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sure, says it's now getting harder and harder for her to keep up with her active granddaughter's schedule.

"She's getting older," Meaney said. Things take longer. She grows tired sooner. She's not as quick as before.

There are also financial concerns. Most of the grandparents the center serves are low-income African-American and Latina women who never planned on covering the costs of raising additional children. Unlike foster parents, grandparents do not receive a government stipend for raising their kin. A comprehensive survey of grandparent caregivers released this summer by the New York City KinCare Taskforce found that almost all must rely on public assistance, including the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), Medicaid and Food Stamps and the New York City Housing Authority.

Approximately 70 percent reported that they can "barely manage to cover their expenses." Thirteen percent reported they simply could not make ends meet. Again and again, the survey found problems securing housing, obtaining health care and navigating family courts, and repeated complaints about roadblocks in the system.

"Kinship caregivers, filling a void left by the absence of biological parents, have accepted responsibility for children at their own expense, both financial and emotional," the report states. "Yet, the overwhelming conclusion of this study is that their efforts to obtain necessary benefits and services for these children are often met with unhelpful staff at city agencies, bureaucratic red tape, paltry benefits and misinformation."

The survey implored the city "to recognize the magnificent service kinship caregivers perform," and to do more to help the group survive.

But as city budgets are slashed across the board, government support has dwindled for the handful of city programs that assist this oft-overlooked population.

The Family Center, which provides family counseling, legal aid, grandparent support groups and other assistance, was informed in December 2008 that, thanks to the recession, it had lost its grant from the city's Department for the Aging, reducing the operating budget by \$100,000, or nearly 20 percent.

"That's very significant for us," Gamble Cobb said.

As a result, the center has had to cut back its outreach efforts because it can no longer afford to serve the number of clients it once did.

"When you're having to deal with these very dire fiscal times, tough decisions are being made

across the board," she said.

By some estimates, unpaid caregivers, including grandparents, already save the government an estimated \$6 billion that would otherwise be spent on foster care. Part of the problem is that most other city services are not designed for elderly mothers and fathers. For instance, most senior centers won't even allow children inside their buildings. Assisted living facilities that accommodate children are extremely rare.

"They just don't fit in anywhere," Meaney said. And for grandparent caregivers like Nelson, this lack of support can be frustrating.

"We have to put our retirements on hold and take care of these children," Nelson said. But, she complained, "They really don't acknowledge grandparents. They put us on the backburner."

Diane Mick-Feldman, 65, agrees.

Mick-Feldman knew it was time to step in when her grandson Evan, now 14, told her how bad the situation was at home during a visit to his pediatrician's office three years ago.

"Grammy, things are so bad," said Evan, who had grown quiet and withdrawn. "Be glad you don't live with me. It's really bad now."

Evan's parents had had a history of substance abuse problems and were having trouble paying the bills. They had no electricity, little food and no phone.

"Is it time for you to live with Grammy?" Mick-Feldman asked.

"Yes," her grandson answered.

But Mick-Feldman and her husband, Henry, 71, said the transition from retiree to parent has been a challenge. Before Evan, she said, "We were happy empty nesters." "We had freedom," Henry agreed, describing dinners out, traveling and entertaining as they pleased.

With Evan in the home, "the spontaneity came to a halt." Nights at the Angelika have been replaced with class parent meetings, homework help, taking Evan to football games and cheering on the sidelines.

Henry has had to continue working, knowing he must put another child through college soon.

"This is certainly a big change from what we expected," Mick-Feldman said.

She urged the city to "step up to the plate" and do more to fund resources like The Family Center, which make life just a little bit easier for caregivers like her.

"The Family Center enabled us every stage," she said. "For us it was critical.... Without the center, I think we really would have not had such a turnaround in Evan's behavior and quality of life."

Care for the Caregiver

Caregivers often forget to take time for themselves, and a great way to unwind is with a massage. Downtime Massage + Skincare, which recently re-opened at 698 10th Ave. and West 49th Street, is sponsoring a spa giveaway for a three-hour "Hell's Kitchen" retreat package that includes a facial, body treatment and massage. Owner Greg Cartwright said the package is valued at \$425.

"This package is about giving someone a service so they can feel that they fill their cup up," Cartwright said. "If I can be of service to

someone else and stick a smile on their face and make the difference in someone's very hard year, I'd feel very accomplished."

Patrons should also check out the spa's "sugaring" treatments, based on a secret Turkish recipe for boiling down sugar to a paste and using it for hair removal.

To enter the contest, send a short email to mgt@downtimemassage.com nominating a caregiver, and explaining why this person could use this opportunity to "fill their cup back up." The deadline is Dec. 21 and the winner will be announced Dec. 24.