

**Testimony to the Senate Special Committee on Aging Hearing
June 23, 2022**

Importance of Peer Support – We shouldn't have to do this alone
A Statement by Gail Engel
Founder/Executive Director Grand Family Coalition

Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, thank you for allowing me to share my story and perspective. It is an honor to be here.

My name is Gail Engel, my husband and I have raised our grandson since he was less than 1-year-old. We later adopted him, now 15, and co-parenting our 14-year-old granddaughter. Our daughter experienced trauma as a child by a father who had suffered from his own mental health issues. I didn't place trauma on my child, we experienced it together. Yet the guilt, shame and stigma kept me from seeking help.

¹“Negative experiences in childhood and the teenage years may put children at risk for chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance use in adulthood.” Center for Disease Control

Our daughter suffers from physical and mental health problems that she has not been able to overcome. As a single mother of two children, one of whom had challenging behaviors, and was living in poverty. Her inability to adequately care for the children and fear of child welfare involvement, we stepped in.

Raising a child, a second time around has many challenges; physically, socially, emotionally, and financially. At the age of 52, I was already caring for my aging mother. We felt alone and lost contact with friends. The physical demands, such as teaching a child how to ride a bike with two knee replacements was impossible. Many times, we have asked ourselves if we could do this. The cost of raising a child has not allowed us to retire. The funds put aside for retirement may not sustain us past age 82, a mere 15 years away. With a diagnosis of Autism, IDD and Cognitive Function Disorder, after adopting him we were able to collect Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) to help financially.

*“According to the US Department of Agriculture, in 2015, a family will spend approximately \$12,980 annually per child in a middle-income (\$59,200-\$107,400)
<https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2017/01/13/cost-raising-child>”*

Children with trauma and developmental delays are often unable to access the part of the brain needed to learn and often with a fight or flight response to any disciplinary action. Schools are most often ill prepared with specialized training to support these youth. My grandson has suffered unnecessarily due to continuous punitive punishment and being labeled as a “behavior” child. Having to pay out of pocket to get a medical diagnosis, we were finally able to advocate for an IEP Individualized Educational Plan. Even with that, the inadequately trained staff, services and supports, his emotional wellbeing and education have suffered dramatically.

*“Children who have been abused do not have “behavior problems’ that need to be addressed. They have extreme survival skills that need to be understood”.
- Paula Goodwin @myintegrativetherapist*

“Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can have a tremendous impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity. CDC works to understand ACEs and prevent them. Preventing ACEs could potentially reduce many health conditions. For example, by preventing ACEs, up to 1.9 million heart disease cases and 21 million depression cases could have been potentially avoided. Center for Disease Control and Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

Having to educate myself, and seek out resources, that were mostly non-existent, I discovered that in my own small community there were more than 3000 grandparents raising grandchildren. I found many struggling just as we were and now serve over 140 families.

Building upon my own experience, I have built a community of grandparents and other kin rising kin, by creating a place where grandfamilies and services connect. Grand Family Coalition was created out of my own need to survive. www.grandfamilycoalition.org

It should not be ignored that aging has its own challenges, and grandfamilies are taking on an additional role. Often taking in grandchildren with little warning and often having to return to the work force to maintain stability for the long haul of raising a child to adulthood. Often winding up with significant legal expenses to retain the legal responsibility of the children. They most often isolate to avoid judgment, guilt, and shame, and experience a secondary trauma. They must navigate a complex system to find resources, that are often lacking and inadequate. Grandfamilies are stepping up, while the world is unaware of their complexities or even their existence.

Grand Family Coalition relies on grants, donation, and volunteer staff to support our mission. We also know the need for our services is in every community. Other small non-profits such as Grand Family Coalition have the experience and knowledge to support grandfamilies. However due to limited funding, they struggle to take root. We need funding to expand our work and reach, and to be compensated for our efforts.

My ask would be to encourage collaboration among the many systems that are responsible for assisting children and families so that more dollars can be put in the hands of the small non-profits that do the beneficial work for grand and kinship families.

Gail Engel, Grandparent Caregiver
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