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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Wednesday, September 28, 2022 | 10 a.m.

Representative Eddie Day Pashinski

10:00 a.m.

Natalie Hoprich, grandmother raising two grandchildren

Karen Barnes, Founder/President
Grands Stepping Up

10:45 a.m.

Jon Rubin, Deputy Secretary, Office of Children, Youth, and Families
Pennsylvania Department of Human Services

Steven Horner, Deputy Secretary
Pennsylvania Department of Aging

11:30 a.m.

Angela Liddle,
Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance

Joan Gower, Board Member
Advocacy Fund 4 Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Q & A with Legislators

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Natalie Hoprich

September 28, 2022

Good morning,

My name is Natalie Hoprich, my husband and I are grandparents raising grandchildren. We are the average American family.

We raised four children, 2 with college degrees and beyond, one that served in Iraq and one heroin addict. Our story started five and a half years ago.

My husband and I were preparing to retire, my husband is now 69 and I am 63. We bought new cars, put a new roof on our home, paid 2 mortgage payments every month and bought a camper to see the country. Both of us working full time allowed us to do all of this with the plan of paying everything off in 2-3 years so my husband could retire. We were living our best life, traveling, camping, best of all were grandparents to 6 beautiful children. We lived for family dinners, holidays and vacations with our growing family. Then one day while I was at work I received a call from Children and Youth, "come pick up your grandsons within the hour or we will take them to a foster family". I had no idea what was happening. I raced to get my precious boys. This had to be a mistake! Someone called Children and Youth to check on my grandsons and my daughter failed a drug test. We were given temporary custody and were told that this would only last 3-4 weeks. My daughter just needed to pass some drug tests, of course she would because this was a mistake. We were given the option of being our grandson's foster parents and getting paid for it or just having custody. We couldn't be foster parents to our own grandsons! They are our family and besides this was all going to go away soon. As long as our daughter passed drug tests everything would go back to normal. She did not pass the drug tests. Then we tried several rehabs and failed.

Four months later we were given permanent custody, both parents were deep into heroin addiction. So, now we have our boys but no information from anyone where to turn for help. It was a huge responsibility dropped in our lap with no instructions. During this time the dream of retirement was put on hold. We paid \$8,000 a year for daycare plus clothing, food, school supplies and everything else that goes along with raising two little boys. Paying off cars and extra mortgage payments were a thing of the past. The little savings we had was gone. I looked for help paying for daycare, we made too much money. I called the Bureau of Aging but we made too much. Even though that money was already tied up in bills to prepare us for retirement.

Because my husband and I work in jobs that use computers we are computer savvy but could not find help for people in our situation. Eventually, we found SWAN, they helped us get horseback riding therapy for the boys, gave us the opportunity to go on outings as a family, when Covid-19 hit they sent us books and school supplies. They introduced us to the Wilkes Barre group for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. We finally had a group of people in our situation, with our problems and with information on where to get help, and most importantly they helped us emotionally. If only this information was given

to us right from the start our lives would have been so much easier! I know now over five years later that there are so many places willing to help grandparents but, at the time we were alone, not only dealing with being parents again to 4- and 6-year-old little boys but needing help finding daycare, so we could continue to work, finding pediatricians and yes financially. If this information was given to us from day one the stress and toll of being new parents and wrapping our heads around the fact that our beautiful, smart, funny daughter is now a heroin addict, would have been a little easier to handle.

After overcoming many hurdles, life with the boys had finally become our normal. The boys were in a new school, involved with Cub Scouts and sports a normal little boy life. We were a family. Then we started to hear stories about parents going to court and getting visitation or worse, custody of the same children that were given to their grandparents to protect. At this point we knew we had to save these boys, we had to adopt them so there would be no chance that either parent, including our own daughter could take our boys to who knows where and do who knows what with them. The grandparents group helped us find a lawyer for the adoption. More importantly they connected us with The Advocacy Fund for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. They helped us pay to adopt our boys! It took such a weight off our shoulders! We didn't have to worry about our little family being broken up, we didn't have to worry that our boys would not grow up in a stable environment. The Advocacy Fund for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren saved our family! We will forever be grateful, it would have taken us months to save the money to pay for the lawyer that gave us peace of mind.

My reason for speaking to you today is to ask for help with getting information out to grandparents and our communities. From the minute we get our grandchildren we should have resources to go to for help. Many people my age and older don't have computers or even know how to use them, phone numbers, addresses and websites should be available. The public should be told that there are families with these problems, no matter what the reason, we need support from our communities. We are the new face of 'family' and 'parents'. It shouldn't take almost two years to get support for people that have worked and paid taxes for 30, 40, 50 years or more.



**TOGETHER
We Can Just
Say YES!**

Our Mission Statement

Grands Stepping Up is a non-profit corporation dedicated to assisting grandparents/kinship guardians who are raising their grandchildren, primarily due to many issues such as the opiate epidemic, incarceration, mental health issues, death or illness of the parents that cause the parents to have the inability to fitness in their traditional parental roles; to assist by the creation of many holistic programs (to include Denis' Pantry & Free Store, as the only program that will also be offered to all community residents) that will support the new grand family financially, psychologically, legally and socially to support the success of the new family unit; to educate governing county agencies and entities, as well as primary care physicians, school districts, etc. regarding the complexity of the Grand/ Kinship families' needs.

