

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 30, 2022

The Honorable Eugene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General  
United States Government Accountability Office  
441 G St. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We write concerning the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older adults and other kin caregivers who care for children when their parents are unable to do so. A 2020 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report relying largely on pre-pandemic data found an estimated 2.7 million of these kin caregivers facing a range of challenges.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, press reports, academic articles and other experts have shown that COVID-19 has exacerbated the challenges experienced in kin caregiving arrangements, for both the adult caregivers and their children. These realities were underscored during a recent hearing before the Special Committee on Aging. More older adults may be raising children because so many youths lost their parents during the pandemic. In addition, the loss of grandparents or other kin caregivers to COVID-19 may retraumatize children who previously lost one or both parents.

GAO's 2020 report found that kin caregivers faced a wide range of challenges including limited financial resources, inadequate child care, a need for legal assistance, a lack of awareness of available supports and higher rates of physical and mental health problems.<sup>2</sup> The report also identified various strategies to address these challenges that were being implemented by child welfare programs and Area Agencies on Aging in four selected communities.<sup>3</sup> While this report provided valuable insight into the state of kin families throughout our Nation, it relied heavily on pre-pandemic data.<sup>4</sup> As our Nation works to ease the long-term problems caused by COVID-19, there is an urgent need to understand the impact on grandfamilies, other kin caregivers and their children.

Since the time of GAO's analysis, the COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects on families across our Nation, including children and kin caregivers. Recent testimony to the Senate Special Committee on Aging further highlighted these difficulties. One grandparent described to the Committee the difficulty of losing access to a support group because of the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> A

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<sup>1</sup> Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Child Welfare and Aging Programs: HHS Could Enhance Support for Grandparents and Other Relative Caregivers*, July 10, 2020, (GAO-20-434), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-434.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*, at 27-31.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*, at 31-34.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, at 53-61.

<sup>5</sup> *Strengthening Support for Grandfamilies during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond*, Before the Special Comm. on Aging, 117th Cong. 8 (2022). Hereinafter "Grandfamilies Hearing." (Testimony of Ruth Stevens, Grandmother). Available at [https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony\\_Stevens%2006.23.22.pdf](https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony_Stevens%2006.23.22.pdf).

second witness described how the pandemic added stress from “job loss, critical technology barriers to in-home schooling and work” and unique health and safety fears.<sup>6</sup>

Third-party reports further show how the difficulties described to the Committee are being experienced by families across our Nation. One report estimated that more than 140,000 children lost a parent or other caregiver due to the pandemic between April 2020 and June 2021.<sup>7</sup> These losses were 4.5 times more likely to affect children of minority groups than white children.<sup>8</sup> A second report noted that COVID-19 deaths included “many parents, custodial grandparents, or other caregivers on whom more than 167,000 children” relied.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, these losses may create a layer of additional trauma for children who have already lost one or more parents. Another noted that, “[s]ince the start of the pandemic, almost 40 percent of grandfamilies say they struggle to pay for housing,” while one-third are food insecure.<sup>10</sup> A fourth noted that many kin caregivers raise children with disabilities, and those children were frequently cut off from support programs offered by public schools.<sup>11</sup> A fifth noted that “more grandparent caregivers have disabilities than parents,” including disabilities that place them at greater risk of complications from COVID-19.<sup>12</sup>

These reports, and the testimony received by the Committee, are troubling. Together, they highlight the need for an updated examination of the state of kin caregivers and the children in their care in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We ask that GAO examine the following questions:

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing effects change or exacerbate the challenges faced by kin caregivers and their children, including mental health conditions and access to food, housing, education and child care? How did efforts to address those challenges change during the pandemic in the local communities examined in GAO’s prior work, and what are the lessons learned?
2. The Committee received testimony regarding the added difficulties faced by kin caregivers with disabilities and those raising children with disabilities. How did the pandemic specifically impact kin caregivers with disabilities and kin caregivers raising children with disabilities? How did the suspension or delivery changes to assistance

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<sup>6</sup> Grandfamilies Hearing, (Testimony of Donna Butts, Generations United, Executive Director). Available at [https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony\\_Butts%2006.23.22.pdf](https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony_Butts%2006.23.22.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Hillis, Susan D., Alexandra Blenkinsop, Andrés Villaveces, Francis B. Annor, Leandris Liburd, Greta M. Massetti, Zewditu Demissie, et al, *Covid-19–Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States*,” *Pediatrics* 148, no. 6, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-053760>.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> Social Policy Analytics, COVID Collaborative, *Hidden Pain: Children Who Lost a Parent or Caregiver to COVID-19 and What the Nation Can Do to Help Them*, December 2021, at 4, <https://www.covidcollaborative.us/assets/uploads/img/HIDDEN-PAIN-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Public Broadcasting Service, *Raising children for a second time, ‘grandfamilies’ struggle during the pandemic*, PBS News Hours, February 23, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/raising-children-for-a-second-time-grandfamilies-struggle-during-the-pandemic>.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Kelley, Generations American Society on Aging, *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren and COVID-19: Overlaying Risks, Uncertain Outcomes*, Generations Now, <https://generations.asaging.org/grandparents-raising-grandchildren-covid-19>.

<sup>12</sup> Generations United, *Facing A Pandemic: Grandfamilies Living Together During COVID-19 and Thriving Beyond*, 2020, at 2, <https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2020/10/2020-Grandfamilies-Report-Web.pdf>.

programs affect these families and what are ways that such impacts can be reduced in future public health emergencies?

3. What recent data are available on the characteristics of grandparents and other kin serving as primary caregivers, including the number of grandparents and kin in that role? What are the government's current capabilities to identify how those characteristics have changed because of the pandemic? What additional steps can the federal government take to more accurately track how important characteristics change for kin caregivers during future public health emergencies?
4. In July 2018, the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act (P.L. 115-196) was signed into law. This legislation established the Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, which submitted a report to Congress in November 2021.<sup>13</sup> What progress has the federal government made on implementing the recommendations from that report? In what ways have recommendations that have been implemented provided support to states and community-based organizations, particularly as they deal with impacts from the pandemic?

Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,



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



Susan M. Collins  
Member  
Senate Special Committee  
on Aging



Tim Scott  
Ranking Member  
Senate Special Committee  
on Aging



Mark Kelly  
Member  
Senate Special Committee  
on Aging

<sup>13</sup> Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living, *Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (SGRG) Act: Initial Report to Congress*, November 16, 2021, [https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/RAISE\\_SGRG/SGRG-InitialReportToCongress\\_2021-11-16.pdf](https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/RAISE_SGRG/SGRG-InitialReportToCongress_2021-11-16.pdf).