

2018 UPDATE

RAISING THE CHILDREN OF **THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC:**

SOLUTIONS AND SUPPORT FOR GRANDFAMILIES



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Executive Summary

More than 2.6 million children are raised by grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings and other extended family and close family friends who step forward to care for them when parents are unable.

New in this Report

- *Updated data on the opioid epidemic and its impact on grandfamilies*
- *Updated policy and program recommendations related to recently passed legislation - the Family First Prevention Services Act and the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act*
- *New finding - children placed in family foster care because of parental drug or alcohol use are now more likely to be placed with relatives than non-relatives*



More than 2.6 million children are raised by grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, other extended family and close family friends who step forward to care for them when parents are unable.¹ Although data is limited, research shows parental substance use is the most common reason these grandfamilies come together to raise children who would otherwise go into foster care.² With the rise in heroin and other opioid use, more relatives are raising children because the parents have died, are incarcerated, are using drugs, are in treatment or are otherwise unable to take care of their children. The vast majority of children being raised by relatives live outside the formal foster care system. Yet the child welfare system relies heavily on relatives, so much so that 32 percent of all children in foster care are living with relatives.³

After years of decline in the overall numbers of children in foster care, the numbers are rising. Experts say the opioid epidemic is responsible for this trend.⁴ Between 2015 and 2016, the drug overdose death rate rose sharply, particularly among those of childbearing age.⁵ More than a third of all children who were removed from their homes because of parental alcohol and drug use⁶ were placed with relatives.⁷ Yet the impact of parental

substance use disorders on grandfamilies is not a new challenge. For decades grandparents and other relatives have provided an essential safe haven for children whose parents have been unable to parent due to alcohol and other drug use - from crack cocaine to methamphetamines to opioids.

Grandfamilies affected by substance use disorders face a range of unique social, financial, physical and mental health challenges. Despite challenges, the growing reliance on grandfamilies is best for children whose parents cannot raise them. Decades of research repeatedly confirms that children who cannot remain with their birth parents thrive when raised by relatives and close family friends.⁸ They have more stable and safe childhoods than children raised by non-relatives.⁹ Public policies should better support children and caregivers in grandfamilies inside or outside the formal foster care system while offering services to birth parents in order to keep children safely with their parents whenever possible.

The Family First Prevention Services Act signed into law in February 2018 provides new opportunities for states to provide such supports to grandfamilies.

KEY FINDINGS

- The percentage of children in foster care with relatives has increased from 24 percent in 2008 to 32 percent in 2016. At the same time placements in non-relative family foster homes and group settings have decreased.¹⁰
- More than 1/3 of all children placed in foster care because of parental alcohol or drug use are placed with relatives.¹¹
- Of children in family foster care because of parental drug and alcohol use in 2016, more children lived with relatives than with non-relatives.¹²
- The drug overdose death rate rose sharply between 2015 and 2016, particularly among people of childbearing age, with increases of 29% among 25-34 year-olds and 24% among 35-44 year-olds.¹³
- 2.6 million children are being raised in grandfamilies or kinship care with no birth parents in the home (4 percent of all children).¹⁴
- 32 percent (139,017) of children in foster care are being raised by relatives.¹⁵
- For every child in foster care living with a relative, there are 19 children being raised by grandparents or other relatives outside of the foster care system.¹⁶
- Compared to children in foster care with non-relatives, children in foster care with relatives have more stability, better mental and behavioral health and are more likely to report always feeling loved.¹⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

Encourage states to offer a continuum of tailored services and supports for children, parents and caregivers in grandfamilies available through the Family First Prevention Services Act.

Ensure children in foster care are placed with families, prioritize placement with relatives and give them support to care for children with high level needs.

Promote services to children and caregivers in grandfamilies through the network of organizations serving older Americans by urging all states to maximize use of the National Family Caregiver Support Program.

Provide an array of legal options to grandfamilies by:

- ***Educating relatives on their full range of legal options and improving their access to legal assistance***
- ***Identifying and engaging relatives from the time children come to the attention of the child welfare system***
- ***Urging adoption of the Model Family Foster Home Licensing Standards so more relatives can be licensed foster parents and secure accompanying financial support, benefits and services to meet the needs of the child***

Ensure grandfamilies not licensed as foster parents can access financial assistance to meet children's needs, child care assistance and help securing employment.

