

**Written Testimony of Donna M. Butts
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**To the Committee on Rules
U.S. House of Representatives**

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to submit testimony to the Rules Committee on behalf of Generations United, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational strategies. We applaud Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and members of the Committee for your leadership in holding this roundtable examining *Hunger Among Seniors and Multigenerational Families*. The testimony focuses on hunger and food insecurity facing multigenerational families and grandfamilies and highlights intergenerational solutions to address those issues. Multigenerational families are families where three or more generations reside in the same household. “Grandfamilies” are families where children are being raised by grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends (also known as kinship families) usually without parents present.

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 of all. Founded over 35 years ago, we are a catalyst for policies and practices stimulating cooperation and collaboration among generations, evoking the vibrancy, energy, and sheer productivity that result when people of all ages come together. We believe that we can only be successful in the face of our complex future if generational diversity is regarded as a national asset and fully leveraged.

Multigenerational families and grandfamilies epitomize the value of intergenerational interdependence, the backbone that build our country and continues to strengthen our communities. Generations United is one of the few groups that advocates on their behalf but more importantly, engages the families in identifying their strengths, challenges, and needs.

In 2011 in the wake of the Great Recession, we researched and released *Family Matters: Multigenerational Living in a Volatile Economy*. While the families were often shamed in the media at the time and held up as a sad example of what had become of our country’s “rugged individualism,” the families we surveyed said their multigenerational households helped individual family members and strengthened family bonds.

Ten years later, as we grapple with the global COVID-19 pandemic, we once again undertook a survey to see how multigenerational families were faring. In *Family Matters: Multigenerational Living is on the Rise and Here to Stay* we reported that while not for everyone, multigenerational living has helped many families to pool resources and care for one another. Living under one

roof is no longer an emerging trend but a permanent family configuration with most of the families reporting they intend to continue living together long after the pandemic subsides.

Even before we advocated for multigenerational families, Generations United worked with and on behalf of grandfamilies. Over 20 years ago, we established the National Center on Grandfamilies to improve policies, supports, and services for the millions of grandfamilies around the country who keep children connected to their siblings, kin, and culture. The Center conducts federal advocacy, provides technical assistance and training to state policy makers and advocates, develops guides, fact sheets and other resource materials including an annual *State of Grandfamilies Report*, and raises awareness about the strengths and needs of the families through events, media outreach, and weekly communications. The Center's work is guided by our GRAND Voices network of grandfamily caregivers representing 45 states, the District of Columbia, and 11 tribes. Through the Center, Generations United has successfully advocated for an array of laws and policies to help grandfamilies gain access to affordable food and nutrition supports, financial assistance, housing, counseling, respite care, and other supportive resources. More information about our work and resources are available at www.gu.org and www.grandfamilies.org.

BACKGROUND ON MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILIES AND GRANDFAMILIES

Multigenerational Families

Multigenerational living is on the rise and here to stay. The number of households consisting of three or more generations has increased from a low of 15 percent in 1980 to 20 percent in 2018. In 2011, in the wake of the Great Recession, Generations United conducted a survey to learn more about multigenerational households and found 7 percent of Americans reported living in a multigenerational household. In 2021, we conducted a new survey and found the number had quadrupled to 26 percent which is a 271 percent increase. Six in ten families said they started or continued to live together because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sixty-six percent said the current economic climate was a factor in their family becoming a multigenerational household with 16 percent saying it was the only reasons. Other factors can be traced to the pandemic as well with an equal 34 percent saying their household formed because of eldercare or childcare/education needs and 30 percent saying it was because of job loss, change in job status, or underemployment. "Since COVID hit, I don't have a job," said Katie Stewart who lives with her 6-year-old son, mother, stepfather, and two stepbrothers. She was working for a ticket company when the pandemic started, and concert venues shut down. "Until we get approved to open up for the concert venues again, I don't have work."

While the families may have come together by need, they are staying together by choice. In fact, 72 percent of the families said they intended to continue living in a multigenerational household long term. It is not surprising given 98 percent said their multigenerational household functioned successfully. Still 77 percent feel there should be more government programs and policies that are supportive of multigenerational households like theirs. Most frequently cited were help with caregiving, mental health services, support groups, mortgage or rent assistance as well as paid

family leave, flexible work environments, and increased access to home- and community-based services and supports.