Grand/Kinship families have unique needs due to the complicated family dynamic. Grands Stepping Up came to be to serve/help the grand/kinship families holistically, from having like-minded community members to legal/therapy clinic services and more. Are you a grand/kinship family? Would you or your business like to sponsor or donate? Are you interested in volunteering? Contact us or visit our website today!

Grands Stepping Up

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DENIS' PANTRY & CLOTHING CLOSET



with Grands Stepping Up
AT LLANERCH HILLS CHAPEL



- 1216 Myrtlewood Ave, Havertown, Pa 19083
- Food Pantry serving all of Delaware County
- Baby Pantry: formula, diapers, wipes, & other essentials
- Clothing Closet: Free new/gently used clothing & shoes
- Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas Holiday Programs open to ALL pantry clients



Ways To Get Involved

- Volunteer your time
- DONATE: Goods/ Services/Money
- Every bit counts! #GSUJustSayYes
- Share/Like/Tweet: @GrandsSteppingUp @GSU_DenisPantry
- Send a note/Call local government to get support for "grand families"

Signature Programs/Services Offered

- Trauma-Based Therapeutic Services
- Legal Clinic
- Holidays Program: Birthday Club, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Grandparent's Day
- Financial Services: Sports/Activity Youth Fund, Housing & Utilities Fund
- Volunteer Program
- "Where Are They Now?" Campaign
- Denis' Pantry *ONLY Service open to all Delco residents

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Testimony on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Jon Rubin, Deputy Secretary

Office of Children, Youth and Families

Pennsylvania House Policy Hearing

September 28, 2022



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Good morning. I am Jon Rubin and I serve as Deputy Secretary for the Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) in the Department of Human Services (DHS). I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding kinship care.

Pennsylvania has a long history of providing support to kin who provide safe and stable homes to children that may otherwise be placed in foster family homes with persons they do not know. Research has demonstrated that there are many benefits of placing children in need of foster care with relatives or other kinship caregivers. For instance, the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, a longitudinal survey of children and families who have been the subjects of investigation by Child Protective Services sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families, has found that, overall, children in kinship care experience greater placement stability and safety than children in non-kinship foster care. Children in kinship care are more likely to stay with their kin caregivers, and are thus subject to fewer child welfare system placements.

Data collected from Pennsylvania's 67 county children and youth agencies shows that a total of 12,930 children were formally in placement in out-of-home care on March 31, 2022. Of the 12,930 children placed in out-of-home care, 10,732 children, or 83%, were placed in a foster family home. Of those, 5,444, over half, were in a relative foster family home and 5,288 were in a non-relative foster family home. OCYF remains committed to increasing our efforts to ensure that children are placed in family-like settings and to increasing our use of kinship care.

Support of kin began nearly three decades ago beginning with the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997. ASFA addressed permanency outcomes and safety for children and families in the child welfare system. ASFA focuses on preserving

families while assuring child, safety, permanency, and well-being. ASFA required county children and youth agencies make reasonable efforts to finalize permanency plans as soon as a child enters care and to be diligent in identifying a permanent family for the child.

Pennsylvania's Juvenile Act, amended to comply with ASFA, established a hierarchy of permanency goals for children and youth in the custody of county children and youth agencies. The emphasis on this was to make sure children and youth did not languish in the system and were discharged to a positive adult relationship as well as emphasizing that foster care is temporary. Children and youth need permanent, safe, and stable families in order to grow and thrive.

When a child enters the foster care system, a court ordered goal is established with the focus on the provision of services to children to promote their safe return to their families. When reunification is not possible, we first look to ensure legal permanency for a child through adoption, placement with a permanent guardian, or placement with a fit and willing relative. The importance that children are placed with relatives is underscored through the permanency goal of placement with a fit and willing relative. Through this hierarchy of permanency goals, the court must rule out a goal before the next is considered. If a child cannot return to parent, then adoption is the next permanent legal option.

To support the ongoing needs of children with special needs who were adopted from foster care, Pennsylvania established an adoption assistance program. Children adopted from the foster care system are most often adopted by their foster/kinship parents with whom they have a long-standing relationship. In federal fiscal year 2021, 68.04% of children adopted from the Pennsylvania foster care system were adopted by their foster/kinship family. This program

continues to meet the needs of children adopted from foster care in Pennsylvania through the provision of a subsidy and Medical Assistance coverage.

Recognizing that in certain situations, the court determines that adoption is not in the child's best interest, we next look to achieve permanency for a child through placement with a fit and willing relative or permanent legal custodian. As a result, in 2001 DHS established the Subsidized Permanent Legal Custodianship Program. This program ensures that families who were willing and able to become a permanent resource for a child in the foster care system were provided the needed financial support to enable them to provide the necessary care to the child. Pennsylvania recognized the important role that extended family and kin play in ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children they are related to or with whom they have a relationship and started this program through state and county funds. When this program began in Pennsylvania, federal funds were not available.

