manager unit in the lower level). The units include two-, three- and four- bedroom apartments. GrandFamilies House is fully accessible with a ramp, an elevator, and grab bars in the bathrooms. The apartments are "child-proof" with electrical outlet covers and security gates. There is a common community room on the first floor for use by residents. There is a playground and small recreational blacktop area for the children of GrandFamilies House.

In conjunction with the development of the GrandFamilies House, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the city of Boston issued new Section 8 certificates for specific use by elders (60+) and near-elders (50+) respectively, who have permanent custody of non-biological children through kinship care placements. Section 8 certificates are rent subsidies that allow tenants to pay no more than 30% of their income for rent, while the federal government pays the difference. Before the

GrandFamilies House opened, it was expected that most, if not all, residents would be Section 8 certificate holders who would be drawn to GrandFamilies by its attractiveness, amenities, and programs. It was anticipated that some residents would be grandparents who already held Section 8 certificates, while most would use a certificate, acquired through the new program initiative, to GrandFamilies House. Preference was given to families in which the head of household was age 62 or older, and all heads of households who were at least age 50. Eligibility was limited to families who met specified income limits and federal housing preferences. Most of the families moved to GrandFamilies House from Dorchester or neighboring communities and, thus the racial composition of the house reflects the community, over 90% African-American.

The YWCA Boston-sponsored activities include a preschool program and an after-school program located in the lower level of GrandFamilies House. The preschool program for children ages 2.9 to 5.0 opened in fall 1998. The after-school program for children ages 6-12 opened during spring 1999 and emphasizes the development of math, science, and computer skills. In addition to children's programming, YWCA Boston operates a weekly exercise program for the grandparents called "Senior Strength." Other programs for grandparents have included workshops on self-esteem, stress management, child safety programs, first aid classes and a series of workshops offered through the Gerontology Institute at UMass Boston (behavior management, legal issues, and nutrition). There have been recreational field trips and occasional holiday parties sponsored by volunteer organizations. In addition, BAC-YOU employs a resident services coordinator at the GrandFamilies House whose duties include community building. A live-in House Manager responds to emergencies at night and on weekends. BAC-YOU staff conduct monthly tenant meetings at GrandFamilies House to discuss tenant concerns and interests.

## **THE STUDY**

Researchers at the University of Massachusetts Boston's Gerontology Institute conducted in-depth interviews with residents of the GrandFamilies House during spring 1999 to gain insight and understanding about the first six months of this supportive housing initiative. Over a four-month period, in-depth interviews were conducted with grandparents from 20 of the 26 households.<sup>1</sup> These interviews, which lasted on average an hour, were conducted either in the grandparents' apartments or in the common "living room" on the first floor of GrandFamilies House. The interview guide contained both closed-ended, quantitative questions and open-ended, qualitative questions. Through both types of questions, descriptive information about the sample and rich comments about the GrandFamilies

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted between April and July, 1999. The preschool program was operating fully by the first of the year. The after-school opened in May - after half of the interviews were completed. Since the time of the interviews, additional programs and services were put into place, many in response to input from resident families. These are outlined in the Appendix.

House were obtained.

All data presented in this report (unless otherwise noted) were from interviews with 20 grandparents at GrandFamilies House. Six grandparents were not interviewed. Two declined, two were ill, one was hospitalized, and one could not be reached in spite of numerous attempts over the data collection period. Comparisons between the interviewed sample and non-respondents, reveal slight demographic differences (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

Comparisons

Respondent/Non-respondent Characteristics

	<b>Respondents (20)</b>	<b>Non-respondents (6)</b>
Number of Grandchildren	39	10
Mean number of grandchildren per family	2	1.7
Mean age of grandchildren	9 years (SD=4)	11 years (SD=5)
Age range	2-20	1-20

The following section provides information about the grandparents and their families as summarized from the 20 interviews.

Grandparents' Demographics

- **The grandparents at GrandFamilies House represent demographic diversity.**

Grandparents' ages spanned 25 years, from 48 to 73 years old, with an average age of 62 (SD=7.5). This is similar to another study of 134 grandparents conducted by the Gerontology Institute (Silverstein & Vehvilainen, 1998), which reported an average age of 61 (SD=8). An additional comparison is available through an AARP study by Chalfie (1994) who divided grandparents into two age groups: 45-64 and 65+. The median age for the 65+ group in both the AARP study and the GrandFamilies House study was the same (70 years old). The younger groups were not comparable because of different lower age criteria.

Among the sample interviewed, three families included both the grandmother and grandfather. Two grandfathers responded for their families.