Several benefits surfaced from the survey. Seventy-nine percent responded that it made it easier to provide for the care needs of one or more family members. The same percentage said it enhanced family bonds or relationships while 76 percent said it improved finances and mental or physical health. Living together made it possible for at least one family member to continue school or enroll in job training. Food plays an important role. Forty percent said sharing family meals with all household members present is a factor that contributed to their household's success.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found “Millions of people report that their household didn't get enough to eat, isn't caught up on rent, or struggled to cover usual expenses.” The COVID-19 pandemic caused unemployment to reach an all-time high and families have hunkered down at home together by necessity or by choice to provide care, lower expenses, stretch food dollars, pass on family traditions and culture and avoid isolation. Multigenerational families may be one of the most positive changes to come out of the pandemic. Given 7 in 10 multigenerational families say they plan to continue doing so long-term, we must prepare for a multigenerational future examining our age segregated policies and approaches to better serve today's families.

Grandfamilies

More than 2.3 million grandparents are responsible for raising grandchildren across the U.S. Approximately 2.7 million children are being raised by grandparents or other relatives with neither parent in the home. When children cannot remain with their parents, the comfort of a grandparent, aunt, or godparent eases the trauma of separation. Compared to children in non-relative care, children being raised by relatives have more stability, higher levels of permanency, and decreased behavioral problems. They are more likely to maintain connections with brothers and sisters and to preserve their cultural heritage. Yet, for every child being raised by relatives inside the formal foster care system, 19 children are raised by relatives outside of the system. Grandfamilies raising children outside the foster care system are often left disconnected from basic benefits and supports like food and nutrition programs, respite care, counseling for children and caregiver training.

Grandfamilies face unique strengths and challenges. Unlike parents, grandfamily caregivers do not have inherent legal rights and responsibilities with respect to these children. They often take informal responsibility for children suddenly and have no planning time to meet their financial, housing, or other needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit grandfamilies especially hard. Demographic data point to the greater risk COVID-19 poses to grandfamilies than other families. Almost half of all grandparent caregivers are age 60 and older, and grandparent caregivers are much more likely to have a disability than parents of children age 18 and younger. Adults age 60 and older and those with disabilities, such as compromised immune systems, are at higher risk for getting COVID-19 and are told to heed warnings to distance themselves from young people and others. That becomes

impossible, for example, when one is the sole caregiver to a young child. Grandfamilies are also more likely to have Black or Native members than white members. Nationwide, Black Americans are dying from COVID-19 at 2.5 times the rate of white Americans, and Native and Latinx Americans are dying at about 1.5 times the rate, according to data collected by the COVID Tracking Project. Many states do not report data for American Indian or Alaska Native people and instead report them under the “other” category. The impact on American Indian and Alaska Native people is likely much greater. With this pandemic and its resulting deaths, COVID-19 is not only heightening challenges for existing grandfamilies, but creating new ones.

Access to adequate food and nutrition supports ranks highly among the challenges that grandfamilies face during the pandemic according to a survey of more than 600 grandfamily caregivers from all 50 states conducted by the Grandfamilies Outcomes Workgroup, Generations United, and Collaborative Solutions. Approximately 43 percent reported that they were fearful of leaving the house to get food because of exposure to COVID-19, 47 percent reported waiting in long lines to access food assistance, and 32 percent reported that food at pick up sites ran out when they arrived. More information about the impact of COVID-19 on the families is available in Generations United’s State of Grandfamilies Report: [*Facing a Pandemic: Grandfamilies Living Together During COVID-19 and Thriving Beyond.*](#)

Despite the important role that millions of grandparents and other relatives play in caring for children both inside and outside of the formal foster care system, the vast majority of available supportive policies and services are targeted at supporting only those kinship families where the children are part of the formal foster care system. Even those kinship families who are caring for children inside the foster care system often do not receive foster care maintenance payments to provide for the needs of the child.

Grandfamilies are often left out of aging services as well because of lack of familiarity with serving these unique families and because of age restrictions in programs such as the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP). It provides funding to Area Agencies on Aging which may be used to serve grandfamilies but is limited to those where the grandparent or other relative caregiver is age 55 and older.

The following recommendations address ways food and nutrition programs, income supports, aging services, and child welfare funding streams can better support multigenerational families, engage grandfamilies as resources to each other, and reduce barriers for these grandfamilies to allow the caregivers to access services and resources necessary to meet the needs of the caregivers and provide for the children for whom they care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

“If we didn’t get SNAP, we couldn’t make it through the month to eat.”

