

Written Testimony of Donna M. Butts, Executive Director, Generations United

Strengthening Support for Grandfamilies During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

**United States Senate Special Committee on Aging
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Generations United applauds Senator Casey and Senator Scott for your leadership in conducting this hearing and is pleased to provide testimony to the Senate Special Committee on Aging. Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the Committee, thank you for your commitment to families and the opportunity today to talk with you about grandparents and other relatives raising children, also known as grandfamilies or kinship families. My name is Donna Butts and I have the honor as serving as the executive director of Generations United.

About Generations United

Generations United's mission is to improve the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit for all. Launched in 1986, the organization was officially incorporated as a 501(c)(3) in 1996. As the only national nonprofit focused solely on intergenerational solutions, Generations United acts as a catalyst for stimulating collaboration among disparate organizations focused on aging, children, and youth and provides a forum to explore areas of common ground to advance innovative public policies and programs.

For almost twenty-five years, Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies has been a leading voice for issues affecting families headed by grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends. Through the Center, Generations United leads an advisory group of organizations, caregivers, and youth that sets the national agenda to advance public will in support of these families. The Center's work is guided by the GRAND Voices Network of grandfamily caregivers representing 46 states and 12 tribes. Center staff conduct federal advocacy, train grandfamilies to advocate for themselves, and raise awareness about the strengths and needs of the families through an annual State of Grandfamilies report, media outreach, weekly communications, and awareness-raising events. As of the fall of 2021, Generations United, along with five national partners and an array of subject matter experts, is also running the first-ever national technical assistance center on grandfamilies and kinship families, known as the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network (Network). Through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Community Living, the Network is providing a new way for government agencies and nonprofit organizations in states, tribes, and territories to collaborate and work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries – all to improve supports and services for grandfamilies and kinship families now and into the future. More information can be found at www.gu.org and www.grandfamilies.org.

Introduction

Families are the cornerstone of our civil society, our neighborhoods, towns, and cities. Regardless of political affiliation, families and their well-being unite us. When parents are unable to raise their children, grandparents and extended family step up and wrap children in the protective cocoon of family, providing roots and connection to culture, keeping siblings under one roof, and showering children with the one thing money cannot buy – love.

Currently more than 2.6 million children benefit from the sacrifices of grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends, and they thrive in this loving care. Caregivers may step into this role for a host of reasons, including the parent’s substance use, mental illness, military deployment, or death. This list grows whenever our country faces an assault, including most recently the COVID-19 pandemic. Whatever the reason, the caregivers often give up dreams of their own future – a carefree retirement, travel, dates with friends – and instead invest their hope for the future in the children they never planned to raise. They cannot and should not have to do this alone and without our support. We are grateful for the important actions the Special Committee on Aging has taken to support the families and thank you for understanding there is still more to accomplish on their behalf.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

The vast majority of children raised by relatives are cared for by their grandparents. Approximately 2.4 million grandparents are responsible for grandchildren according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Among those celebrating Father’s Day recently were the 270,000 children who live in a household headed only by a grandfather. These family heroes face tremendous challenges stepping into the role of parent. Approximately one in four have a disability, 48 percent are 60 or older, 17 percent live below the poverty line, and far more are close to it. While these grandparents may expect this caregiving role to be temporary, research shows nearly half (46 percent) have been responsible for the children for five or more years.

Just over half (56 percent) of these caregivers are in the workforce, but many find that the lack of affordable childcare and the demands of providing for children who have experienced trauma force them to quit their jobs and dedicate their full attention to the children. Many are retired and living on fixed incomes. Some must return to work after taking on the children in order to provide for the growing family. Countless grandfamilies report spending down their retirement savings to address the needs of the children. Others turn their retirement savings into college tuition payments.

While the majority are married (67 percent), many grandparents face this full-time caregiving role alone. Single grandmothers raising grandchildren are most likely to face financial hardship. Grandmothers living in their own homes, raising grandchildren with no parent present, have the highest rates of poverty among these caregivers.