Similar practices supporting the role of extend family and kin began to emerge across the nation with positive results. Research showed that children who were placed with relatives often stayed within their communities, they did not move from home to home and they were able to remain in their same schools. We all recognize the positive impacts that being connected to your community and having stability in where we live and where we go to school have on our long-term success. As a result of the recognized improved outcomes for children placed with kin, the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed in 2008. This legislation allowed states to participate in the Guardianship Assistance Program, referred to as subsidized permanent legal custodianship (SPLC) in Pennsylvania, which provides a subsidy payment for the care of children by custodians or relatives who have assumed legal guardianship of eligible children for whom they previously cared as foster parents. Fostering connections

further allowed states to use federal funds to support adoption assistance programs for children up to age 21, if the youth meets certain criteria, including being age 16 or older at the time of adoption. Prior to Fostering Connections, adoption assistance programs ended at age 18. This legislation focused on ensuring that older youth were supported through permanency and not exiting the foster care system unprepared for the transition to adulthood.

Through data analysis, we recognized Pennsylvania had a large number of children in out-of-home care age 13 and older who were staying in foster care far too long without having permanent homes. To support improved outcomes for our youth and to ensure relatives and kin were supported in providing permanent homes for children, Pennsylvania went a step further than Fostering Connections required and made state funds available to support adoption assistance subsidies through age 21 for children adopted between the ages of 13 and 15. Pennsylvania went beyond the federal program requirements to ensure greater success for youth served in Pennsylvania's foster care system and the relatives and kin who are willing and able to care for them.

In 2003, the Kinship Care Program was originally established in Pennsylvania to ensure that relatives, godparents, and persons who have a relationship with a child are supported when they become approved foster parents. Over the years, the Kinship Care program was amended to underscore the importance of family members becoming permanent long-standing resources for children. This includes the requirement to notify grandparents and adult relatives to the fifth degree when a child enters out-of-home care and to ensure that efforts are made through the time a child and family is active with the child welfare system to locate family on a regular and ongoing basis to support the child and family indefinitely. In 2012, the Pennsylvania General Assembly enacted legislation that codified the Subsidized Permanent Legal Custodianship

Program in the Human Services Code. Additionally, the Adoption Opportunities Act and the Family Finding and Kinship Care Act were amended to revise the definition of child and extend subsidies for youth up to age 21 when certain criteria are met.

The emphasis Pennsylvania has placed on kinship families as a resource for children in out-of-home care has remained steadfast. County children and youth agencies are reliant on kin to fill this need for children of all ages and Pennsylvania continues to see the use of kinship increasing across the commonwealth.

However, we are aware and do recognize the national and statewide data and trends related to children being raised by relatives and kin who are not involved with the child welfare system, often referred to as informal kinship care. According to the U.S. Census, approximately 2.6 million children are being raised in a kinship care family without a parent present. As of September 30, 2020, nationally, there were 407,493 children in foster care. Of those 137,356 or 33.7% lived in a relative foster family home. As stated earlier, as of March 31, 2022, 12,930 children are in foster care in Pennsylvania. Of those, 5,444, or 42.1%, which is higher than the national average, are residing in formal kinship homes, meaning that the children are in the custody of the county children and youth agency and placed into the home of a relative or kin provider. However, the number of children who are being raised by relatives or kin without the support of the child welfare system is even higher. In their 2021 State of Grandfamilies Report, Generations United estimated that for every one child in foster care with relatives, there are 18 children being raised by grandparents or others relatives outside of the foster care system. Therefore, using Generations United data and Pennsylvania foster care data, it can be estimated that there are 97,992 children in Pennsylvania who are being raised by relatives or kin, regardless of involvement in the child welfare system.

While many families opt to provide care for relative children without the involvement of the child welfare system, such families often have difficulty locating and accessing the services and supports needed to adequately provide for the child(ren) in their care. To ensure kinship families are supported and have the necessary resources to help care for the children they are raising, the department developed a Kinship Navigator Program, known as KinConnector.

The development of Kinship Navigator Program was supported through the passage of the federal Family First Prevention and Services Act of 2018 which provided states one-time federal Title IVB funding to start a Kinship Navigator Program and a pathway to sustainable federal Title IV-E funding once the program meets certain requirements. In addition to Family First, the passage of Act 89 of 2018, known as the Kinship Caregiver Navigator Program Act, required Pennsylvania to establish a Kinship Navigator program to be a resource for grandparents and other relative or non-relative caregivers who are raising children in the state of Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania's KinConnector program began in May 2019 and is administered through a grant with the Bair Foundation. KinConnector is an information, referral and education program for kinship caregivers that helps identify multiple sources of assistance, including local, state and federal resources. The KinConnector program works in all 67 counties of the commonwealth by providing education, support, and resources to grandparents and other relatives who are raising children. The program is comprised of several key resources which include:

- A Kinship Support Center that consists of:
 - A toll-free helpline, 1-866-KIN-2111, that serves as an information and referral system for kinship caregivers, support groups facilitators and kinship service providers to connect with:

- Each other;
 - Eligibility and enrollment information for federal, state and local benefits;
 - Relevant training to assist kinship caregivers in caring for the children in their home and in obtaining benefits and services; and
 - Referrals to obtain legal services.
- A website, www.kinconnector.org, that provides information for kinship caregivers such as:
 - How to access benefits and services;
 - Printable materials that provide information to kinship caregivers;
 - A map that shows state and local resources and services available in each county; and
 - An online discussion group to allow kinship families to communicate with each other.
- An outreach campaign designed to let the public know about the program through the website, social media, radio, and distribution of informational materials.
- Coordination with other state and local agencies that promote service coordination or provide information and referrals services, including 211. A direct link to the 211 information system can be accessed through the website;
- Virtual trainings for kinship families and professionals occur regularly along with a blog and podcast series that can be accessed on the website; and,
- A Kinship Navigator Program Advisory Committee with membership that consists of kinship caregivers, relevant community-based or faith-based organizations, and relevant government agencies, including the Department of Aging and Office of Income

Maintenance. The committee participates in planning and continued development of the program and makes recommendations to the department.

Since the PA KinConnector support center began in July 2019, more than 3,100 calls have been received and the website has been visited more than 280,000 times since it went live in September 2020. Since the KinConnector program began in May 2019, more than 2,400 families have been served. While many served are informal kinship families, those not involved with child welfare system, the vast majority of callers decline to provide information on whether they are a formal or informal kinship family. The majority of callers are between the age of 45-54 and the three main topic areas for which kinship caregivers request information or resources are financial assistance, general questions about kinship care, and legal services assistance.

As the KinConnector program continues to serve kinship caregivers across the commonwealth, DHS/OCYF, remains committed to building the programs infrastructure for sustainability and growth.

Thank you for your continued support of children and families who are achieving permanency through lasting connections with relatives and kin and for the opportunity to provide information about Pennsylvania's initiatives that support kinship care.



Steven B. Horner, Deputy Secretary
Pennsylvania Department of Aging

House Democratic Policy Hearing
Caregiver Support Program
September 28, 2022

Good morning, Chairman Bizzarro and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. On behalf of the Pennsylvania Department of Aging (Department), I would like to thank Representative Pashinski for his engagement on the issue of grandparents raising grandchildren and this Committee for the opportunity to provide information on the Department's Caregiver Support Program (CSP). As the State Unit on Aging, the Department is formally charged by the federal Older Americans Act (OAA) and the Pennsylvania General Assembly with representing and advocating for the interests of older Pennsylvanians throughout the Commonwealth. The Department recognizes the significant role grandparents and other older relative caregivers play in providing care to their loved ones. According to *Grandfamilies.org*, there were 235,515 grandparents responsible for their grandchildren, 68,000 children being raised by kin with no parent present, and 6,242 children in foster care being raised by kin in Pennsylvania, as of April 2021. While older relative caregivers often find the care they provide to be a meaningful and rewarding experience, the work is often unpaid and the demands of being a primary caregiver can be stressful physically, emotionally, and financially.

Caregivers often face a myriad of challenges as they seek to provide care and support to their care receivers, such as access to information about available benefits and resources, lack of adequate education and training, and financial assistance to help defray the costs of caregiving-related expenses. The Department's Caregiver Support Program provides resources and assistance to individuals who assume primary responsibility for the provision of care of their loved ones, which helps alleviate the stresses associated with caregiving and supports the caregiving relationship by focusing on the caregiver's well-being.

Most recently, Act 20 of 2021, signed into law by Governor Wolf on June 11, 2021, further recognized the needs of grandparents and other older relative caregivers as they provide care to their loved ones. This Act strengthened the CSP by updating state statutory requirements to provide greater flexibility for the administration of the program and to bring it into alignment with the most recent reauthorization of the OAA. Act 20 of 2021 has allowed the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) to provide vital support and services to additional grandparents and other older relative caregivers. Most notably, AAAs were given the flexibility to use both state and federal funding to serve grandparents and older relative caregivers.

While it is too early to determine the full impact of its passage, Act 20 of 2021 has allowed the AAA network to enroll additional caregivers into the program, increase the allowable care plan cost cap for new and existing caregivers to the maximum of \$600, and administer the program more efficiently at the local level. The Department continues to monitor the AAA's administration of the CSP to assess the ongoing impact of policy changes, identify pertinent trends and highlight best/promising practices. In addition, the Department remains committed to exploring ways to further support and empower caregivers as they navigate the critical responsibility of caring for their loved ones.

Program Overview

The Department's Caregiver Support Program provides assistance and support to primary caregivers in their caregiving role to encourage a healthy, ongoing relationship with their care receivers. The program, administered by a network of 52 AAAs, aims to alleviate the stresses associated with caregiving by focusing on the well-being of the caregiver, providing access to

respite care, addressing the need for formal and informal supports, and providing financial reimbursement of out-of-pocket costs associated with caregiving-related services and supplies.