Elevate and promote best practices for serving children, parents and caregivers in grandfamilies by creating and supporting a National Technical Assistance Center on Grandfamilies.

Grandfamilies Provide Safe Homes for Children Affected by the Opioid Epidemic

“For my 50th birthday, I got a 2-year-old. My story isn’t unique. This epidemic has devastated communities all over the country. It doesn’t discriminate against age, race, gender or income. It affects all of us. But sometimes it feels like folks in Washington don’t hear these stories.”¹⁸

- Pamela Livengood, grandparent caregiver

Like Pamela’s grandchild, more than 2.6 million children are raised by grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, other extended family and close family friends who step forward to care for them when parents are unable.¹⁹ Although data is limited, research shows parental substance use is the most common reason these grandfamilies come together to raise children who would otherwise go into foster care.²⁰ With the rise in heroin and other opioid use, more relatives are stepping up to raise children whose parents have died, are incarcerated, currently using drugs, in treatment or otherwise unable to take care of their children.

After years of decline in the overall numbers of children in foster care, the numbers are increasing. Experts say the opioid epidemic is responsible for this trend.²¹ In 2016, there were more than 437,000 children in foster care, up from about 397,000 children in 2012.²² The percentage of children entering foster care that had parental drug or alcohol use reported as a reason for removal increased from 26 percent in 2006 to 35 percent in 2016.²³ This is the largest increase of any reason for removal. More than 40 percent of children in foster care with relatives in 2016 were removed from their parents’ care because of parental alcohol or drug use, up from 34 percent in 2008.²⁴

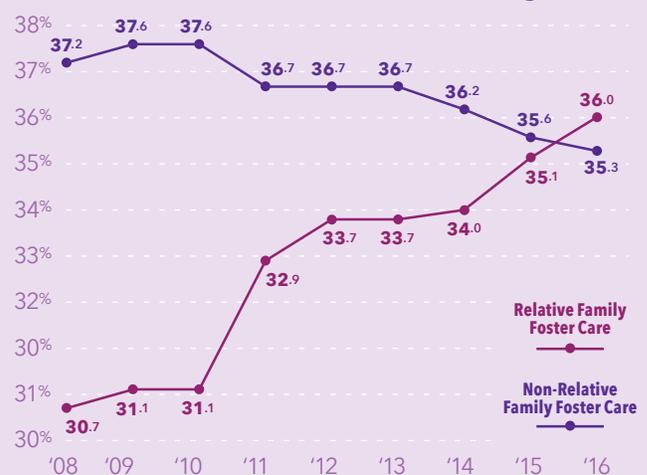
State-specific data further illustrate how rising opioid use is putting pressure on child welfare systems. From 2012 to 2016 in West Virginia, there was a 24 percent increase in children introduced to the system. About 42 percent were removed from their homes due to substance use.²⁵ In Pennsylvania, drug use is the number one reason children are removed from their homes.²⁶ In Maryland where opioid related deaths recently quadrupled, Baltimore experienced a 30 percent increase in foster care placements from 2014 to 2017.²⁷