Grandparents frequently step into their full-time caregiving role unexpectedly and do not have an automatic legal relationship to the children, unlike parents, who have inherent legal rights and plan or expect to raise children. Grandparent caregivers face challenges accessing necessities such as health care, affordable housing, school enrollment and educational

supports, and food and nutrition assistance. They often neglect their own health, mental health, and nutrition, prioritizing the children's needs. They may suffer from social isolation and depression because they do not want their peers to know about their situation or because their peers are no longer parenting. The stress and stigma that many feel while trying to navigate complex systems only exacerbate these challenges.

Grandparent Keith Lowhorne of Alabama, a member of Generations United's GRAND Voices Network, described it this way in a recent interview for the Today Show. He said, "We were thrown into a world we knew nothing about. Babies born with addiction." Mr. Lowhorne and his wife accepted three of their grandchildren into their home when authorities were threatening to put them in foster care because of their parent's substance use issues. They went on to spend countless hours and \$40,000 to gain legal custody and adopt the children. In describing interactions with the systems his family needed to have contact with, Mr. Lowhorne said, "I don't know of any grandparent who asked to be in this position so don't treat us like the enemy."

Children Raised in Grandfamilies

Relatives play a unique and vital role in providing safe, stable, and permanent homes for 2.6 million children. For every child in foster care with relatives, there are 19 being raised in grandfamilies outside of the foster care system. When they cannot be raised by their parents, children do best with relatives. Compared to children in foster care with non-relatives, children in foster care with relatives have more stable and safe childhoods, better behavior and mental health outcomes, experience fewer school changes, and are more likely to report "always feeling loved." However, because the vast majority of children in grandfamilies are outside the foster care system, these families are less likely to get access to services to help them meet the needs of the children in their care, even though most came to them after experiencing significant trauma.

Children in grandfamilies are diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, and they are found across the nation in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native children are more likely to live in grandfamilies than any other racial or ethnic groups. They are also more likely to be placed in foster care than to receive in-home services, even when they have the same challenges and characteristics as White children. According to the American Bar Association, many factors may explain the evidence of disproportionality and disparity surrounding certain racial groups and low-income families in the child welfare system, including child welfare professional bias and limited access to services. This comes on top of the impact of the historical trauma and residual effects of slavery, segregation, displacement, the forced removal of children from homes, and placement in boarding schools. Despite this history, Black and Indigenous families have continued to care for children, reducing the trauma of separation and keeping them connected to their roots through the strength of their long-standing cultural traditions of kin caring for kin.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on grandfamilies and is contributing to their numbers. There are an estimated 140,000 orphans in the U.S. due to COVID-19, many now being raised by kin. While we do not know exact numbers, one legal nonprofit in New Mexico is serving over 100 new grandfamilies formed due to parental covid deaths. This includes teenagers seeking to be declared adults so they can raise their siblings. And that is just one legal provider. Anecdotally, we know it has happened and is happening throughout the country.

Grandfamilies that formed prior to the pandemic have found that their challenges have been heightened. Due to the suddenness of the onset of caregiving responsibilities and the lack of an automatic legal relationship to the children, grandfamilies have long faced barriers to housing, health care, nutrition, children's education, and financial assistance, all of which were in even shorter supply during the public health emergency. The pandemic added job loss, critical technology barriers to in-home schooling and work, and new health and safety fears.

Furthermore, these families faced heightened anxiety about who would care for the children if they got sick and could no longer do so. Unlike parents, most grandfamily caregivers cannot simply name a guardian for the children in their will. A nationwide survey of grandfamilies taken during the pandemic showed 30 percent had no caregiving plan for the children if the caregivers were to die or become too sick to care for them. These caregivers are often older and are more likely to be disabled than the caregivers in parent-headed families. They are also disproportionately Black and Indigenous. All these factors caused them to be at greater risk for negative outcomes if they contracted the virus.

The parents' absence and the circumstances that caused these children to go live with kin caused trauma. While the presence of loving family buffers that trauma, many of the members of these families – both the caregivers and the children – experienced compounded trauma during the isolation and challenges of the pandemic. The families are facing heightened struggles with mental health issues, stress, isolation, and, from what we are seeing anecdotally, an increase in death by suicide.

Supporting Grandfamilies and Kinship Families

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to shine a light on the need for improved supports and services for grandfamilies, which Generations United and our partners have highlighted for decades. For those who are stepping into the role of parent suddenly, programs like quality kinship navigators can play a critical part in helping families understand and find their way through complex and fragmented systems and secure available benefits.