- **The typical family at Grandfamilies House included two grandchildren.**

Twelve grandparents (60%) had two grandchildren living with them at the time of the interview, although family size varied from one to five grandchildren. The 39 grandchildren ranged in age from 2 to 20 years old, with an average age of 9 years old (SD=4).

- **Almost half of the grandparents had more than a high school education.**

Thirteen grandparents (65%) had a high school diploma and nine of these had some college or were college graduates. Only one grandparent reported having completed eight or fewer grades. This finding is notably different from both an AARP study (Chalfie, 1994), which indicated that over half of their grandparent sample (58%) had less than a high school education, and a study of black grandmother caregivers (Burton, 1992) that reported 55% with a high school diploma, of which 15% had some college.

- **Ten grandparents indicated chronic health problems.**

Health problems reported by these ten grandparents included chronic conditions such as arthritis and other mobility limitations, high blood pressure, diabetes, hypertension, and heart problems. Seven grandparents (35%) thought that they were in better health since their grandchild(ren) came to live with them. Only four grandparents (20%) thought their health had worsened.

- **Only 2 grandparents did not have health insurance.**

Eighteen grandparents (90%) had some type of health insurance. Two had private insurance (through a spouse or former employer) while the others were covered by Medicaid or Medicare.

#### Grandparents' Activities

- **The most often mentioned regular activity was religious services.**

While ten grandparents (50%) indicated that they were involved in some type of regular activity, almost all grandparents (17 or 85%) attended religious services on a regular basis. Seven grandparents (35%) said they currently attend a grandparents' support group. Five grandparents (25%) volunteered on a regular basis. One was employed part-time, while three other grandparents indicated that they were currently looking for work.

- **Most grandparents have participated in activities at GrandFamilies House.**

Fourteen grandparents (70%) had participated in at least one GrandFamilies House activity such as workshops, exercise programs, or tenant meetings. Workshops were given on such topics as

child safety, first aid, legal issues, self-esteem, child nutrition, and hearing problems. The exercise program is a weekly event, while the tenant meetings are held monthly, or more often as needed. Twelve grandparents (60%) had participated in a GrandFamilies House holiday party. Seven grandparents indicated that their grandchild(ren) were involved with a GrandFamilies House program including preschool and after-school programs.<sup>2</sup>

### Grandparents' Social Support Network

The extent and composition of grandparents' social support networks was assessed utilizing the Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule (Barrera, 1980). This tool asks respondents to name individuals who provide them with assistance or support for each of six supportive functions. The size of a person's social support network is determined by the total number of individuals who provide at least one supportive function.

- **On average, the grandparents mentioned 10 people in their social support network.**

Grandparents typically indicated ten people (SD=5) in their social network. These networks usually included six family members and one resident from GrandFamilies House. Grandparents indicated that network members typically provided emotional support rather than physical assistance or material aid; on average, Eight people provided emotional support (talking about private feelings; positive feedback; social participation), while only three people provided instrumental assistance (material aid; advice and information; physical assistance.) The social support networks of these grandparents are comparable to those described in studies of families in other non-traditional caregiving roles (Allard, Gottlieb, & Hart, 1991; Gottlieb, 1993). Thirteen grandparents (65%) indicated that they received help with their grandchildren, primarily from family. Only one grandparent reported receiving childcare help from another GrandFamilies House resident.

### Other Caregiving Roles

- **A number of grandparents provide care to other family members.**

Six grandparents (30%) were providing care to someone in addition to their custodial grandchildren including other grandchildren not living at GrandFamilies House, their own young children, or their adult children.

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember the time frame during which these interviews were conducted. The interviews were completed over a four-month period from April through July. The after-school program had not started at the time of the first interviews.

## Grandparents' Emotional Health

Grandparents were asked seven questions that asked them to rate the impact of grandparenting on seven aspects of their lives. These questions were developed as part of other studies conducted by the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston on grandparent caregiving families (Gottlieb, 1996; Silverstein & Vehvilainen, 1998), and were based on review of relevant literature that identified key issues. The questions are listed in Table 2.

- **The grandparents were mostly satisfied with the caregiving experience and voiced pride, confidence, and pleasure in caregiving for their grandchildren.**

Grandparents reported the caregiving experience as mostly positive. All 20 grandparents experienced “some” or “a lot” of satisfaction. Most grandparents experienced pride, confidence, and pleasure while caregiving for their grandchildren. Money, however, posed “some” or “a lot” of a problem for 12 of the grandparents (60%). Moreover, while nine of the grandparents (45%), indicated no worry about raising their grandchildren, eight or 40%, indicated “some” or “a lot” of worry.

