

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 10, 2023

Alison Barkoff  
Acting Administrator and Assistant Secretary for Aging  
Administration for Community Living  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
330 C Street SW  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Acting Administrator Barkoff,

I write to express my support for the National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers (Strategy) and to applaud the Administration for Community Living's (ACL) longstanding commitment to supporting family caregivers across the Nation. The Strategy comes at a critical time as our Nation seeks to support the more than 53 million family caregivers and 2.7 million grandparents raising grandchildren. Family caregivers improve the quality of life and independence of care recipients and help to sustain our overall health care, long term care services and supports, and child welfare systems.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the challenges that many of these families face, while also highlighting the vital role that family caregivers play in supporting older adults and people with disabilities.

There is a greater need for caregiver engagement to inform policymaking and I am supportive of the Strategy's efforts to elevate the perspectives of family caregivers and direct care professionals. The recommendations included in the Strategy, along with 345 federal agency commitments and more than 150 actions to be implemented locally and across the private sector, are essential to better addressing the needs of both caregivers and care recipients. The goals outlined within the Strategy provide a framework for a diverse set of stakeholders to implement evidence-informed solutions to support family caregivers and direct care professionals across the Nation. I applaud the Strategy for its focus on supporting grandparent and kinship caregivers, strengthening the direct care workforce, and providing family caregiving training and support.

## **Grandparent and Kinship Caregivers**

The Strategy's attention to grandparent and kinship caregivers elevates the needs of an often-overlooked group of family caregivers. Grandfamilies and kinship families form in response to a number of challenges, including substance use disorder, serious mental illness, parental incarceration, gun violence, and other life events. Grandparent and kinship caregivers provide

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<sup>1</sup> The Administration for Community Living. (2022, September 21). *2022 National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers*. <https://acl.gov/CaregiverStrategy>

stability, familial continuity, and increases in well-being for the children in their care.<sup>2</sup> Yet, many operate outside of the child welfare system and often do not receive sufficient services and support. This can cause grandparent and kinship caregivers to forgo their own financial security in order to provide for the children placed in their care.<sup>3</sup>

I am encouraged to see ACL's commitment to continuing the work of the Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren by establishing a new Council in accordance with the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act (P.L. 115-196). The Advisory Council was established to identify and promote best practices and available resources for grandfamilies and kinship families. It also helps to ensure the voices of grandparent and kinship caregivers are considered when agencies develop new policies regarding children and families.

I support ACL's ongoing partnership with Generations United to manage the implementation of the National Technical Assistance Center on Grandfamilies and Kinship Families, which was funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (P.L. 117-2). The National Technical Assistance Center provides critical guidance and assistance regarding grandfamilies and kinship families to states, territories, tribes, tribal organizations, and community-based organizations, among others. In addition, I am encouraged by the partnership between ACL and the Department of Education to ensure materials regarding services and supports are made available to family caregivers, kinship families, and grandfamilies to improve access to needed resources.

These efforts are essential to improving services for grandparent and kinship caregivers, which has broad bipartisan support in Congress. In June of this past year, the Senate Special Committee on Aging held a hearing examining the strengths and challenges facing grandparent and kinship caregivers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the hearing, my colleagues and I introduced legislation that would support federal and state agencies in their efforts to better address the needs of grandparent and kinship caregivers.

### **Direct Care Workforce**

Direct care professionals are an essential part of the care team for older adults and people with disabilities and serve as a foundational element of our Nation's caregiving system. Direct care professionals enable older adults and people with disabilities to remain in their homes and communities.<sup>4</sup> However, they are often under supported and underpaid, leaving many with little choice but to leave the workforce altogether. I applaud the Strategy's recognition that a well-trained and well-paid direct care workforce can serve as essential partners to families and help to meet the needs of both caregivers and care recipients. I also am encouraged by the Strategy's emphasis on the roles that volunteers can play in providing direct support to families, particularly through ACL's Community Care Corps Program.

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<sup>2</sup> The Administration for Community Living. (2021, November 16). *Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (SGRG) Act Initial Report to Congress*. <https://acl.gov/SGRG/report>

<sup>3</sup> Id.

<sup>4</sup> Fitzhugh Mullan Institute for Health Workforce Equity, The George Washington University. (2021, September). *Advancing the Home Care Workforce: A Review of Program Approaches, Evidence, and the Challenges of Widespread Adoption*. <https://user-niv7hdi.cld.bz/Report-Advancing-the-Home-Care-Workforce>

I am supportive of the many actions of federal agencies to strengthen the direct care workforce. This includes the establishment of ACL's Direct Care Workforce Capacity Building Center to improve the recruitment, retention, and training of direct care professionals. The Department of Labor's (DOL) commitment to working with direct support providers to identify policies aimed at improving the direct care workforce's funding and stability will also foster a sustainable pathway for supporting direct care professionals. In addition, DOL's support for developing career ladders and training through their technical assistance centers is an essential step towards improving workforce retention.

These federal efforts align with Congressional action to include an historic investment in Medicaid's home and community-based services in the American Rescue Plan Act in order to expand access to good-quality care for care recipients and better pay and benefits for direct care professionals. In addition, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328) includes \$2 million for a demonstration project to improve the retention, recruitment, and advancement opportunities of the direct care workforce. Congress will continue to explore opportunities to better support the direct care workforce in the 118th Congress.

### **Family Caregiving Training and Support**

Family caregivers step in at a time when long-term care services and supports are unavailable or inaccessible. Moreover, they are increasingly asked to do more complicated and time-consuming tasks that were once previously handled by medical professionals. As such, family caregivers would benefit from evidence-informed training and support, which often includes respite care, as they adjust to their new responsibilities.

I applaud ACL's commitment to providing services and assistance to caregivers of older adult family members through the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP), which helps support caregiver mental health and enables older adults to remain in their homes for as long as possible. The NFCSP's funding for respite care services provides caregivers with the ability to take a break from their caregiving responsibilities and recharge, thereby reducing burnout. I also support ACL's commitment to the continued access to information and community resources, including for respite care, caregiver training, and transportation, through the Eldercare Locator. This tool is essential to ensuring caregivers can find the supportive services they need.

Increasing training and support for family caregivers has been a longstanding priority for Congress, particularly for the Senate Special Committee on Aging, as demonstrated through the recent reauthorization of the Older Americans Act (P.L. 116-131, as amended). The reauthorization included enhanced funding for family caregiver support through Title III programs, such as the NFCSP. Further, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, both the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (P.L. 116-136) and the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (P.L. 116-260) included additional funding for caregiver training and respite.

In summary, I applaud the Strategy's acknowledgement that a multipronged and multisectoral approach is critical to better supporting family caregivers and am encouraged by their recognition that all efforts should be person- and family-centered, trauma-informed, and

culturally competent. Although family caregivers face challenges, many find that with the right support and services caregiving can be rewarding and report closer relationships with care recipients, enhanced self-esteem, and greater confidence in their ability to navigate difficult situations.<sup>5</sup> This Strategy provides a framework for improving services and supports for family caregivers and has the potential to enhance the quality of life and well-being for both caregivers and care recipients.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bob Casey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.  
Chairman  
Senate Special Committee on Aging

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<sup>5</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2016, November 8). *Families Caring for an Aging America*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK396398/>