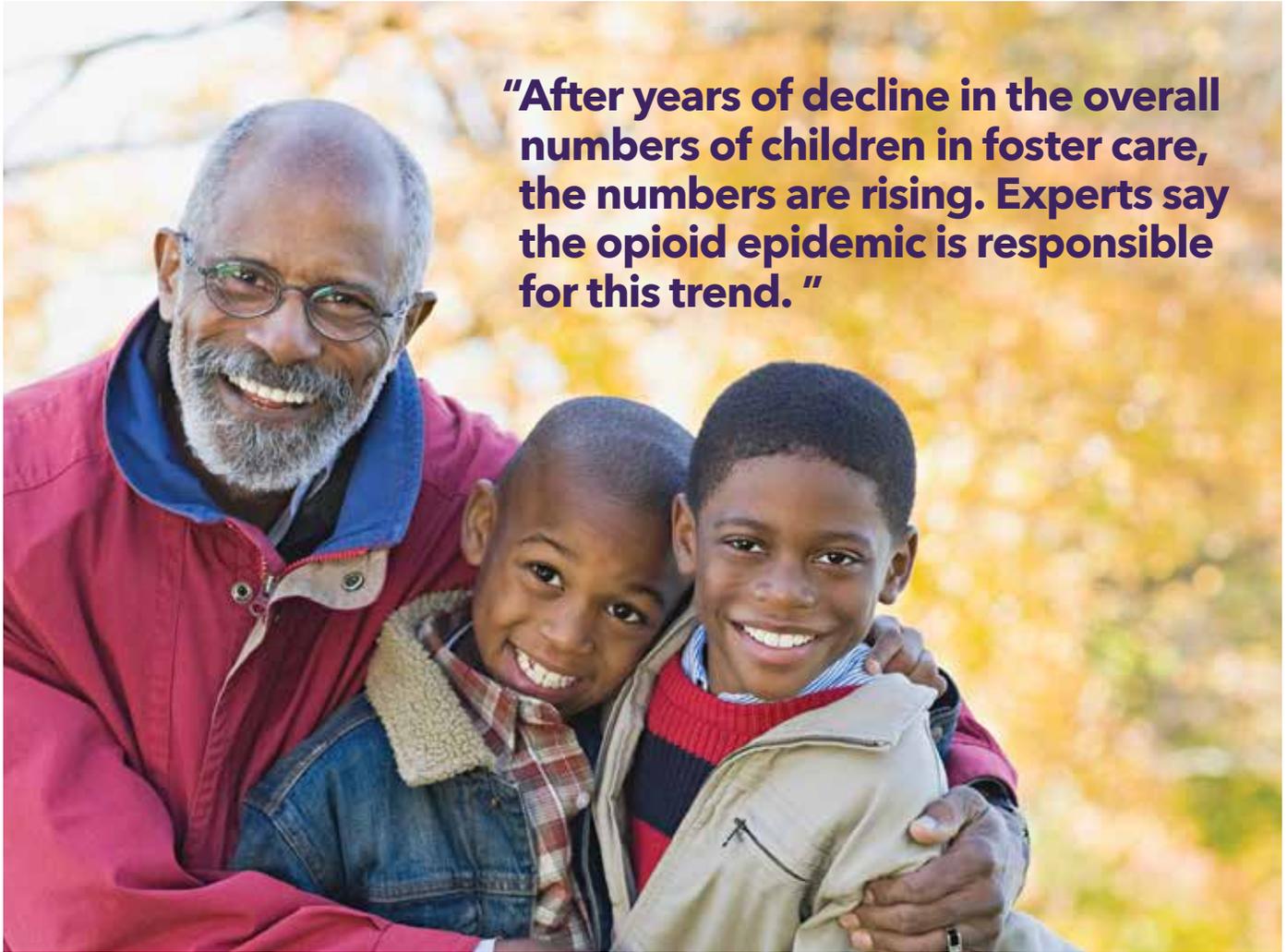
Relatives are being asked to care for these children more often as the child welfare system seeks to reduce its reliance on institutions and group care settings for children. In fact, 32 percent of all children in foster care are living with relatives.²⁸

In 2016, more than 139,000 children in foster care were living with relatives, an increase of over 8 percent since 2008.²⁹ Children are especially likely to end up in the care of relatives when parental alcohol or drug use is a reason for removal. In 2016, more than a third of all children who were removed from their homes because of parental alcohol and drug use were placed with relatives.³⁰ Of children in family foster care because of parental drug and alcohol use, more children live with relatives than with non-relatives.³¹

Although the child welfare system has a large percentage of children living with relatives, it is still a very small percentage compared to the total number of children living with relatives. For every child being raised in foster care with a relative, there are 19 children living with relatives outside of the foster care system.³²

Percentage of Foster Children in Out of Home Care Due to Alcohol or Drugs³³





“After years of decline in the overall numbers of children in foster care, the numbers are rising. Experts say the opioid epidemic is responsible for this trend.”



