



📷 Victoria Shiel, director of the Gold Coast Community Legal Centre, said although she was seeing a rise in the number of grandparents seeking help, she believed this was just the tip of the iceberg.

— Sun Community —

Gold Coast grandparents caught in custody battles are facing abuse from drug-affected parents

Laura Nelson, Gold Coast Sun
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AN alarming number of elderly residents caring for their grandchildren are becoming victims of escalating domestic violence and drug abuse on the Gold Coast.

Experts warn grandparents are at risk when they try to protect their grandchildren from violent parents under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Others are prevented from seeing their grandchildren in situations of elder abuse.

With limited income and reduced access to free legal aid, they are suffering in silence and fear.

Victoria Shiel, director of the Gold Coast Community Legal Centre, said although she was seeing a rise in the number of grandparents seeking help, she believed this was just the tip of the iceberg.

“We believe there are a whole lot of hidden grandparents who haven’t come forward because they are very fearful about reaching out for help,” she said. “It concerns me that they are in these horrible situations but aren’t getting help.”

Ms Shiel said the grandparents she was seeing were all frightened and their fears included upsetting their children and of their grandchildren being withheld from them.

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Alan Jones on drug addicted parents

“We are also seeing elderly people who are prevented from seeing their grandchildren in situations of elder abuse and a large number seeking help to formalise care arrangements so that they can be the main carers,” she said.

“We have a significant number of clients seeking to spend time with the children, which has been refused after the parents separated.”

Kirsty Mackie, chairwoman of the Queensland Law Society’s Elder Law Committee, said grandparents had been forced to take on a larger role in their grandchildren’s lives with the Department of Child Safety becoming reliant on them as alternatives to parents.

This applied particularly to cases involving substance abuse, domestic violence or parents in prison.

In fact, she said it was not uncommon for DVO's to be taken out between grandparents and their own children when grandchildren were involved.

"In some cases, parents turn up to the grandparents' home, leave the children and often don't return for several months," she said.

"When they do, they demand their children be returned to them," she said. "Parents often become violent when under the influence of drugs or alcohol and grandparents are exposed to family violence when they try to step in and protect their grandchildren from their own parents."

She said growing drug use, in particular ice, caused parents to disengage from all activities, including being fit parents to their children.

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Lambie calls for forced drug treatment

"Sometimes parents are in prison or 'disappear' due to drug-taking binges and don't take part in mediation or consent to formal parenting orders. The grandparents are left with no option but to file a contested application in the Federal Circuit Court for parenting orders."

She said this was a complex, time-consuming process which could take up to 18 months to finalise.

"The parents often engage in the court process and then disengage, which causes multiple adjournments of the court process," Ms Mackie said.

“Without a formal parenting order in place, they can’t obtain financial family assistance, access to Medicare, open a school banking account, obtain a passport or even be authorised to apply for a birth certificate.”

She said unfortunately when grandparents turned to community legal centres, only half of them were able to get the help they needed because of limited resources.