**Table 2: Grandparent Impressions of Raising Grandchildren**

<b>Impressions of Raising Grandchildren (n=20)</b>	<b>A lot</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>None</b>
How much satisfaction do you get from raising your grandchildren?	95 %	5 %	0	0
How much of a burden is the time you spend caring for your grandchildren?	5 %	15 %	10%	70 %
How much pride do you feel in how you are raising your grandchildren?	90 %	10 %	0	0
How much does money pose a problem in raising your grandchildren?	25 %	35%	25%	15 %
How confident do you feel in the way you are raising your grandchildren?	90 %	10 %	0	0
How much worry do you experience taking care of your grandchildren?	30 %	10 %	15%	45 %
How much pleasure do you get from taking care of your grandchildren?	90 %	10 %	0	0

Grandparents' overall well-being was assessed with six items adapted from the Affect-Balance Scale (Bradburn, 1969). Using a three-point scale, grandparents were asked to indicate how often they had experienced a number of specific feelings during the preceding month (See Table 3).

- **While half of the grandparents experienced consistently positive emotional affect, many indicated loneliness, boredom and depression.**

About half of the grandparent respondents reported that they often felt positive (pleased about how things were going, interested in something, or sense of achievement). Over a third of the sample felt positive only some of the time, while two of the respondents had not felt positive at all during the past month. Nearly half the grandparents never felt negative (depressed, bored, or lonely). Almost as many, however, sometimes felt depressed, lonely or bored while four reported often being bored and three, often depressed. Only one grandparent reported often being lonely. These responses suggest the need for more activities to minimize boredom and depression, which, if not addressed, could lead to increased health problems.

**Table 3: Grandparent’s Emotional Affect**

<b>Emotional Affect (n=19)</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
During the past month or so, did you feel depressed or blue?	16 %	42 %	42 %
During the past month or so, did you feel bored?	21 %	37 %	42 %
During the past month or so, did you feel pleased that things were going well?	47 %	42 %	11 %
During the past month or so, did you feel very lonely or remote?	5 %	42 %	53 %
During the past month or so, did you feel particularly excited or interested in something?	47 %	42 %	11 %
During the past month or so, did you have a feeling of achievement?	58 %	31 %	11 %

Use of Community-Based Social Services (Pre and Post GrandFamilies House)

- **Grandparents mentioned receiving an average of four services both before and after moving to GrandFamilies House.**

The average number of community-based services that grandparents utilized did not change as a consequence of moving to GrandFamilies House. However, 8 (40%) grandparents reported an increase in use of services since moving to GrandFamilies House, 6 (30%) grandparents reported using the same number of services, and 6 (30%) reported using fewer services.

Eleven of the 13 grandparents who reported having had no housing certificate prior to their

move reported receiving a Section 8 certificate when they moved to GrandFamilies House. Five grandparents who did not use recreation services before GrandFamilies House reported using recreation services after the move.

Overall use of counseling services for grandchildren declined after moving to GrandFamilies House. Nine grandparents (45%) mentioned receiving counseling for their grandchildren before GrandFamilies House. Among these nine grandparents, six indicated that their grandchildren no longer received counseling since moving to GrandFamilies House, while one grandparent reported receiving counseling as a new service after moving to GrandFamilies House.

Table 4: Use of Social Services Before and After GrandFamilies House

<b>Services</b>	<b>Before GrandFamilies</b>	<b>At GrandFamilies</b>
	Services used	Services used
Counseling for Grandparent/Spouse	5	3
Counseling for Grandchild	9	4
Homemakers	4	2
Food Stamps	5	5
Home Health Care	3	3
Housing Subsidy Voucher	7	18
Transportation	5	3
Clothing Allowance	7	8
Subsidized Child Care	3	2
Big Brother/Big Sister	5	3
Church Assistance	8	6
Legal Assistance	4	5
Camp Scholarships	6	4
Recreation Services	7	12
Other Services	4	4

### The Grandchildren

- **The typical grandchild was nine years old.**

Most grandparents (60%) had two grandchildren residing with them at GrandFamilies House. The grandchildren’s average age was almost nine years old, ranging from 2 to 20 years (SD=4). Most grandchildren (51%) were between the ages of six and ten years old, and just over half were female.



- **All grandchildren under 18 years old (38) attended some type of educational program.**

Eight grandchildren attended preschool or early intervention programs. Twenty-two were attending elementary school grades (K – 5). Of the nine older children, four were in middle school grades (6-8), four were in high school grades (9-12), and one older child was no longer attending school.