Federal, state, local, and tribal governments and community-based organizations must work together, breaking down silos and collaborating seamlessly to support the families in order to meet the needs of children and caregivers. States, tribes, and localities should learn from each other and adopt proven practices and innovations. Congress must make greater investments in supports and services that are working, like support groups, peer navigators, respite care, quality mental health care, and income supports. Often, the most trusted and effective helpers

are fellow caregivers who have been through it themselves and now operate programs and supports to help others like them. All programs, supports, and services must be fully informed by and engage the voices and wisdom of the caregivers, like Mr. Lowhorne, and the young people in grandfamilies who they are designed to serve.

Thanks to the leadership of this committee, two bold, new federal initiatives are beginning to make a difference in the lives of older caregivers and the children in their care. For more than two years, the federal Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren has worked across government and private systems, engaging and listening to the voices of the caregivers themselves, to draft a comprehensive initial report to Congress outlining recommendations that could make a significant difference in the lives of grandfamilies. The work of the Council has been critical, and it is not done. To ensure the report and recommendations do not sit on a shelf, Congress needs to extend the life of the Council to assist with implementation and oversight.

Among the recommendations of the Council was the imperative to establish a national technical assistance center on grandfamilies and kinship care. As a part of the American Rescue Plan Act, funding was made available to create and run such a center over the next five years. Generations United successfully competed for the cooperative agreement, which is administered by the Administration for Community Living, launching and building what is now called the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center. Given the patchwork of systems, services, and supports for the families across the country, the role of the technical assistance center is essential. It will facilitate connections between various government agencies, integrate nonprofit providers, elevate exemplary programs and practices for replication, offer macro and micro technical assistance, and become the hub that is needed to coordinate and strengthen support for the families. Importantly, the work of the technical assistance center is informed by members of grandfamilies as well as key partners representing the diversity of the families, including the National Indian Child Welfare Association and the National Caucus and Center on Black Aging.

On behalf of the families, our partners, and others who care deeply about grandfamilies and kinship families, Generations United thanks Congress for supporting the new technical assistance center and the Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. These two initiatives play critical roles in raising awareness about the families and supporting coordination across agencies to better serve the caregivers and the children in their care.

Recommendations:

While progress has been made, there is much to be done to better serve, support, and meet the diverse needs of grandfamilies and kinship families. Generations United makes the following recommendations:

Implement the Recommendations of the Federal Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: The Council, which was formed as a result of the actions of this committee, released an initial report to Congress in November 2021, with 22 recommendations for how to better support grandparents and other relatives raising children. The

recommendations focus on outreach and awareness, supports and services, authentic caregiver engagement, financial and workplace security, research, data, and evidence-based practices. Congress and the Administration should also look to the more specific and detailed recommendations of the National Family Caregiving Strategy, which are being jointly developed by the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Council and the RAISE Family Caregiving Council and are expected to be released later this year.

Authentically Engage Members of Grandfamilies, Including Kin Caregivers and the

Children/Youth They Raise: Ensure legislation continues to promote the engagement of the voices, experience, and skills of caregivers and young people who are living in or have lived in grandfamilies, as they are critical to ensuring that policy and practice are realistic and effective in supporting the families. Invest in community-based programs led and staffed by caregivers and individuals who have lived in grandfamilies.

Promote Services to Grandfamilies through the Network of Organizations Serving Older

Americans: Urge states and territories to use funding available through the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) to serve grandfamilies. NFCSP funds may be used to provide supportive services to caregivers and children in grandfamilies regardless of whether they are involved with the child welfare system or have legal custody of the child. In 2020, USAging polled their members and found only 52 percent were providing services specifically for grandfamilies/grandparents raising grandchildren. Increased funding for the National Family Caregiver Support Program and Title VI Native American Aging Programs are critical to ensure adequate resources are available to meet the full range of family caregiving needs facing communities. Policy should also support national experts and other resources to help educate the aging network about grandfamilies and the most effective services to support them. These services should be documented and promoted so they can be replicated. This should include collaboration between aging services and other key agencies serving grandfamilies, such as child welfare and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Support the Development and Sustained Use of Quality Kinship Navigator Programs:

Provide multi-year federal funding to help states, territories, and tribes develop, operate, and evaluate kinship navigator programs that meet evidence-based standards; address unnecessary barriers to kinship navigator programs meeting Family First Prevention Services Act evidence-based standards; and provide ongoing technical assistance to kinship navigator programs. These programs should support grandfamilies outside the child welfare system by partnering with aging services, income support programs, housing organizations, and community-based supports and report on use and outcomes of the funds. Child welfare agencies should be encouraged to contract with community-based organizations that are trusted by grandfamilies to deliver kinship navigation services.

Ensure Adequate Financial Support for Grandfamilies to Meet Basic Needs:

- Improve access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for grandfamilies by encouraging states, tribes, and localities to increase the monthly child-only grant

amount to mirror foster care maintenance payments in each jurisdiction, and to provide the same amount of TANF child-only support for any eligible child in the home. Direct HHS to issue guidance, similar to what existed under Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), that facilitates the use of the good cause exemption to the requirement to assign child support to the government, including when it raises fear that parents will be violent toward the caregivers or children. For TANF family grants that include the caregivers, encourage all states, tribes, and territories to make clear exemptions to work requirements and time limits, as many jurisdictions already do.

- Improve access to family foster care maintenance payments for children in child welfare custody with relatives by directing HHS to clarify that federal law requires that all children placed in a relative's home by a child welfare agency should be supported in the same way as those who are in non-kin foster families.
- Improve the adequacy of and access to Social Security to better meet the needs of grandfamilies by reinstating the student benefit and by ensuring children being raised by other relatives – such as aunts or uncles – in addition to grandparents would be eligible for Social Security based on their caregivers' work records.
- Expand the adoption tax credit to allow adults who have taken guardianship of children through the court system to also claim the credit and make it refundable again to support families who do not make enough income to owe taxes.

"I was retired from my job with the federal government by that time, and I depleted my 401(k) to adopt and continue caring for my grandchildren. That was supposed to fund our retirement, but the grandchildren became our priority." — Sarah Smalls, Grandparent Caregiver, Virginia

Ensure Access to Health Care for Both Children and Caregivers: Access to quality health care and services is critical to meeting the physical and mental health needs of children and caregivers in grandfamilies. Federal support for Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and Indian Health Service programs must be preserved, including Early and Periodic Testing and Diagnostic Treatment (EPSDT) benefits, to ensure that the special health needs of children are diagnosed and treated in a timely way. States and territories should enhance Medicaid outreach efforts to grandfamilies. Less than half of eligible children in kinship care receive Medicaid. Efforts should also include tribal governments to improve outreach to American Indian and Alaska Native grandfamilies and leverage Medicaid service agreements that many tribes have with the states. Private health care insurers should allow grandparents and other relatives raising children to include those children on their health care plans without requiring adoption, which is not always feasible or appropriate.

Promote Trauma-Informed Mental Health Services and Support Groups:

- Invest and encourage greater availability and access to quality, trauma-informed mental health providers that are familiar with the unique dynamics of grandfamilies. Elevate ways federal funds can support the development and operation of support groups and counseling for grandfamilies, such as through the National Family Caregiver Support Program.

- Encourage states, tribes, and territories to offer a continuum of tailored mental health, substance use, and in-home services and supports for children, parents, and caregivers in grandfamilies, available through the Family First Prevention Services Act.

Improve Access to Food and Nutrition Programs for Grandfamilies:

- Create a “child-only” SNAP benefit that does not consider caregiver income in making eligibility determinations and, instead, is based on the income of the child only, like the TANF child-only grant.
- Ensure automatic access to free and reduced school meals (breakfast and lunch) for all children including those living in grandfamilies.
- Increase outreach and awareness about the availability of the WIC program for grandfamilies.

Improved Access to Educational Supports for Children: Ensure the U.S. Department of Education uses inclusive language in communications with families, directing outreach to caregivers and families, not just parents. Ensure grandfamily caregivers are invited to Individual Educational Plan meetings for children and fully involved in ongoing planning.