**Amount grand-
parents and other
relatives save
taxpayers each
year by raising
children and
keeping them
out of foster care ³⁴**



Chris Mathews:

"Grandparents are doing whatever it takes to bring their grandchildren to safety"

A few years after Chris Mathews' daughter got pregnant with her second child, things began to fall apart. With histories of substance use, she and her boyfriend began using drugs again. "Soon they were abusing prescription medication and shooting up heroin and anything they could get their hands on," Chris explained. "I made a decision that I couldn't sit by and watch."

But Chris and her partner lived in Florida, a long way from her daughter and two grandchildren, Kenny and Katrina, in Oregon. As a grandparent living in a different state, she made unsuccessful attempts to intervene. Kenny and Katrina persevered through a series of events with Chris' daughter, including continued drug use, domestic violence, theft and eventually homelessness.

Finally, after years of instability, Chris' daughter called her for help one day, desperate and homeless. She allowed Chris to bring Katrina, age nine, to live with her and her partner in Florida. Her daughter soon joined them, along with a new boyfriend. Chris helped to stabilize them in a nearby apartment. Later, thanks to Chris' steadfast advocacy, Kenny, who had been left behind in Oregon with his abusive father, came to live with them in Florida as well. Chris did all this while recuperating from a stroke and three heart attacks she had recently suffered.

But Chris' daughter was also living with an undiagnosed bipolar condition. She returned to drugs, self-medicating her mental illness. In 2006 she attempted suicide. Soon after, she was arrested for drug possession.

At that point, Chris decided to pursue emergency custody of both grandchildren. She learned about the Kinship Program, part of The Children's Home in Pinellas County. The program helped her navigate the court process to get full custody of the children, secure Social Security funds for them, and find support groups.

"I would have lost my mind without the Kinship Program," Chris said. "I have friendships to this day because of it." She also secured employment with the program – first working part-time as Kinship's support group assistant and now working full-time as their outreach coordinator.

Over time, Chris' granddaughter held steady, embraced by the love of the family Chris and her partner provided.

But Mathews' grandson, who was on track to become an Eagle Scout, struggled. "School bullying triggered the trauma and insecurity he endured at a young age," Chris explained, "and he reacted by putting a crude bomb, known as a Molotov cocktail, in the school bathroom." Chris knew he needed more help. With the support of the Kinship Program, Chris fought to keep her grandson out of a traditional juvenile justice facility and found a trauma-informed behavioral treatment program that he attended for several months. Throughout his time there Chris, her granddaughter and her partner drove two and a half hours three times a week to visit him and attend family therapy. The combination of this specialized treatment and the stable family his grandmother provided was just what Chris' grandson needed.

"He's 18 now, working at Lowe's full-time," Chris said. "Just this past June, he graduated cum laude. The Army and the Navy are looking at him; we're not sure which he's going to do yet. He's such a good kid, and I'm so proud of him."

"I'm so proud of my granddaughter, too – a lovely young lady. She is 24 and married. We have a great-grandson – we babysit him – and another one due this month. She and her husband both work and support themselves."

Both grandchildren have learned from Chris' modeling how to be consistent and nurturing caregivers. Now they help care for Mathews' partner who has early-onset Alzheimer's disease.

Chris' daughter is also back at home – taking medicine for the bipolar disorder and helping with household chores.

Today, Chris continues to advocate. "I'm constantly telling people to get the kids into therapy; don't let their lives be destroyed by what their parents did and what they've been through. At Kinship, we help with counseling, applying for public benefits, legal services, access to medical care, mentoring, tutors, support groups, transportation, vocational services, substance use treatment and more.

"And we're still fighting for grandparents' rights. We can't leave these kids in the situations they're in. The courts are getting much better, but it's taking the legislature too long. Grandparents are doing whatever it takes to bring their grandchildren to safety. We spend all of our savings. We lose our friends. We lose our identity. Work with us to get the financial aid, the legal help, the counseling and everything else we need to do this."