Only four grandparents reported that a grandchild changed schools upon moving to GrandFamilies House.<sup>3</sup> Two of these grandparents indicated that the grandchildren experienced some difficulty adjusting to the new school.

Seven grandparents (35%) indicated that a grandchild in their custody was receiving special education services. Eight grandparents (40%) said that at least one grandchild in their family had a behavioral or emotional problem. Of these, five grandparents indicated that the grandchild was receiving counseling. Only one grandparent received counseling for herself.

Six grandparents indicated that their grandchild(ren) had attended an after-school program before moving to GrandFamilies House. At the time of the interviews, three of these grandchildren were no longer attending after-school programs while four others had begun using a program. These changes may reflect the delayed opening of the YWCA Boston after-school program on the premises. (Some children may have discontinued a former program and may have been waiting to enroll in the YWCA Boston program, while others, who were now using after-school care, were interviewed after the on-site program had opened.)

- **All grandchildren under age 18 had Medicaid/MassHealth.**

All grandchildren under age 18 had Medicaid/MassHealth. Most saw a regular doctor either through an HMO, hospital, or clinic. Very few grandparents indicated that they had visited an emergency room with their grandchildren recently; for those grandparents, the reasons for emergency room visits included broken arms and ear infections. Half (10) of the grandparents said that at least one grandchild in their family had chronic health problems. These health problems included asthma, allergies, and problems related to being exposed to drugs before birth.

### **IN THEIR OWN WORDS: GRANDPARENTS' EXPERIENCES**

Resident interviews revealed a wide variation in experiences. Families at GrandFamilies House

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<sup>3</sup> Because the city of Boston has a policy of school choice, children are not required to attend neighborhood schools.

differed widely in terms of the grandparents' ages and the number and age distribution of the grandchildren. Families also came to GrandFamilies House under a variety of circumstances and from quite varied prior living arrangements, ranging from their own home to homelessness. None of those interviewed, however, had come from large congregate housing situations, other than elder housing. Thus, moving to GrandFamilies House represented a substantial change in living arrangement as well as neighbors. This is reflected in responses to the first open-ended question in which grandparents were asked to talk about the reasons for their decision to move to GrandFamilies House and how easy or difficult it was for them to make the move.

### Why Did Grandparents Move to GrandFamilies House?

Analysis of the comments provided by the 20 grandparent respondents suggests that, overall, over half viewed the move positively. A few grandparents indicated that the move was very difficult, while the rest expressed mixed feelings (both positive and negative).

Grandparents talked about a variety of reasons for deciding to move to Grandfamilies House. The most frequently mentioned reasons were economic: living at Grandfamilies House was viewed as affordable. Specifically, grandparents referred to a newly acquired Section 8 housing voucher, affordability in general, or reduced utility costs. As one grandparent said:

- *I moved to GrandFamilies because it fit my pocketbook. I couldn't afford to live where I lived before...I can afford this rent.*

Some grandparents mentioned being forced to leave a former home or long searches for adequate, affordable housing.

- *Our landlord...didn't want no kids in the building...he gave me a hard time...*

A number of grandparents cited major shortcomings of their former housing situation as a reason prompting their move. Some mentioned that their former home was in an unsafe neighborhood, especially for children.

- *It was easy for me... cuz where I was living before was a lot of drug activity around there and it was a bad neighborhood... I was too glad to get a nice place for me and my grandkids.*

Several described the poor physical conditions of their former home (run down, rats, etc.).

- *...where I lived was a dump. The landlord never fixed nothing.*

Some mentioned lack of accessibility in their former home.

- *To better benefit me and my health problems....I lived on the third floor of the apartment I left from. [GrandFamilies] has a convenient elevator and access, a walk ramp, that enables me to go in and out without being housebound.*

Others reported that their former home was too small to comfortably accommodate their grandchildren.

### Have the Grandparents' Expectations of GrandFamilies House Been Realized?

As a second major topic, grandparents were asked to talk about any expectations they had had before moving to GrandFamilies House, and the extent to which these expectations had or had not been met. Most grandparents had quite specific expectations--regarding the building itself, the programs and services to be offered in conjunction with the House, and the overall atmosphere or GrandFamilies community.

The GrandFamilies Building. Most grandparents expressed opinions about the building, its maintenance, or its management style. Opinions were fairly mixed: of the 20 grandparents, five expressed enthusiasm (the building met or surpassed their expectations), seven expressed disappointment with the building (compared to their expectations), one expressed a mixed opinion, and the remaining seven did not mention any expectations relating to the building.