The program served over 4,000 caregivers in FY 2021-2022. Of these, 790 caregivers were grandparents and other older relatives. To be eligible for the program, all caregivers and their care receivers must be residents of Pennsylvania and must meet one of the following eligibility categories:

- 1) An individual age 18 and older who is the primary caregiver for an individual age 60 or older with functional deficits, or an individual of any age who has a diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease or a related disorder;
- 2) An individual age 55 or older who is the primary caregiver for an individual age 18-59 who has a non-dementia related disability, and is related by blood, marriage, or adoption. In this category, the caregiver can be the biological parent of the child;
- 3) And the category for the caregivers being highlighted today - An individual age 55 and older who is the primary caregiver for a dependent child under the age of 18, and related by blood, marriage, or adoption. In this category, the caregiver cannot be the biological parent of the child.

Caregivers who are enrolled in the CSP are assigned a Care Manager from their local AAA. The Care Manager conducts a comprehensive assessment to determine the needs of the caregiver, provides support, and works to develop a person-centered plan of services. Services available in the CSP include:

1. **Care Management** – Care management is an administrative function that identifies the caregiver's needs and the timely delivery of services and supports to meet those needs.

2. **Benefits Counseling** – Benefits counseling provides information about available services and programs that caregivers and their care receivers may be eligible to receive such as individualized counseling and support, as well as assistance with applying for federal, state, and local benefits, if needed.
3. **Caregiver Education and Training** – Caregiver education and training provides educational curriculum and resources designed to help caregivers strengthen caregiving skills, foster healthy coping skills, and develop effective stress-reduction strategies.
4. **Caregiver Reimbursement** – Caregiver reimbursement is financial assistance to help defray the costs associated with approved, caregiving-related expenses such as respite care, consumable supplies, supportive services, supplemental services, home modifications and assistive devices.

There is no financial eligibility or asset test requirement to receive services through the CSP; however, the reimbursement amount received by caregivers is determined using a sliding scale covering a range of income from 200% to 380% of the Federal Poverty Level. The reimbursement percentages are updated annually and are based on the income and household size of the care receiver. The maximum monthly care plan cost cap is \$600.

Pennsylvania is fortunate to have both federal funding through the OAA and state funding through the Pennsylvania Lottery to support the program. For the SFY 2021-2022, the average monthly care plan cost was \$416.21, and the total monthly care plan cost was over \$3.1 million. The Department projects that the demand for this program will continue to grow in the future. Nationally, Pennsylvania is home to the fifth largest older adult population of more than 3.4 million, with the third largest population of older adults aged 85 and older. In less than a decade,

approximately four (4) million, or one in three (1 in 3) Pennsylvanians, will be over age 60 and potentially eligible for this program.

Recent Enhancements to the CSP

When faced with the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, the Department provided guidance to the AAA network to administer Aging Services programs, such as the CSP. The health and safety of the caregivers and AAA staff was, and continues to be, paramount. COVID-19 has exacerbated the challenges faced by older relative caregivers of children, specifically with the changes in how children attend schools and day care centers over the last two and a half years. The Department has been very responsive to the needs of caregivers by not only providing supportive services, such as respite care, summer-camp related fees, and school supplies, but also providing financial reimbursement of the costs associated with purchasing technology-related items not covered by schools to caregivers of children who are learning virtually.

The Pennsylvania's Caregiver Support Program is a vital resource that empowers caregivers, especially Grandparents to manage the challenges associated with caring and provides the support to cope with the stress and responsibilities associated with caregiving. Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the Caregiver Support Program.



**Testimony of
Angela M. Liddle, President, and CEO
Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance**

**House Democratic Policy Committee
September 28, 2022
Grandparents Raising Grandchildren**

Good morning. I am pleased to offer testimony to this Committee today as the President and CEO of Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PFSA), a statewide not for profit organization, providing support and education programs to families and professionals for the prevention of child abuse and neglect. We have spent more than 40 years tackling the societal health issue of child maltreatment with a 3- pronged approach. We know the first, and best step to preventing child abuse and neglect is keeping children with their parents in a safe, nurturing environment. PFSA works with dozens of community-based agencies in every region of PA offering positive parenting programs and resources.

For those parents who are not capable of providing a safe environment we rely on mandated reporters, those professionals and volunteers who work with children and play a pivotal role as their safety net. Each year, PFSA's child welfare expert trainers provide instruction to thousands of mandated reporters on how to properly recognize and report child abuse. We know PA's children need everyone looking out for their best interest and PFSA offers The Front Porch Project, a training program for community members to learn how to intervene when a child in their midst is not safe in their neighborhood or in public.

I would like to thank Chairman Bizzarro for the opportunity to share testimony today on the experiences, observations, and what members of PFSA's staff have heard from grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. Thirty years ago, long before we knew the words opioid epidemic, or kinship care, I sat in a church basement in Warren County to observe a family support group and it was there that I first encountered a grandparent who put life on hold to raise her grandchildren. Her name was Mary, and she was the only grandparent in the group. Mary's daughter got involved with a man who introduced her to crack cocaine and she stopped parenting, leaving three young children under age 10 with Mary who had just transitioned to part-time employment.