-Linda, Grandparent Raising Grandchildren in Oklahoma

Promote Joint Meal Programs and Fund Multigenerational Demonstration Projects in the Older Americans Act

During the pandemic grandfamilies reported challenges accessing food and nutrition assistance including being required to travel to separate locations to secure food for themselves and for the children. The Older Americans Act reauthorization also authorize congregate nutrition programs designed to provide healthy meals that present opportunities for social engagement, information on healthy aging, and meaningful volunteer roles. The Act encourages multigenerational nutrition and meal service programs where possible. It recommends that states working with area agencies on aging reduce the administrative burden on these programs and help direct limited resources to where services are needed most. The Act also promotes the creation of intergenerational shared site programs that offer adult and childcare at the same location which are ideal for many multigenerational families juggling competing caregiving needs. These programs help meet the food and nutrition needs of younger and older family members. These approaches will help more effectively serve multigenerational families and grandfamilies by providing a single location for the family to access free and reduced-priced meals.

As Congress considers appropriations for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, we urge you to recognize the importance of the newly authorized Older Americans Act Grant Program for Multigenerational Collaboration. This grant program was created with strong bipartisan, bicameral support. We recommend allocating \$2.5 million in FY2022 funding for the OAA Grant Program for Multigenerational Collaboration, which will allow state and local organizations to create or enhance a variety of intergenerational programs serving children, youth, and older adults including those that could help with food and nutrition assistance.

Support Access to Food and Nutrition Services for Multigenerational Families

Ensure families who choose to live in multigenerational households are not punished by losing eligibility to food and nutrition programs due to having multiple incomes in the household, yet not enough food to go around. Food assistance programs provide access to food and nutrition services for those in greatest need. Because these programs are based on income, it is important that families that chose to live in multigenerational households are not punished by losing eligibility to these programs and are instead supported through these programs. Means-tested government programs were created as supports for families to thrive and should therefore be viewed as a support for multigenerational households alike, not an opportunity to disqualify individuals for finding a lifestyle that has positive impacts on those individuals and society.

Strengthen Outreach, Access and Benefit Adequacy in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for Grandfamilies and Multigenerational Families.

Despite need, grandfamilies and multigenerational families often experience challenges accessing SNAP benefits. Many families are unaware of what benefits they may qualify for and have difficulty navigating paperwork. A [2020 GAO report](#) found that some kin caregivers' household incomes may be too high to qualify for assistance from means-tested programs, like SNAP. Yet, the unexpected addition of a child can be a financial strain, especially to households where the caregiver is living on a fixed income which is the case for many older and retired

grandfamily caregivers. According to the [Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2012](#), less than half of low-income grandfamilies receive SNAP, even though most report food insecurity. Although we lack newer data, anecdotally we know things have not improved. Given available data during the pandemic, results have likely gotten worse for grandfamilies. Congress should examine ways to improve access to SNAP for grandfamilies and multigenerational families by considering approaches that consider only the child's income and by improving outreach and coordination with programs that serve grandfamilies.

Moreover, even when households do access SNAP, as [FRAC \(The Food Research and Action Center\) as documented](#), their benefits fall short of amounts needed to afford an adequate healthy meal plan. Without federal action, households will suffer cuts in SNAP benefit amounts in coming months, as the 15% boost in effect since January 2021 is due to sunset September 30, 2021, and SNAP Emergency Allotments will sunset upon termination of federal and state pandemic declarations.

Congress should examine ways to improve access to SNAP for grandfamilies and multigenerational families by considering approaches that consider only the child's income and by improving outreach and coordination with programs that serve grandfamilies. In particular, [as Unidos US and FRAC have recommended](#), the federal government and states should do more to support community-based outreach and application assistance to help connect families with benefits. Finally, [Congress should act now](#) to ensure that SNAP benefit amounts are adequate, not only until sufficient economic recovery has taken hold, but beyond.

Improve Outreach to Grandfamilies for the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Woman, Infants and Children (WIC)

The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a critical source of nutrition support for grandfamilies. It is one of the few programs that will only consider the income of the child and not the family or their assets. WIC helps grandfamilies provide nutritious foods for the children they are raising without having to sacrifice hard earned retirement savings or other basic critical assets. Yet many grandfamilies are unaware that they may qualify for the program because outreach is not typically geared toward these families. Improved outreach strategies and educational programs that inform them of their benefits could help reach more grandfamilies.