All the grandparents who expressed positive (or mixed) views mentioned that they expected and found the building to be "new," "nice," or "beautiful." Three experienced the building to be quieter than they had expected. Two mentioned being pleased with the convenience associated with GrandFamilies (laundry, dishwasher, and snow-shoveling service). One family had come with few expectations and was delighted that Grandfamilies had a playground and parking.

- *Well, the place itself is beautiful. I took [my granddaughters] when I came over here to look at the apartment. They lay down on the floor. 'Oh yes, yes. We're home.' They just couldn't wait to get in here. They went and told all their friends in school... 'A mansion. We're like the Jeffersons. We're moving on up.'*

More details were provided by grandparents who felt that the building did not measure up to their expectations. Three grandparents had expected it to be less quiet, while three other grandparents had expected it to be more quiet than they experienced it. Five mentioned an amenity they had hoped would be included with their apartments or the building: central air conditioning, garbage disposal, private porches, bigger living accommodations, and a garden. Two mentioned safety features they had

expected: specifically, an outside fire escape and a cable TV security channel to monitor visitors in the main lobby. One mentioned an anticipated service -- someone to take the garbage downstairs, and 3 had expected the building to be better maintained (halls and elevators cleaned).

Other grandparents mentioned disappointment with the atmosphere of the building in terms staff and resident interactions. One grandparent had expected that grandparents would have been granted more decision-making power over design features of the GrandFamilies building. Others had expected less of what they perceived as invasion of their privacy (several mentioned that staff had apartment keys, and one mentioned that staff had entered her apartment unbidden), fewer restrictions, or a more supportive/caring attitude toward residents (in terms of flexibility about regulations). One grandparent had come to GrandFamilies with different expectations about resident characteristics-- she thought the grandparents would be younger.

Programs and services. Grandparents were asked to talk about what they had anticipated in terms of programs and services that would be available at GrandFamilies House. This question was left open, without referring to specific programs, to hear the grandparents' opinions. All but one of the grandparents who were interviewed responded to this question, although they varied widely in terms of what they viewed as a program or service. They talked about building maintenance, child care programs, services, and meetings. In general, over half mentioned areas of dissatisfaction about the available programs or services. Most of the rest expressed positive views, while a few provided a mix of both positive and negative comments.

Most of the positive comments were from grandparents whose children were enrolled in the preschool or after-school programs.<sup>4</sup> One grandparent was enthusiastic about museum trips for the children and shopping trips for grandparents. Another was thrilled by the preschool, after-school care, summer camp program, and grandparent-focused activities (workshops, exercise class, and tenant meetings).

Grandparents were more vocal in describing shortcomings of the programs and services offered at GrandFamilies House. It was apparent that they had moved to GrandFamilies with high expectations. The most common response was, "there are none." Some version of this response was given by half of the grandparent respondents, typically followed by an explanation of what they would like to see provided.

Grandparents' comments about the shortcomings in the program or services can be divided into four categories: services associated with building maintenance, services or programs for children, services or programs for grandparents, and opinions about the oversight of GrandFamilies House as a concept (as opposed to building maintenance).

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<sup>4</sup> The after-school program started up part way through the interviewing process.

Three grandparents expressed concern that there was not enough routine maintenance provided for the building or that better management was needed. Specific comments included:

- *I already see some things that need to be addressed.*
- *I think they should have a full time maintenance man here, not divided between [other places] and GrandFamilies...*

Responses also reflected concern for lack of cleanliness in common areas (halls and elevators), and poor response on the part of management to things being stored in the hallways (bicycles, garbage). Thus, as much as programming to enrich the lives of children and grandparents, quality living space that would provide families an opportunity to live in dignity had been anticipated and remains a very important aspect of living at GrandFamilies House.

Most grandparents had expected and wanted some type of programming for their grandchildren, although this varied with the age of the grandchildren. There were no complaints about the preschool program or after-school program from grandparents whose children were enrolled.<sup>5</sup> There was some concern that programs were not adequately prepared to respond to children with special needs. Two grandparents indicated that they had not enrolled their children in the after-school program because they thought it was too expensive.<sup>6</sup>

Several residents mentioned the lack of any activity for teens. Specific suggestions included developing a GrandFamilies baseball or basketball team, holding cookouts, and involving teenagers in cultivating a garden. A number of grandparents thought that better use should be made of the outdoor spaces (both the areas adjacent to the house and the vacant lot). Suggestions ranged from modest to more expansive: hopscotch (painted on the hardtop), swings, a garden, a basketball hoop, and a swimming pool.