Mary had health issues, lived in a mobile home, and depended on community supports like the local food bank. Moms from the support group shared clothes and baby equipment their children had outgrown. Mary often said she had no idea how she would have provided for the children if not for the generosity of strangers. I remember thinking how tired, unhappy, and beaten down Mary appeared. My 29-year-old eyes had limited awareness of Mary's day to day life. Today, I view all grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, with eyes that are now 60 years old- the same age Mary was when she received three children to raise and the concern, compassion, and respect I have for them is immeasurable.



Mary stayed connected to the parent support group until she was physically unable to attend, and she raised into adulthood two of the three grandchildren. Let me summarize and tell you what Mary's top struggles were in 1994. With failing health, and limited funds, she often sacrificed her own medications to provide the essentials for the children - and by essentials, I mean utility bills and food. She had inadequate housing and had no resources to secure more appropriate housing. She gave up her bedroom and slept on the living room couch for years. She could not afford childcare and so she gave up her full-time employment, collected social security as soon as she was eligible and tried to supplement as she could. Mary never had legal custody of her grandchildren. She had no resources for legal services, and I suspect no strength left to fight her daughter. Since 1994 I have encountered more grandmas like Mary than I can count. And despite the passing of time, their challenges and struggles remain the same.

In June of 2017, Highmark's The Caring Place, a center for grieving children, adolescents, and their families contacted PFSA to discuss their concern about the growing number of children who were losing parents to the opioid epidemic and living with grandparents. They asked for our assistance to plan a community forum for grandparents now raising grandchildren. We worked with media partners to promote the event and remained uncertain if anyone would come. The Caring Place was filled; filled with grandparents, returned to full-time parenting, many cried, nearly all looked like they were still in shock. One woman, a family law attorney from Camp Hill, sat clutching a photo of her daughter who had died only months before. With a call from local law enforcement, she received her 18-month-old granddaughter Carter.

Governor Wolf, along with several Cabinet Secretaries joined us at The Caring Place in December of 2017, specifically to hear from grandparents about their experiences and challenges related to raising their grandchildren. PFSA invited grandparents from every region of Pennsylvania and the common themes shared with Governor Wolf and members of his administration were 1) an inability to secure affordable, legal representation. In many instances grandparents had primary physical custody, but not full legal custody, which impacted their ability to secure necessary public benefits and services; 2) an inability to secure affordable childcare. In instances where both grandparents were in the home, one grandparent often worked well past age 70 to afford 1-2 days per week of childcare because the other grandparent had health issues and needed rest. 3) an inability to financially provide the day-to-day essentials for grandchildren. Most grandparents struggled to purchase formula, diapers, and baby equipment. You will notice the challenges and struggles facing these grandparents were the same challenges Mary faced in 1994.

At the request of Governor Wolf, PFSA coordinated a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Listening Tour. In two-hour sessions, grandparents in Wilkes-Barre, Harrisburg, and Pittsburgh explained their needs for improved access to services, resources, and supports to raise their grandchildren. Secretaries from Departments of Human Services, Education, Health, Aging and Drug and Alcohol Programs attended. Grandparents ranked their greatest needs, and they reported the following: #1) Affordable legal representation; 2) Affordable Child Care; 3) Financial assistance for basic, tangible needs; #4) Respite Care, especially for medically fragile children. We all should notice these identified challenges and struggles were the same challenges Mary faced in 1994. The difference is, we now have more Marys.



The comments of Dan M. from Cumberland County summarize well the feelings I have heard from dozens upon dozens of grandparents raising their grandchildren, “There is an inconsistent, imbalance in representation/advocacy. As a grandparent, I have all the responsibility with no authority. I cannot afford the legal fees necessary to gain legal custody of Sela. My wife is ill, we are tired, and we know we will not live long enough for this precious child to turn into a woman. And so I work, as much as I am able, to have a little something to leave behind for her care. But who will care for her? Her mother has made this mess and we are cleaning it up, but we are no longer talking about a messy room or unfinished chores, we are talking about a beautiful little girl whom we love and want to keep out of entering the foster care system. Every time I have sought help, I was told to contact county child welfare. I am aware we could apply to be formal caregivers to Sela, but we have no guarantee. My wife is sick, I am old and yet we know Sela’s best life is with us because she knows her grandparents love her, and she is safe.”

And Dan is correct. There is a plethora of research that supports children do better when they are unable to live with their parents (for a plethora of reasons) if they are cared for by a grandparent. But as one grandparent stated, “a moral obligation cannot buy groceries. And the amount of love for children does not determine the resources available to care for them.” In PA, like most states, eligibility, and access to services - education, healthcare, transportation - all are designed based upon parents as head of household. We really do not have systems that are easy for grand, or kinship families.