Improve Access to School Meals for Grandfamilies

Access to free and reduced-price school meals for children in the care of relatives can be a critical source of income support for grandfamilies and provides essential nutrition to help children in the families thrive. Yet, many of the families face challenges accessing these supports due to eligibility restrictions and complex application processes. Generations United urges Congress to pass the CARE for Kids Act to help support children who are being raised by grandparents or relatives other than their parents by addressing barriers to access free school meals.

Improve Access and Adequacy of TANF for Grandfamilies

Typically, the only source of ongoing financial assistance to most grandfamilies is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only grants, which is based on the income of the child and to help meet the needs of the child. The TANF and SNAP application process are often linked, and if a grandfamily is unable to access TANF, they are also unlikely to access SNAP. If the grandfamilies are only able to access TANF child-only based on the income of the child, this critical funding source can make it possible to get food on the table for the children as their fixed incomes may not allow them to access other food and nutrition benefits.

About twenty-five years ago, Congress enacted TANF to replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Since 1996, one of the four primary purposes of TANF has been to keep children in their own homes or in the homes of relatives. Despite this declaration, most children in grandfamilies do not receive any TANF support or any other type of ongoing financial assistance.

Congress can do a number of things to improve access to this important assistance. Most fundamentally, Congress should increase its block grant funding, and encourage states, tribes, and localities to mirror their child-only TANF grant amounts on their foster care maintenance payment rates, which similarly are designed to meet the needs of children whose parents cannot care for them.

Further, direct HHS to provide clear guidance on the good cause exemption for assigning child support to the agency, as existed under AFDC. Many caregivers do not pursue TANF child-only support due to the requirement to assign their right to collect child support to the agency. Many caregivers are reluctant to do this for various reasons, including fear that the parents will remove the child from their safe and loving care. Another common concern is that the parents will not be able to reunify with the children if they are pursued for these funds, which they likely need in order to stabilize housing and other essentials so they can reparent.

Require Food and Nutrition Delivery Systems to Develop Strategies to Promote Race Equity and Address Disparities Including Promoting Equitable Treatment of Grandfamilies

Levels of food insecurity rose during the COVID-19 pandemic, hitting communities of color particularly hard. During this public health emergency, [FRAC](#) (The Food Research and Action Center) noted that Black and Latinx adults age 60 and older have experienced higher levels of food insecurity than white older adults, exacerbating prior rates of disproportionate food insecurity levels. About 24 percent of Latinx older adults of any race and 23 percent of Black older adults experienced food insecurity during the pandemic, as compared to 11 percent of white older adults.

Among all Americans, Latinx Americans (45 percent) and Black Americans (33 percent) are more likely than white Americans (19 percent) to say they live in a multigenerational household. Almost half of all grandparents raising their grandchildren are age 60 and older, and disproportionate numbers of them are Black and Native American grandchildren, with 20 percent

of grandparents raising Latinx grandchildren. These grandfamily caregivers are raising children unexpectedly and need equitable solutions to access SNAP and other nutrition programs.

We urge Congress to require states to develop and implement a plan to address racism and racial disparities in the SNAP and other federally supported nutrition programs for all families, including those grandfamilies with caregivers age 60 and older experiencing dramatic increases in food insecurity. Approaches should include providing interpreter and translation services and partnerships with community-based organizations to ensure effective outreach and access to grandfamilies with caregivers who do not speak English.

Promote Authentic Engagement of Individuals with Lived Expertise in Multigenerational and Grandfamilies in All Aspects of Planning, Policy Development, Service Delivery and Evaluation

Families are best served when they are heard and have input into all aspects of planning, policy development, and delivery of services and supports designed to help them. The majority of food and nutrition supports and other services available to help multigenerational and grandfamilies were not designed with these families in mind. As a result, programs often miss connecting with these families in outreach efforts and may be ineffective at addressing the needs of all family members. Authentic engagement of members of multigenerational families and grandfamilies can improve access and effectiveness of services.

The Children's Bureau Information Memorandum [ACYF-CB-IM-19-03](#) provides an array of key principles and considerations for engaging, empowering, and utilizing family and youth voice in all aspects of child welfare to drive case planning and system improvement. Food and nutrition services, income support and aging service programs should promote the use of similar approaches adapted for those systems through requiring and incentivizing approaches like those outlined in the memo.