Ensure Equity for Grandfamilies in Housing Programs:

- Expand the pool of affordable housing and urge the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of the Interior, and U.S. Treasury Department to provide clear written guidance stating that their housing programs cannot block assistance from lawfully eligible households that include grandfamily caregivers without legal custody of the children they are raising.
- Enact federal legislation to facilitate the expansion of specially designed grandfamily housing and provide direct assistance to grandfamilies for their housing stabilization, including providing dedicated support for the coordination of onsite supportive services. This would leverage the impact of recent appropriations for a competitive grants program to build such housing.

Support Equitable Legal Services and Supports for all Grandfamilies:

- Direct the Legal Services Corporation to elevate best practices and engage in innovative practices to support grandfamily caregivers with legal matters such as dealing with custody, guardianship, and adoption, filing papers, securing transportation to court, or preparing wills or other documents to outline their wishes for the children. Promote pro-bono partnerships with law firms to help grandfamilies.
- Allow funding through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to be used to reimburse attorneys for representation of kinship caregivers, as is now allowed for attorneys providing services to children and parents.

“We’ve had the question posed like, ‘what happens if I end up in the hospital and I can’t care for my child? What happens if I don’t survive?’ You’d like to think that we’d all have that planned out carefully, but because there’s always the expectation that the kids will go home at some point, I

think we procrastinate on making that final plan. It's got to be in the forefront for millions.” — Ms. Bette Hoxie, grandparent caregiver, Maine

Direct Agencies and Their Grantees to Apply a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Lens to Policy, Practice, Messaging, and Materials: This involves assessing content and collateral materials (including print, electronic, social media, etc.) associated with policies and programs to determine if their messages will resonate with targeted grandfamilies. Adapt policies and practices as needed to effectively and equitably serve the ethnically, socioeconomically, and culturally diverse grandfamilies population.

Fund and Promote Public Awareness about Grandfamilies: Support a campaign to educate the public about the important role grandparents and other relatives play in raising children, mitigating trauma, and keeping children out of foster care and with family. Include information to help grandfamilies become aware of and connect to available supports, benefits, and services in their communities.

Enhance Data Collection on all Grandfamilies to Better Address Inequities Across Systems:

- Direct the U.S. Census Bureau and HHS to collect and analyze additional data about grandfamilies who are not involved with the foster care/child welfare system, as well as about children in foster care with kin. This includes tracking the number of children who have come to the attention of the foster care/child welfare system but are diverted from that system; disaggregated racial and ethnic data, including tribal affiliation; and demographic information on other kin and the children they raise (currently such data is reported for grandparents/grandchildren only).
- Encourage states and territories to work with tribes to better understand data trends among American Indian and Alaska Native grandfamilies.

Facilitate Collaboration Between Grandfamilies Support Organizations and Programs: Enact a competitive grant program through the Administration for Community Living that incentivizes and supports states, tribes, local agencies or nonprofits to establish cross-sector partnerships that promote interagency collaborations and foster the integration of activities for grandfamilies and kinship families. This would build on recommendations for interagency collaboration from the federal Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Advisory Council and leverage the work of the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center.

Conclusion

“People see me now and think I’m a new person. I wake up with purpose and it’s a blessing.” — Keith Lowhorne, Alabama

Most grandparent caregivers, including Mr. Lowhorne, say they never saw themselves raising another generation of children. Yet they step up and, despite complicated systems, hurdles, and hardships, they provide the loving homes in which children thrive. But they cannot and should not have to do this alone. Collectively, they save our country more than \$4 billion a year by keeping children connected to their roots and out of foster care. They are doing their very

best and they deserve our best. We should not expect them to fit into systems and services designed for other families, but, instead, create connecting pathways that respect their unique and complex circumstances.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of Generations United and the grandfamilies and kinship families we believe in and support.

Resources for Further Information and Recommendations:

[Grandfamilies and Kinship Families: Strengths and Challenges Fact Sheet](#)

[Generations United's Annual State of Grandfamilies Reports](#)

[Generations United's Toolkits for Servicing Latino, African American, American Indian and Alaska Native Grandfamilies- Helping Children Thrive Through Connection to Family and Culture](#)

[Grand Facts State Fact Sheets](#)

[Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center](#)