Other specific suggestions for child-related services included tutoring (mentioned by several grandparents), computer training, and a study area with a children's library. One grandparent thought that a number of grandparents were experiencing enough difficulty with their grandchildren to warrant crisis intervention (by a child psychologist) and that there was need for more child care and a youth worker. While some of the negative attitudes about the availability of programs for children clearly reflected the late start of the after-school program, the views expressed by many grandparents suggest that expectations for structured or supervised opportunities for older children and teens were not being adequately met by current GrandFamilies House offerings (see Appendix).

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<sup>5</sup> Many of the respondents were interviewed before the after-school program had opened. This was undoubtedly reflected in the high number of grandparents reporting that there were no programs.

<sup>6</sup> The after-school program is subsidized. Families pay on a sliding scale or a voucher system.

Grandparents also talked about their expectations for programs and services for grandparents. Very few grandparents volunteered that they had attended workshops offered at GrandFamilies House, although those who did found them to be valuable. One grandparent expressed a need for more programs to assist her with her grandchildren's emotions associated with leaving their mother, as opposed to programs on how to safely raise children (first aid). One mentioned the need for help with house cleaning or laundry.

A few grandparents had arrived with expectations that GrandFamilies House would offer activities like those at a Senior Center (pleasure excursions, structured craft activities, a group site for cards or games). A number of residents wanted more opportunities for grandparents to get together informally for coffee, conversation, cards, or a simple craft activity. Several wanted more access to the van either for planned or spontaneous trips. Several mentioned wanting a garden or places to sit outside. And two grandparents had thought they would be given opportunities to learn computer skills (see Appendix ).

The final set of comments relating to GrandFamilies House programming reflects opinions about the oversight by BAC-YOU staff and stands in greatest contrast to grandfamilies who are thrilled with the programs and services available at GrandFamilies House. A few grandparents resented what they viewed as an intrusion into their private lives or a demeaning attitude toward their ability to manage their own lives. Specifically, they felt that persistent requests to attend tenant meetings, to follow rules, or to attend workshops imply that they are inadequate. They resented self-esteem workshops taught by white instructors. One grandparent summarized her bitterness at how poorly she felt the GrandFamilies House management demonstrated respect for and understanding of the needs and wishes of its residents.

- *I feel like I'm in a little program, not in a house....*

Another grandparent believed there should be a "real tenants' task force."

GrandFamilies community. Grandparents were also asked if they had any expectations of what it would be like to live at GrandFamilies House in terms of a "community" and the extent to which their expectations matched their experience to date.

Half of the grandparents interviewed described the GrandFamilies community in positive terms. The most frequently expressed quality was mutual help and sharing between residents - - - usually between one or two neighbors who lived on the same floor. As one grandparent said:

- *I've met some wonderful people here. If they're going out, they knock on your door and says, 'I'm going out. Do you need bread or milk?' ....And then, lots of them who are much younger than I am, come to ask me questions about things.*

Several residents described situations where neighbors checked on each other or provided help when one was sick. A number of residents have set up a system whereby neighbors check on each other when they go out or return. One grandparent expressed this sense of mutual caring in the following incident:

- *I heard a big bang next door. I didn't know what it was. I just threw down what I had and ran over and knocked on the door....I said, 'Are you all right?' She said, 'Yeah, you heard that big bang?' I said, 'Yeah, I thought it was you.' She said it was the cable man. She gave me a hug and thanked me for being concerned because she wouldn't have had anyone to help her if she had fallen. I said, 'Well, that's what we're here for. Did you forget the name of the building? The GrandFamilies House. We are a family, working together.'*

Sometimes the sense of mutual caring goes beyond neighbors. One grandparent described why she liked the tenants' meetings:

- *I like to get together and help one another. That makes a family.*

Another resident described situations where grandparents take the initiative to discipline children in the playground who are not their own.

Grandparents also described meeting wonderful people. Several residents had looked forward to and were happy meeting other grandparents who understood what they were experiencing raising grandchildren. Two grandparents mentioned that they already knew some of the residents, while others who were positive about the sense of community said they get along easily with people.

