

Faith Lewis
Testimony before the
United States Senate Special Committee on Aging
May 8, 2019

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey and Members of the Committee, thank you for the honor to testify before you today on behalf of grandparents raising their grandchildren across the country.

My name is Faith Lewis and I live in Simpson, Pennsylvania. I am proud to say that I have 4 grandchildren and 4 great grandchildren. I was invited here today to explain to you why the National Family Caregiver Support Program is so important to me, and why it—and all of the programs funded through the Older Americans Act—are so important to older Americans.

I am currently caring for my five-year-old great-granddaughter, Xziylan. At 69 years old, running around after a five year old is no small feat, but she is a good kid. She is a good eater. She loves fruits, vegetables and yogurt. When I take her to the grocery store with me, she picks out what she wants and it is always watermelon. I didn't know anyone could love watermelon so much. She loves going to the park and got a bike for Christmas. She can't wait for the weather to be nice enough to be outside all of the time. She is a happy kid.

It is important to me that Xziylan has a happy childhood. Xziylan's mother has been in prison on drug-related charges for the past three years. And, if I did not step in to help, my daughter, Xziylan's grandmother, would be taking care of three kids under 11. That is a lot to ask of one person. We help each other out. My son helps when he can, too. And, so does a neighbor when I ask.

Having a strong support network is so important. Every couple of weeks I go out dancing at the VFW in Wilkes-Barre with a friend. That's how I envisioned my retirement. Dancing with friends and traveling with the money I saved.

Now, I rely on my Social Security check to make ends meet. Some months that is harder than others. But, like I have been doing since my mom passed away when I was 13 years old, I figure it out. I get \$35 every month in food stamps, but with a kid who likes to eat such healthy food, that doesn't stretch very far. Sometimes I go to the St. Rose Food Pantry. That helps. I had to buy a new car because I drive Xziylan to and from school. Car insurance is expensive. My housing costs are \$500

each month. And, I feel like I am always needing to buy her more clothes. You can see how it all adds up.

Last year, I joined a grandparent support group, called 'Parents a Second Time', run by the Lackawanna County Area Agency on Aging. It meets regularly. And, if the support group did not exist, I would have nobody to talk to who would understand what it means to be caring for a kid in your golden years. The issue that we discuss most often is the financial strain of raising our grandchildren.

The National Family Caregiver Support Program helps because I can get reimbursed for some of the costs of raising Xziylan. It helps me afford clothes that fit her. She is always growing. Next year, she is going to kindergarten, so I will have to buy her a uniform. And, it helps me pay for a membership to the YMCA so that she can attend some of the activities for kids. Every kid deserves to have playtime. She loves going to the Y and I would not be able to afford that if I could not get reimbursed from the Area Agency on Aging.

I think it would be so good if more grandparents raising grandchildren could be served through the program. Every little bit helps. And, on behalf of the grandparents who can't get the help like I can, I'd like to thank Senator Casey and Senator Collins for trying to help make sure that more grandparents raising grandchildren can participate in the program.

My granddaughter is not the only person who got caught up in this opioid crisis. There are many more. And, even more parents who are unable to care for a child because of an illness or accident. Grandparents and even great-grandparents are the next line of support. I hope that the National Family Caregiver Support Program will be able to help all older caregivers. And, I hope that you continue to improve all of the programs funded by the Older Americans Act so that my Area Agency on Aging will continue to be around for me and my family.

Again, Chairman Collins and Ranking Member Casey, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee. I look forward to answering any questions.