Many of the grandparents who participated in the listening tour became members of a formed workgroup facilitated by the Dept. of Aging. While we have seen some progress (legislation providing temporary guardianship and the launching of The Kinship Navigator Program) there remains a large gap and sadly many of the grandparents who participated believe their family and their needs have been forgotten by those in “powerful positions.” I do not believe that to be the case and I want to publicly commend Representative Pashinski for staying the course in his continued attempts to make it possible for grandparents to raise their grandchildren. I believe looking at the issue of subsidized childcare and legal representation are overwhelming issues to tackle. But, if we believe they are too overwhelming to address, imagine the impact felt if grandparents who are raising their grandchildren fall down one day and do not get up - figuratively speaking. On average there is an annual cost of \$25,000 per child in foster care. Imagine the impact on our already overburdened and fragile system.

And so, we must begin somewhere and H.B. 2858 establishing a legal assistance grant program is a good start. I have attempted today to pass along to you the words from grandparents I have personally heard spoken. But I want to leave you with some hard and fast bullet points for why a grant program needs established to help level the playing field from a legal perspective for grandfamilies:

- If a child is in the foster care system, the parents will be provided an attorney, but grand or kinship families typically do not get free representation.



- Most legal aid programs have very limited hours for family law cases if they take them at all. This means that grandparents with low incomes struggle to find, and most cannot secure affordable legal counsel.
- Without affordable legal services, the fees can devastate grandparents' ability to pay for the needs of the children they are raising or provide for their own retirement. I know of many grandparents who have liquidated their entire retirement savings on legal fees. Grandparents are willing to raise a child in need; they should never have to spend so much money obtaining a legal relationship with a child that it proves nearly impossible to financially recover.
- Most grandparents without a legal relationship will struggle to enroll children in school, get healthcare services, nor will they be able to secure a driver's license. Access tends to vary by school and healthcare practitioner and also depends upon the grandparent's standing in the community.
- The legal system is complicated and confusing and understanding the terminology and legal options are crucial.

Grandparents raising their grandchildren deserve and need the same amount of advocacy and support they are providing to those for whom they care.

PFSA would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to comment on this critical issue and Rep. Pashinski's legislation. We stand ready to assist your efforts.

HEARING TESTIMONY

September 28, 2022

PA HOUSE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE

Wilkes University

From: Joan M. Gower

Bullet Points for Testimony Regarding the Needs of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren:

Introduction:

I have been facilitating a Support Group for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren for approximately 14 years. Prior to that, this Support Group began with Foster and Adoptive Families. It evolved into a Group for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, as more and more grandparents stepped up to care for their Grandchildren on a fulltime basis. Our Support Group is now called, "New American Heroes", a phrase coined by a Rap Artist, who wrote a song to commend her parents, who were caring for her children while she was addicted to drugs. New American Heroes now meet on the Second Monday of each month, from 6-7:30 p.m. at the Wilkes Barre YMCA. It is through this Support Group, past work as a Foster/Adoption Caseworker, past involvement with the NEPA Intergenerational Coalition, and my work on the Board of the Advocacy Fund for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren...that I have gained knowledge of the needs of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren.

1. There continues to be inequality for Grandparents who simply begin taking care of their grandchildren at the request of the parents, or find their grandchildren not being cared for and in very compromising situations, and they bring the children to their own home for safety. When a child is not in the care of our County Children and Youth Agency for at least 24 hours, the Grandparents cannot become Kinship Caregivers and receive the benefits of that alliance with Children and Youth Services. Most of the children, who are simply taken into the care of their

Grandparents, have experienced the same kind of trauma in their Birth Families, as experienced by children who come into the care of Children and Youth Services. In my experience with these Grand Families, it is approximately half of the families I have been involved with, who simply begin caring for Grandchildren, without the involvement of Children and Youth Services. I am aware that the Area Office of Aging has a Caregiver Support Program, which provides funding that can be used by Grandparents for clothing and activities for the Grandchildren in their care. The Grandparents must be 55 years of age to qualify for this Assistance. There are quite a few grandparents in their 40's in this situation. I strongly believe that the Caregiver Support Program through the Office of Aging, should be made available to any Grandparent Raising a Grandchild. One must also qualify, financially, for this assistance. Kinship Caregivers, working with a County Children and Youth Agency, do not have to qualify, financially to receive a subsidy for the care of a child. Working Grandparents often find it difficult to make ends meet in the new situation they find themselves in, for the safety and well-being of a grandchild, or multiple grandchildren.

2. One of the Grandmothers in our New American Heroes Support Group recently looked into the possibility of Financial Assistance for her college age Granddaughter, through the Chaffee Grant, which is available to children who are in Foster Care after the age of 16. This Grandmother learned that the Chaffee Grant is not available for her 18 year old Granddaughter, Lily, who has been in her care for many years. It may be because this Grandmother and Grandfather have Permanent Legal Custodianship of their two Granddaughters. Raising their Granddaughters is NOT something

they planned on this late in their lives. They accepted the care of their Granddaughters when their daughter was experiencing Mental Health Issues that prevented her from parenting. Now, this same daughter, the mother of the two Granddaughters, is in advanced stages of Multiple Sclerosis, and has entered a Nursing Home.