Not all residents who expressed satisfaction with living at GrandFamilies described a sense of community. Two grandparents were satisfied with GrandFamilies because they had anticipated too much contact or being bothered by neighbors and were pleased that residents had left them alone. Two other residents had not expected or wanted to find a community at GrandFamilies, and thus, were satisfied that there didn't seem to be one. As one said:

- *I live by myself --- me and [child]. I don't want anyone minding my business. When I lived in my house, I kept to myself. It's the same here. I live in my apartment, not in this house. I keep to myself. That's what I expected to do here.*

Eight grandparents had come to GrandFamilies House with different expectations than they had actually experienced. Four described having difficulty making friends at GrandFamilies. As one said:

- *The only one I talk to is the lady next door....*

Another who was disappointed in the lack of community said:

- *There is none [community]. We are isolated here. You can't talk to your next-door neighbor. It's a sort of isolation I don't think grandparents need....there are too many children. This is supposed to be home... I think [a GrandFamilies housing program] should be small units for grandparents....*

Others had expected to find the residents more friendly or “neighborly.” As one said:

- *I thought it would be fun and everybody would get together...and participate in different things...sewing...and get to know each other. It ain't like that....It's different. Most of the grandparents keep to themselves....So you just feel like you're here by yourself.*

Others had expected more mutual understanding because they all shared the responsibility of raising grandchildren:

- *I really thought we'd have more understanding of each other because of our age and our....special mission.*

Several grandparents mentioned the frequency of police coming into the building, which detracted from a sense of security and community.<sup>7</sup> One said she “felt like a rat” because she had to call the police four times to address a disturbance. Another attributed the frequent need for police to poor matching of grandparents within the building (too wide an age range of grandparents). She had also anticipated a racially integrated community. In her opinion:

- *This is turning into just another project. It's not a model....There are lots of problems. The community didn't want this house here. The neighborhood kids fight with the grandkids. There are grandparents getting drunk here. The police are here often. This place needs more organization.*

### Grandparents' Opinions On Raising Grandchildren.

The grandparents were asked to comment on their overall feelings about raising their grandchildren. The comments they made about its most enjoyable aspects were typical of most grandparents when asked to define their relationship to their grandchildren:

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<sup>7</sup> Most of the documented police visits were in response to an alarm from a YWCA-occupied space, although respondents reported police responses to other problems with residents.



- *They keep me young.*
- *Seeing her grow up. I worked all the time when my kids were small.*
- *They comfort me. They keep me laughing at times, and I really enjoy them.*
- *I like to go for a walk with them and play with them in the park.*
- *I enjoy making what they like to eat and hearing their tales.*
- *When I cook, she cooks. I think she learns from me and I from her.*

Differences between these grandparents and grandparents who are not raising their grandchildren are more apparent in the responses about the most difficult aspects of the grandparenting relationship.

#### The lack of time away

- *It's such a stress. They depend solely on me now. I can't even take a vacation and stay too long. Because they'll get sick, one of them will get sick. I just keep praying and taking them to church and hoping they will turn out to be the best.*
- *Can't do what I want to do. I always have to be here for her schedule. I get so bored here. I'm depressed all the time. I want to do things but I can't.*

#### The concern for safety

- *When kids pick on her at school. They like to fight and she don't.*

#### Understanding teenagers

- *Probably the generation gap. They all think they know everything. I have to remind them.*
- *Not being able to give him a lot of the things he would like to wear to keep up with the Joneses. Name brand stuff. I get him some but I can't get it all of the time.*
- *The hardest part is seeing one of them get old and have attitude changes.*
- *Getting them to listen.*

#### Caring for children when they are ill

- *The hardest part is when they get sick and they have to take medication and they don't want it. So I say, do you want to go to the movies? And he says yeah. Then I say, well then, you have to take this medicine. And sometimes I have to say it again.*

#### Concern if grandparent is ill

- *If I'm sick or I die, which direction is she headed?*
- *Just having to deal with the pain that I'm in constantly and not being able to be as mobile as I'd like to be able to take them places and to do things like when I was raising my own children.*

Perhaps the most poignant response reported by residents of GrandFamilies was:

- *When they cry and ask for their mother*

### Grandparents' Goals and Wishes For the Future.

Finally, the grandparents were asked about their goals and wishes for their grandchildren and for themselves. Most expressed their desire for the children to grow up to be independent and able to provide for themselves.

- *Baby there's nothing you can't do if you put your mind to it!*
- Specifically, grandparents mentioned the following goals for their grandchildren - - - that they...
- *grow up healthy*
  - *stay in school*
  - *go to college*
  - *make something of their lives*
  - *be independent*
  - *grow up to be responsible, positive, contributing citizens*
  - *value their lives*

Many of the grandparents also expressed their concerns for the future of the children if they (the grandparents) did not survive to see them grow up.

- *I hope I can live long enough to see them be teenagers and see them take care of themselves...but I don't think I'm gonna make it.*
- *I wish they would grow up to be able to support themselves if I happen to pass.*

Others were concerned that the children were at risk for getting into trouble.

