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By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader

In Seward County, there are more than 480 grandparents raising grandchildren.

In Kansas, there are more than 18,000 children residing with their grandparents or other relatives. This represents a 30 percent increase from 1990 to the year 2000.

That information is from the 2000 U.S. Census.

To assist grandparents and other relatives in raising children, the Kansas Children's Service League has begun classes throughout the state, including one in Liberal, on grandparents and kin raising children.

"It's a support networking group for grandparents and relatives raising children," said B.J. Gore, supervisor of KCSL's Parents Helping Parents/Parent Leadership program. "We have an emphasis on children with special needs. It's basically providing information, offering support, connecting families to community resources. We bring in different presenters to talk on special issues that the group members like to know about. It's been very successful."

Gore said the program is statewide.

"We have networking support groups throughout the state of Kansas,"

she said. "Two of our big focus groups are 'Families with Children with Special Needs' and 'Grandparents Raising Grandchildren.' We do a lot of work in that arena. They seem to be very, very successful in helping families."

Gore said KCSL has much in the way of education materials available.

“Usually, we’ll bring in legal experts to talk about grandparents’

rights in the state of Kansas,” she said. “We’ll also talk about the different legal options that are available so grandparents have a better idea if they’re looking at doing some kind of legal arrangement with the children they’re caring for – what each one entails and what might be the best option.”

Another feature KCSL provides is bringing in families to talk on special needs like special education laws, Gore said.

“We try to look at what information we can provide so they can help the grandparents,” she said.

Many times when grandparents and relatives are raising children, they become overwhelmed, and they have no idea which direction to turn.

Gore said KCSL tries to provide that support piece for them.

She said often, grandparents and relatives are afraid to reach out for services.

“We try to help them start kind of breaking that down,” she said.

“Often, our guest speakers will help to do that. We bring in mental health to talk about different issues.”

Gore said many times, the children being raised by grandparents and relatives come with baggage.

“So many of them have been neglected or abused,” she said. “That brings a lot of special issues in terms of behavior. We try to make sure we cover that arena and make connections through mental health and have speakers come in.”

Gore said the support group began in October, but it will not start up again until January because of the holiday season.

“What we did is we looked at what were the needs in the different areas, and Seward County came up as one of those when we went out in Western Kansas and really started looking at what are the needs within the different communities,” she said.

Gore said there currently is a big emphasis on early childhood. She said in Seward County, there are about 203 children in the age group of birth to 5 years being raised by grandparents.

“When the new census comes out, we anticipate even a higher number,”

she said. “It’s important to note the children between birth and 5 years of age because that’s really become a big emphasis in the state of Kansas and how important these years are and making sure these children get the right start and connected to the right services.”

Gore said grandparents face a lot of challenges when raising grandchildren.

“One of the big challenges they face is their changing roles,” she said. “They’ve gone from a grandparents’ role, just being a grandparent, to being the parent. That’s very, very difficult, especially if they still have children themselves at home.”

Gore said a lot of separation and divorce is also seen amongst the grandparent population when a couple looks to bring a grandchild into the household.

“Sometimes, there may be problems in terms of the marriage,” she said. “Financial is a big one. It just really creates a hardship because so many of our grandparents who move into that role of raising their grandchildren often are on limited incomes. They have that extra financial piece coming in.”

Legal issues are also a big problem, according to Gore.

“What we’re seeing across the state is so many of the grandparents feel like they would like to move into getting some type of a formal legal piece, but the financial cost of that is very, very high for grandparents,” she said. “Sometimes, they can tap into Kansas legal services. There are some attorneys that do the pro bono legal services for grandparents raising grandchildren.”

Gore said in some cases, the parents of the children have simply disappeared.

“They just dump these children, and the grandparents have no legal document to be able to get medical care for the children or to enroll the children in school,” she said.

Housing can also be a barrier, and Gore said there are options available for grandparents raising grandchildren.

“There’s all different reasons why grandparents end up raising grandchildren,” she said. “Death of a parent, incarceration, abandonment, child abuse and neglect. What it all comes down to when you look at all this, the leading cause is drugs, with meth and cocaine being the biggest one.”

The “Grandparents/Kin Raising Children” support group meets from 6 to

7 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month at the Liberal Recreation Center.

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