Grandparents seek Permanent Legal Custodianship for the safety and well-being of their Grandchildren. At a time when they should be considering retirement, many Grandparents continue to work hard to provide for their Grandchildren. College is a major concern. It does not seem fair that children, in the care of their Grandparents, cannot benefit from Pennsylvania's Tuition Waiver Program.

3. When Grandparents advocate for their Grandchildren and reach the legal status of Permanent Legal Custodianship, any party can come forward after six months and request a change in the arrangement for the care of the Grandchildren. It has come to my attention that children are placed in unsafe situations when the Birth Parents are given Unsupervised Visitation, without a full investigation of the Birth Parents and a home in which the child will visit for the first time. I ask that great care be given with an appropriate evaluation before children are given Unsupervised Visits after living with Grandparents for a lengthy period of time.

Thank you for your time and attention to the serious situations
Grandparents Raising Grandchildren find themselves in.

Joan M. Gower

Retired Foster/Adoption Caseworker

Facilitator Support Group for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Board Member Advocacy Fund for GRG

PA House Democratic Policy Committee

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Wednesday September 28, 2022

Written Testimony Submitted by Frank Mariano

I am grateful for the opportunity to provide written testimony to the PA House Democratic Policy Committee, as I am unable to attend the hearing on September 28, 2022.

My name is Frank Mariano, and I am the President of the Board of Directors of the Advocacy Fund 4 Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (AF4GRG.) The mission of the Advocacy Fund is to provide initial financial aid to qualified grandparents in Luzerne County by helping them navigate the legal process as they care for their grandchildren. In addition, the AF4GRG sponsors a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Support Group that meets monthly.

By participating in both the Advocacy Fund and especially the Support Group, which has been named by the grandparents themselves as, "New American Heroes," has provided me with the opportunity to hear a wide variety of issues that face grandparents that are raising their grandchildren.

When one considers the name of the support group, these people may indeed be our new American Heroes. According to the Citizens Voice editorial dated August 1, 2022, there are 95,000 grandparents in Pennsylvania that are primary caregivers for approximately 190,000 children. In almost every case, the 95,000 grandparents did not plan on raising children for the second time. As with most families nearing or into retirement, the issues they were dealing with did not concern toilet training, or preschool costs, or being involved in school activities, homework, etc. The costs and responsibilities of raising children continue to take a toll on these grandparents. They are indeed "New American Heroes," as they are raising children who otherwise may have been with abusive parents, addicted parents, absent parents, or parents who have died. Instead of entering the foster system the children are being raised by family.

Each of these grandparents are living heartbreaking stories that involve their grandchildren, their own children, or themselves. Many are thrust into this situation with no warning or planning. As a result, by stepping up and loving and caring for their grandchildren, it is estimated that their care saves US taxpayers about \$4,000,000.00 per year in social service costs.

While their grandchildren are in their care, time and life continues to go on. Grandparents who are raising their grandchildren become ill, or unemployed, or deal with the normal issues of aging. Can a granddad or grandma play baseball, basketball or soccer with his grandchildren in the same way a dad thirty years his junior can? How comfortable can it be to start saving for college when one is 60 or 70 years of age? These are just a couple of circumstances that are faced by grandparents raising grandchildren that we talk about in our support group.

I want to emphasize prior to an additional detail, that most of the grandparents are not in their dotage. They are bright, world-wise, and motivated to do the very best they can.

One of the topics that continues to be raised by the grandparents are issues that deal with schools. Schools have changed significantly since these grandparents were raising their own children. In addition to the many issues of helping our kids do well in school, we need to understand that there are many of these children whose learning has been delayed or impaired due to environmental issues. A number of these children have been the victims of poor prenatal care, and thus may have learning disabilities or emotional issues.

Grandparents who now have to deal with the complexities of specialized programs, Individual Education Plans, and how to advocate for their grandchildren.

While this issue is simply stated, the way to address this issue may be more difficult. From my perspective as a former Special Education Administrator is to try to find local advocates who are available to the grandparents in terms of giving advice or even attending school-based meetings with the grandparents.

The other pervasive issue is that as the grandparents have taken the children to keep them safe or give them a loving home is that they are often in conflict with their own children (the biological parents.) As the grandparents are working to gain some custody or rights to deal with the grandchildren's needs, they are often engaged in legal battles with their children. This saps the grandparents' time, resources and energy, not to mention the conflict of having to be in such a battle with their own children.

Clearly these issues vary and are unique to each family situation. Once again, I believe that support groups are very valuable to grandparents, but in addition, an advocate or a resource with technical information beyond the expertise of a support group that can help grandparents learn about the system or point them in the correct direction.

Lastly, I believe that underlying all the issues and challenges that need to be met by grandparents, there is a very real fear of becoming ill, incapacitated or dying before they are finished raising their grandchildren. The likelihood of an illness or injury is much greater to an older person. While I do not have an answer to that dilemma, I think that we all need to be aware of where exactly in the life cycle these grandparents are located.

Thank you for taking the time and showing an interest in this very real phenomenon. I would be available for any additional questions for to be involved in further conversations.

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