

GRG Line Advocate - Dennis Nkojo

BCASW AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH – March 18, 2016

Good evening to you all.

Let me take this opportunity to thank the BC Association of Social Workers, and in particular, the Richmond-Delta-Burnaby branch for recognising our efforts in ensuring a world where all children and their families are nurtured, valued and safe. Unfortunately, my colleague and co-recipient Christina Campbell is away and out of town on vacation.

I am humbled and honoured to receive this Award for the Grandparent Raising Grandchildren (GRG) work that I do and care about deeply. But more especially, it helps in confirming that we lawyers do have hearts after all!!

Permit me thank all my other colleagues at Parent Support Services Society of BC (PSS BC) who are represented here by the Executive Director, Carol Madsen and Jane Bouey. Such an achievement is only possible through solid teamwork and support. In the same breath, I wish to thank our immediate past Executive Director, Carol Ross who inducted me into social work practice, as I was coming from largely a lawyering background and perspective.

Allow me recognise and appreciate the positive contribution to our work by the management and staff of:

1- Legal Services Society BC; 2- Law Foundation BC; 3- The Office of the Representative for Children and Youth; 4- Community Legal Assistance Society BC; 5- Law Society of British Columbia; 6- Kettle Friendship Society; and 7- Ministry of Children and Family Development.

In 2013, Statistics Canada estimated that there were 75,000 full-time Grandparent led families in Canada, including 11,000 in British Columbia alone. From our interaction with the grandparents on the line, we know that many of their grandchildren are traumatised and faced with varied poverty-related challenges. The four major reasons for the calls we receive are:

1- Financial Assistance/Accessing MCFD Services; 2- Legal Issues (advice, representation, mediation among others); 3- Mental Health Issues (a whole range of these for both the children and adults); and 4- Meeting Educational and Recreational costs.

As you may be aware, navigating the different government systems can be a tedious exercise for anyone, let alone our GRG families. Whereas PSS does not have its own financial resources to cater for all our clients, we endeavor to offer a little more than just hope. For instance, we have worked on simplifying the comprehension of the relevant laws affecting families through our GRG Legal Guide.

This may assist one during negotiations with the Ministry and in cases requiring self-representation at the Courts. We have also been working with Legal Services Society to create awareness through the Family Duty Counsel Program about the unique challenges faced by GRGs while navigating the court system. We also offer our callers direction to other community resources and referrals, whenever that is necessary.

PSS runs a community based initiative under the GRG Circles Program. These are managed by PSS trained facilitators and are currently active in Abbotsford, Burnaby, Coquitlam, Chilliwack, Delta, Kamloops, Kelowna and Vancouver in the lower-mainland. We also have circles in Duncan, Nanaimo, Parksville and Victoria on Vancouver Island, and two others in Prince George.

Our hope at PSS is that, through the continued collaboration and partnerships with other community service providers, and together with the families themselves, we can protect the safety and wellbeing of all children and promote the health of families by providing support, education, research, advocacy and resources to those in a Kinship Care and other parenting role.

Finally but certainly not least, a big thank you to my partner Bridget, and our daughters Namara and Nagasha. You motivate me to get up every day and go add my effort to making this world a better place.

Thank you and I wish you all a Happy Social Work Week.