Invest in Community-Based Kinship Support Services and Peer to Peer Programs

Among the most valued supports to kinship families are those provided by community-based grassroots organizations often led or staffed by caregivers who have the wisdom of experience navigating fragmented and inadequate systems. These often-under-resourced programs are trusted providers of support and information and can reach and serve families who are fearful or reticent about engaging with traditional child welfare agencies or government operated services. These organizations typically do not have the capacity to compete for federal or state funding opportunities or to invest in evaluation to demonstrate their effectiveness. Yet, they are often the first place kinship families learn about assistance programs including food programs. When these programs have a peer-to-peer component, families are more likely to successfully access food and nutrition programs. Congress should explore approaches to invest, evaluate, and promote peer to peer models of support services such as caregiver to peer navigation services, caregiver mentoring, and support groups.

Ensure Kinship Navigators Programs and the Newly Funded Technical Assistance Center on Grandfamilies and Kinship Families Have Accurate and Up to Date Information about Food Assistance Programs

Congress created federally supported Kinship Navigator Programs to help connect grandfamilies to support kinship caregivers in learning about, finding and using programs and services to meet their families' needs. Congress should ensure these programs have accurate, up to date information about food assistance programs and urge them to coordinate with federal, state and local food and nutrition assistance programs to ensure grandfamilies are accesses all available resources to meet their needs. The recently funded National Technical Assistance Center on Grandfamilies and Kinship Care should provide resources and technical assistance to kinship navigators and other programs serving grandfamilies to ensure they have the nutrition related information and tools tailored toward reaching the unique families.

Encourage Provision of Services to Grandfamilies through the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) including by Supporting Projects of National Significance

For 20 years, the NFCSP has provided supportive services such as information and referral, respite care, support groups, counseling and supplemental services to older relative caregivers of children, in addition to family caregivers of older adults. This may include emergency support such as food and nutrition assistance to help grandfamilies when children unexpectedly come into their care. Services are provided through state and local aging service agencies which have the option to serve grandfamilies. Despite strong need, according to 2020 GAO report- [*Child Welfare and Aging Programs: HHS could enhance support for grandparents and other relative caregivers*](#), only 23 states used their 2016 NFCSP funds to serve older relative caregivers of children, and only five of these states had spent anywhere close to the maximum percentage allowed when the programs were surveyed. Those that do serve grandfamilies are restricted by law to using the funds to serve older caregivers, leaving the large numbers of younger grandparent and other relative caregivers without access to these supports. State officials told the GAO that they would like more tools for how to use the program to serve the families.

Congress should fund the Projects of National Significance authorized under the Older American's Act to provide information and technical assistance to help Area Agencies on Aging better understand the unique needs of grandfamilies, multigenerational families and effective ways to serve them including partnering with child welfare, income support, and community-based organizations that serve families regardless of the caregiver's age.

Promote and Encourage Intergenerational Community Gardens Through Collecting and Sharing Best Practices and Offering Local Tax Incentives

Communities around the country are experimenting with intergenerational community gardens to supply fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Such gardens are increasingly being developed on schoolyards, senior living complexes and vacant city lots. The gardens bring together community members of all ages to plant, harvest, sell, or consume the food they grow. The harvest provides food to the community while building social relationships and helping

individuals acquire entrepreneurial skills. An example of this type of program funded by the State of Nevada SNAP-Education program is Teach Me To Grow Healthy (TMTGH). It is a community-oriented, culturally sensitive program that seeks to improve the holistic care and nutritional support of Native Americans, both urban and rural, in the Reno area. Working through local churches, community centers, senior centers, schools, contacts in several tribal groups, and the State of Nevada SNAP-Education program, TMTGH is creating an intergenerational group to grow and distribute indigenous food produce to the participants' families and communities. Congress should support efforts like these and other approaches to provide produce and other healthy food options in "food deserts" by helping to make fresh fruits, vegetables and nutritious foods more broadly available including at corner stores.

Promote Coordination of Food Programs to Better Serve Families

Expand and involve national services programs such as AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps Seniors and Learn and Serve, to focus on intergenerational nutrition needs in under-served communities. Encourage states to develop comprehensive intergenerational strategies to improve delivery and coordination of nutrition and other assistance programs to better meet the needs of family members of all ages.

"It is too expensive to get enough nutritious food for the family shopping at traditional grocery stores. The only way you can eat fresh fruit that you need is through food stamps."
- Toshia, a grandmother raising five grandchildren, New York

Multigenerational and grandfamilies draw upon the strengths of multiple generations, working together to create solutions in the best interests of family members across a range of generations. The result is resilient families who get through both good and challenging times together and the outcome is a stronger, more caring nation. We must ensure policies support and not harm these important families.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of Generations United. For more information contact:

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