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United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

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August 19, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

We write regarding a report recently released by the non-partisan Government Accountability Office (GAO), entitled “Child Welfare and Aging Programs: HHS Could Enhance Support for Grandparents and Other Relative Caregivers.” We are concerned that the Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) rejected GAO’s recommendations for sharing information and best practices with states related to federal programs designed to assist grandparents and older relative caregivers. During a period of extreme strain on families and budgets, it is especially important that HHS ensure that grandfamilies have the resources necessary to overcome challenges.

Approximately 2.7 million children are being raised by their grandparents or other relative caregivers outside of the foster system. This is nearly 20 times the number of children being cared for by relatives through foster care placement. Older relative caregivers have stepped in to take on this role for many years, including during the recent opioid epidemic, when parents are no longer able. These caregivers provide vital support, stability, and a nurturing environment for children who have lost so much. And with more than 169,000 lives lost to COVID-19, it is possible that even more relatives may become caregivers. While the majority have been over age 65, some younger individuals have passed away and left young children behind.

Under normal circumstances, these older relative caregivers often do not receive aid after taking on this role unexpectedly. Many stretch limited incomes and some postpone retirement to be able to afford childcare and food. They may even be unaware of available supports or how to apply for assistance. Now, as GAO notes, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented additional health and economic issues for older relative caregivers that are likely to exacerbate these challenges.

As the Chairman and Ranking Member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Aging, we have been committed to pursuing policies that connect grandfamilies with needed resources. Most notably, we authored the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act, which was signed into law in 2018, and established a federal advisory council at HHS to provide information about available supports for older relative caregivers. We appreciate the Department’s work to implement this law and look forward to the Advisory Council’s report to Congress. Still, we believe that GAO’s report indicated complementary actions needed to further assist states in their efforts to support these families.

To help ensure that states have relevant up-to-date information and best practices to support grandfamilies, GAO recommended that HHS' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Administration for Community Living (ACL) establish ongoing processes of proactive communication related to programs available to serve older relative and kin caregivers both in and out of the foster care system. This would help participating states remain updated about effective ways to implement such programs and ensure that states considering participation are aware of their options. Such help could come in the form of additional webinars, information-sharing mechanisms and technical assistance. For example, two state officials told GAO that they would benefit from opportunities to share information with colleagues in other states on the national model foster family home licensing standards, including useful materials others have created.

GAO's recommendations to help facilitate information sharing among states and grandfamilies seems sensible and straightforward. Implementing these recommendations could help increase the take-up of assistance available to older relative caregivers and encourage more widespread use of relevant programs and initiatives across the country. We urge HHS to reconsider its approach to these recommendations and to immediately begin implementing them to help ensure that grandfamilies are able to access the help they need.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
Chairman



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Ranking Member