

Colorado's Child Welfare System Interim Study Committee

Legislative Council, Thank you for your time,

Grand Family Coalition is a non-profit organization that offers a community of support for grandparents and kinship caregivers through their journey of raising their relatives' children. The terms "grandfamilies" and "kinship families" are interchangeable terms referring to families in which grandparents, other adult family members, or close family like friends are raising children, without the parent in the home.

Numbers:

According to Kids Count Data Center and Generations United more than 2.5 million children across the U.S. are being raised in grandfamilies/kinship homes. In Colorado over 36,459 grandparents are responsible for their grandchildren. 35,000 Colorado children are living in homes where a relative is the head of the household with no parent is present. At any one giving time about 1,331 Colorado children are in foster care being raised by kin. We know that once the case is closed these children are lost. For every child in the child welfare system, there are 19 more outside of the system not being provided financial support equal to the financial support of a Foster Care Home. Why are some children worthy of support and not other?

Disparity:

We all agree that children do better when placed with family, and with the passing of the Family First Prevention Service Act, more children are being placed in the custody of kin. Child Welfare is a temporary fix for these children. However, the buck stops there. Once children are placed all support in raising these children stops, saving taxpayers thousands of dollars. Child Welfare strives to achieve permanency for these children, when in fact it only places a burden that is putting grandfamilies in jeopardy of raising these children in poverty and often homeless.

Dynamics:

These families come with layers upon layers of challenges. Pushing through the child welfare system to get the children in a stable situation is only the first challenge. Dealing with the parent who just can't seem to get rehabilitated are also their relatives. Then having to fight it out in court further challenges the family dynamics. Children face long term challenges in school, behavior issues and often wind up in the Juvenal Justice System, behavior and educational problems.

Further, raising children is expensive and getting stability to the new situation is only one hurdle. These families are faced with large legal and mental health expenses with long-term therapy for emotional trauma of the child and themselves. The majority of these children have had some sort of Fetal Chemical Exposure and at minimum trauma that causes lifelong challenges. "It is just not as easy as adding another bean to the pot" says an 80 year old single grandmother raising her 16 year old grandson with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder "FASD", Autism and trauma. Taking on a child you had not planned on brings unexpected expenses causing families to deplete or put off retirement savings, retired grandparents are returning to work and often relying on public benefits such as SNAP and CCAP. Over half of the families we serve are single grandparents on a single social security income. The only financial support they receive is the monthly Child Only TANF in the amount of \$141.00 per child. Which is only utilized by 12% of our families due to other underlying circumstances.

Kin are sometimes led to believe that Certification is the answer to financial support. However, any support stops the moment the case is closed. The Relative Guardianship Assistance Program "RGAP" requires kinship certification and possible reunification ruled out. Yet the goal is always reunification. Seldom do Colorado Counties utilize this federal funding.

Longevity:

GFC is not the same as the other organizations here today. We provide Kinship Navigation for families to maneuver the day-to-day challenges of being a kinship care provider. We assure connection to community resources that support their unique and individual needs, providing long-term case management, peer support and education essential to raising these children to adulthood.

Kinship Navigator Programs are a source of prevention from further disruption of our families and essential to our communities, yet we are challenged with funding to keep our programs going because our families are no longer involved in the child welfare system.

Legislative ask

Child welfare was meant to ensure children are not in harm's way. Family First asked us to consider the family as a whole. The voice of our families are asking legislators to change the way our system is built and support families in being whole by create a Family Welfare System. Much like the Office on Aging, support of family not just the children.

Gail Engel
Grand Family Coalition
Founder/Executive Director

Reference:

Generations United Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network – A National Technical Assistance Center; Who are grandfamilies and Kinship Families? <https://www.gksnetwork.org/who-are-grandfamilies-kinship-families/>, Kinship/Grandfamilies: Strengths and Challenges <https://www.gksnetwork.org/resources/grandfamilies-kinship-families-strengths-challenges/>

Source:

115, 259 children living in homes where a relative is head of household (Grandfamilies.org)
36,459 grandparents are responsible for their grandchildren in Colorado (Grandfamilies.org)
23,000 Children being raised by kin and no parent in the house (Grandfamilies.org)
35,000 children in kinship care and no parent present (Kids Count Data Center - <https://datacenter.aecf.org/topics>)
55,000 children are living with neither parent (Kids Count Data Center - Children are not living with a parent if the reference person for the household does not identify them as a biological, adopted or stepchild of the householder or as a child in a subfamily as determined by the Census Bureau. This includes children who are related to the householder as siblings, grandchildren, and foster children. Children are also included if they are the householder or the spouse/partner of the householder, a roommate or other nonrelative of the household. Children living in group quarters are categorized as not living with a parent.

Public Testimony

Gail Engel, Mother, Grandparent Raising her grandson with FASD and coparenting her granddaughter, keeping them from entering the child welfare system. Advocate

Who are grandfamilies and kin stepping up to take the place of Foster Care Providers.

We are families, grandparents, Aunts/Uncles, Sisters/Brothers, Stepparents, close family friends with long prior relationships with the parent and the children. These are our adult children, our grandchildren, our sisters/bothers and cousins that need our support. We have pulled them out of tough spots and watched them struggle. We did not plan on raising other people's children. We did not plan financially to raise these children. It was not in our plan to be a foster parent. We did not set out to do something good for humanity.

We have struggled with supporting our family members through poor mental health, addiction, incarceration, and endured judgment, shame and even guilt. We have put ourselves on the line to keep our families somewhat intact before child welfare got involved. We love these children as if they were our own and willing to walk through fire for them. We strive to keep our culture and beliefs alive and passed on to the next generation. We wish to get our families to the other side of this situation and raise resilient children.

We are not trained counselors or therapists. We are not aware of legal terminology and child welfare practices and policies. We do not understand how to raise children with trauma and have not learned how to advocate for them. We are not prepared to be what is being asked of us. We only know we love these children with all our hearts and want the best for them. We will do whatever it takes and feasibly possible to ensure these children's needs are met.

Out of desperation, we reached out to child welfare for support, and more often then not, told the children are safe with us. Mental health resources are nell and community support lacking. Little do we know that once child welfare gets involved our world is rocked to the core.

We are part of this community, so please don't use us as if we are just expected to do so free of charge. Treat us with respect as we are family to these children not a community service. You would not want that for yourself or your family.

Sincerely,
Gail Engel