- *I think my granddaughter is headed for trouble...I think she will follow in her mother's footsteps.*
- *I hope that my grandson doesn't grow up to be a hooligan.*
- *I hope she never gets on drugs.*
- *I've warned her to "not get babies."*

When asked about their goals and wishes for themselves, the grandparents wished for leisure time and opportunities to return to work or to school, and to stay healthy.

- *Peace. I just want peace and time for myself. I'd like to get back to work.*
- *To go back to school. That's the one thing I had to give up, but I'll get back, it's what I really want to do.*
- *I wish that I could see them grow up...but I don't know if that's in the cards for me.*
- *I hope that I can stay physically and mentally able to take care of her for at least the next 3-5 years.*
- *Live long enough to take care of my babies, let them get grown and go to school.*
- *I'd like to have some leisure time for myself--which I have never known in my life.*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The researchers recognize that the leadership of BAC-YOU and YWCA Boston have been working diligently to be responsive to the residents of this new grandparents' housing initiative, and that many of the concerns of the residents have already been addressed (such as the after-school program and installation of air conditioners). However, the expansive concerns and suggestions about the programming at GrandFamilies House, voiced by the grandparents during these interviews, suggest the need for grandparent residents to play a greater role in planning programs and services offered within the GrandFamilies House building. The residents also wanted to have a role in accessing community resources so that programs and services are more reflective of the family demographics (older children, teens) and the interests (activities for seniors) of the resident population. One grandparent summarized her view of GrandFamilies programming as follows:

*We need a real tenants' task force. We need a youth worker. We need a better resident manager. The van is not utilized enough. We need supportive services, and we need better child care.*

In reviewing grandparents' comments that related to programs available to grandparents, along with responses to the "affect questions" reported earlier in the report, it is apparent that many grandparents are experiencing boredom and do not feel they have enough opportunities for the kinds of activities they could do if they did not have the financial or physical responsibility of caring for their grandchildren. Their comments reflect a need for low-cost, on-site opportunities for recreation and cultural stimulation. Subsequent to these interviews, some of these issues are being addressed (see Appendix).

The program developers and funders may wish to address other issues raised by these grandparents--both with this house and future GrandFamilies complexes they may develop. The following recommendations reflect the words of grandparents.

- Provide planned activities for older children and teens (recreational and educational programs) and a youth worker.

- Develop more programs for grandparents within the building (computer training, more frequent fitness classes, etc.)
- Support grandparents in developing informal community activities (for grandparents or children) within the building and enable grandparents to more easily access seniors' activities within the community (by addressing child care and transportation needs).
- Increase opportunities for resident involvement in decision-making (including design features, space utilization, policies, and programs)

The program sponsors may wish to consider a number of modifications in planning future Grandfamily housing ventures. Instead of the current one large congregate building, they might want to offer a cluster of smaller units. These units might best be intermingled with other types of housing to maintain mixed neighborhoods (with respect to age, economic status, and ethnicity). It is important that such housing retain many of the supportive features of Grandfamilies House, including access to child and family services, and community activities. Replication efforts may also benefit from a better understanding of the profile of the grandparent applicants during initial screening to identify potential grandparents who are likely to respond well to life in a clustered, supportive community, as compared with grandparents who prefer greater autonomy.

It will be important to follow these pioneering grandparents over time – to watch them move from a period of transition to more stable living situations and to observe the factors that contribute to normalizing their lives. These data from the first six-month experience will provide a strong baseline for measuring circumstances where formal interventions are supportive or less successful. The data will also help in providing insight toward replication of the model.

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## APPENDIX

### Programs and Services at GrandFamilies House as of Sept. 1999.

Preschool Program (ages 3 - 6)

#### Sponsorship

YWCA Boston

After-School Program (ages 6-12)	YWCA Boston
Summer Program (ages 6-12)	YWCA Boston
Senior Strength Program (once/week)	YWCA Boston
Empowerment Group for girls 11-15, weekly, spring 1999	Self-Esteem Boston
Computer Learning Center (providing computer access to resident families)	YWCA
Van Driver hired (van scheduled for regular activities and special events)	BAC-YOU
GrandFamilies Vision Collaboration:	
On-site Clinical Services to families	Parents' & Children's Services, Inc.
Expanded health/fitness programs at YMCA Family Center	YWCA Boston
GrandFamilies community organizing and advocacy	BAC-YOU
GrandFamilies House Resident Council	BAC-YOU
Grandparent-chaired Council to address issues, form house rules, create programs	
Vacant lot adjacent to GrandFamilies property acquired and grandparent recommendations solicited	BAC-YOU
GrandFamilies Leadership Initiative was funded	The Lenny Fund

In planning stage as of December, 1999

GrandFamilies House Library