

Testimony
to the
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Majority Policy Committee
on the
Effects of Opioid Addiction on Children and Youth

Presented on:

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The Historic Stone House
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Submitted by:

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Good afternoon Chairman Benninghoff, Representative Dowling and distinguished members of the House of Representatives Majority Policy Committee.

My name is Leslie Grenfell. I am the Executive Director of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Area Agency on Aging, Inc. (AAA) which is a private non-profit Area Agency on Aging (AAA) serving older adults residing in Fayette, Greene and Washington Counties.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the important role grandparents and other relatives have in providing safe and stable homes for children who cannot remain in the care of their parents due to the Opioid epidemic.

Our Area Agency on Aging (AAA) is one of fifty-two (52) in the Commonwealth funded through the Pennsylvania Department of Aging to provide a wide range of home-and-community-based services to ensure that seniors have the opportunity to successfully age-in-place.

For over thirty-three (33) years, our mission has been to support the well-being of older adults by ensuring the delivery of high-quality, cost-effective health and social services through a comprehensive network of providers, advocates, caregivers and volunteers.

Today my comments are focused on the Grandparenting Program and the impact it has had on the lives of grandparents who are providing care to their grandchildren.

Effective with the 2006 re-authorization of the Older Americans Act, the National Caregiver Support Program was revised to permit states to utilize up to 10% of the federal funds for services related to relatives caring for grandchildren. Under the provisions of the program, grandparents or other related primary caregivers of children age 18 or younger and living in the same household may receive services and supports. Based upon the assessed needs and the financial situation of the family, the grandparent or relative may be eligible for the reimbursement of services such as child care assistance and other supplies directly related to caring for grandchildren. The federal funds flow through the Pennsylvania Department of Aging to local Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) for ongoing expenses and provide on average a total of \$200.00 per month and a one-time grant of no more than \$2,000.00.

Parental substance abuse, whether as a result of the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s or today's opioid crisis, has long been cited as one of the most common reasons that grandparents raise their grandchildren (Generals United, 2016; Minkler & Roe, 1993).

As a consequence of the Opioid crisis, our program has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of grandparents who are in need of various services and supports due to caring for grandchildren whose parents are incarcerated or are otherwise unable or unavailable to care for their children due to the use of opioids.

Currently, the services that we are providing to 70% of the grandfamilies in our service area can be directly attributed to the opioid epidemic in southwestern Pennsylvania.

The following example clearly illustrates the trials grandparents face as they struggle to provide needed care and identifies the types of support the Agency is able to provide. A 77-year old grandmother received a call in the middle of the night advising her that her daughter was incarcerated due to a drug-related assault and theft charges. The grandmother was asked if she would take her grandchildren as there was no one else to care for them. Wanting to ensure that her grandsons, aged 11, 9 and 3, had a safe home environment, the grandmother agreed. In the pursuit of money needed to purchase drugs, her daughter stole the family's only vehicle and wrecked it, leaving the family without transportation for medical appointments, school-related activities and grocery shopping. To help support this grandfamily, the Area Agency on Aging provides ongoing monthly assistance for child care and necessary school supplies and has purchased a fence to surround the

grandparent's property, which is along a heavily traveled road, to ensure that the children have a secure and safe area to play outside.

While this is only one case, most of the grandparents in the program have very similar stories. Although there are many challenges, grandparents have consistently informed us that they believe the strong emotional bond of family is critically important in helping to provide a safety net for their vulnerable grandchildren. Research has also substantiated the fact that grandparents and other relatives do have a special protective role that helps to mitigate the trauma and fear of abandonment that many children experience. When asked, the grandparents that we spoke with would not give up their caregiver role, as they witness first-hand the positive influence it has in providing the stability and consistency that their grandchildren need.

However, it is important to state that grandparents or relative caregivers face many complex barriers in caring for their grandchildren, especially if they do not have custody or legal guardianship.

Many grandparents find themselves unprepared to raise children on a full-time basis again, particularly as it relates to the financial costs associated with caregiving that they never anticipated. Grandfamilies have also expressed how isolating it can be for them as their friends are enjoying retirement activities or

volunteering while they find themselves helping with homework or changing diapers.

It is not uncommon to find grandparents questioning their own parenting skills and abilities, struggling with their own mental health issues, often as a result of the stigma associated with their child's drug addiction, or suffering the results of the strain and sheer exhaustion of raising a child or children at this time in their lives under difficult circumstances.

In summary, the Grandparent Program offers a "safe haven" for grandfamilies, who often share the common bond of having sons and daughters who are victims of opioids and other substance abuses. As a result, these grandparents have a great need for and are receptive to receiving the services provided by the aging network, including the peer support groups, which are specifically designed to help reduce caregiver stress.

Although the burden of the Opioid crisis on future generations cannot yet be fully measured, every member of every family who has lost someone to addiction suffers the effects. The grandfamilies who participate in the Grandparenting Program, however, are confronting the challenges that must be faced and meeting their obligations, whatever the costs. They are doing as much as they can to give the children in their care lives that are as typical as they can be in these circumstances and they should be commended for their dedication and

commitment to caring for their grandchildren in spite of the challenges that they must face on a daily basis.

In the words of the late Fred Rogers, “Anyone who does anything to help a child is a hero to me.”