

U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



CHAIRMAN Special Committee on Aging

The Grandfamilies Act of 2022

U.S. Senator Bob Casey (D-PA)

Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement

“Strengthening Support for Grandfamilies during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond”

June 23, 2022

This hearing will come to order. I want to thank everyone for being here today, especially our witnesses, and to see our witnesses here in front of us live is something we haven't been able to do every week and every month. I want to start with a statistic that I think a lot of Americans may be familiar with, either personally or from having seen some of the data. We know that more than 2.7 million children in American are being raised by grandparents or next of kin.

They are among our Nation's unsung heroes. They are. in so many ways, a light in the darkness. They have made sure that their grandchildren are both loved and supported, even in the most trying of circumstances and of course, COVID-19 has been among the most difficult chapters in American history.

For so many American families, the COVID-19 pandemic has been among the darkest and most trying of times. As we will hear today in our hearing, grandparents who are raising their grandchildren became increasingly isolated throughout the pandemic. Grandchildren

lived in fear that they may contract the virus and spread it to aging grandparents. And, tragically, at least 140,000 children—140,000 children—were orphaned by the pandemic and are now living with grandparents or next of kin as a result. Sadly, this staggering number is almost surely an undercount.

The American Rescue Plan invested \$30 million to increase mental health awareness among young people, including members of grandfamilies, and also those dollars were used to train school personnel to respond to these types of concerns. Thankfully, grandfamilies are a topic of longstanding bipartisan interest in this Committee.

We will continue that tradition with today's hearing in the policy we'll talk about. In 2018, Senator Collins—she was then the Chair of the Committee—she and I worked to pass legislation to establish a National Advisory Council to support grandfamilies and kin caregivers. We will build on this legacy by introducing the Supporting the Well-being and Mental Health of Grandfamilies Act to extend the Advisory Council for an additional 4 years. This Council has been successful because it incorporates the voices of grandparents and grandfamilies in its membership and its mission.

At today's hearing, the Committee will have the opportunity to hear from two grandparents: Ms. Ruth Stevens from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and also Ms. Gail Engel from Colorado. Like so many in this room and others listening, I've got a grandson and I've got a grandchild on the way in July, so I know what I would do and what I would do is anything

to support him, if his parents couldn't. And I know every grandparent has that same feeling of love and that same feeling of commitment to their grandchildren.

Both Ruth Stevens and Gail Engel will share the blessings and challenges they have experienced in raising their grandchildren. In this case, Tamir [TA-MEER] and Bryson, who are both with us today. Ms. Stevens fought to bring her grandson home after he was placed in foster care without her knowledge. Families like her family save taxpayers an estimated 4 billion dollars each year in costs each year. Yet approximately one in five grandfamilies live at or below the federal poverty line. And, nearly half of all grandmother-only households are living in poverty.

That is unacceptable and should be unacceptable to any member of the United States Congress. I've fought a lot of battles to strengthen support for these families. Today, I am reintroducing the *Grandfamilies Act*, which would lower costs for grandfamilies by increasing access to Social Security and TANF support, those benefits I should say. I am also reintroducing the bipartisan *Informing Grandfamilies Act*, **S. 4443**, alongside Senator Young to ensure TANF-eligible grandfamilies are aware of and can access all the benefits for which they qualify.

I want to thank Ranking Member Scott for his support on this bill as well as Senator Kelly, a member of our Committee, for both supporting this bill. Tim, thank you for that. So, I look forward to today's hearing, and our witnesses, and their stories and their experiences about

what more Congress can do to support our Nation's grandfamilies. And with that, I'll turn to our Ranking Member Senator Scott.