An Overview of the Opioid Crisis

134 people die every day from opioid-related drug overdoses.³⁵

Data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health show that 11.8 million people misused opioids in 2016.³⁶ Opioids are very addictive. They mimic and alter the brain's natural processes for seeking pleasure and removing pain. Significant numbers of heroin users began by misusing prescription opioids like OxyContin, Percocet and Vicodin. In fact about 11.5 million persons reported nonmedical use of prescription drugs in 2016.³⁷ About 80 percent of new heroin users report having previously misused prescription painkillers.³⁸ Rates of heroin use among ages 15 to 24 increased by 26 percent between 2015 and 2016.³⁹ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that prescription opioid misuse alone costs the U.S. \$78.5 billion a year, due to factors such as costs of healthcare, lost productivity, addiction treatment, and criminal justice involvement.⁴⁰

The opioid epidemic is particularly prevalent among white, middle-class men and women living in non-urban areas.⁴¹ Mental health and substance use disorder treatment, particularly medication-assisted treatment (MAT), is less available in rural areas than in large cities, as are doctors and other health care providers in general. Fewer

providers mean less treatment for opioid use disorders and less availability of MAT such as buprenorphine, methadone, and naltrexone, which are well-established, evidence-based treatment for opioid dependence.⁴² Funding and support may also be less available in rural areas to train police or other emergency personnel to carry naloxone, a nasal spray that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose. Data show naloxone is administered less in rural areas than in non-rural ones proportionate to overdose rates.⁴³

In 2014, the overdose death rate for both prescription and illicit drugs for whites ages 25 to 34 was five times its level in 1999, and the rate for whites ages 35 to 44 tripled during that period.⁴⁴ The death rate for drug overdoses among young African Americans, on the other hand, had edged up only slightly during that period. Studies found that doctors are more reluctant to prescribe painkillers to minority patients, a bias that may account for some of the difference.⁴⁵ This contrasts with the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, which disproportionately impacted African Americans.⁴⁶

Some experts suggest that the difference in the demographics of those affected by the opioid crisis along with lessons from the past have influenced the response to the opioid crisis in a way that contrasts with that of the crack cocaine epidemic, citing greater efforts to educate the public about addiction as a disease, a

less punitive approach from the criminal justice system, and more rapid community interventions – such as the use of naloxone to help reverse overdoses.⁴⁷

Recent data indicate that the impact of opioids is now growing rapidly among African Americans in parts of the country. Drug deaths among African Americans in urban counties, where synthetic opioids are increasingly present, rose by 41 percent in 2016.⁴⁸ In those same counties, the drug death rate among whites rose by 19 percent.⁴⁹

The nation is seeing sharp increases in the number of overall deaths involving synthetic opioids. These include, but are not limited to, fentanyl, fentanyl analogs, and tramadol. Such deaths doubled between 2015 and 2016.⁵⁰ In that same time period, the overall drug overdose death rate continued to show sharp increases particularly among people of childbearing age, with increases of 29 percent among 25 to 34 year-olds and 24 percent among 35 to 44 year-olds.⁵¹

All substance use – including opioids, crack cocaine, meth, and alcohol – has impacted grandfamilies across races, ethnicities and geographic areas for generations. The impact of each new drug epidemic on families points to the need to provide improved supports and services to the grandparents and other relatives who often raise children with little to no formal training on substance use disorders and related challenges.

Opioid and Other Substance Use Disorders Affect Each Generation in a Grandfamily

Many birth parents with opioid or other substance use disorders have a deep longing to parent. But their desire to be a good parent is severely impacted by their addiction, the effect of opioids on the brain, and the barriers they face finding treatment services and other supports to help them reunify with their children in a safe and stable home. Many parents in the child welfare system have undiagnosed mental health disorders, such as depression,

or have experienced significant trauma or violence that, left untreated, may perpetuate substance use disorders.

The children of parents with substance use disorders also face their own complex issues. They may have health issues that directly relate to their parents' substance use disorder. They may have been prenatally exposed to alcohol or other drugs, which can cause temporary or permanent health and developmental

challenges.⁵² They may also have experienced abuse or neglect associated with their parents' substance use. Early traumatic events, such as exposure to family violence and physical abuse can lead to a greater risk of developing PTSD and substance use disorders.⁵³ Once out of the home, the children may continue to face challenges associated with their trauma histories and uncertainty about their parents' welfare.

"We have friends who are retired who are always telling me about their next cruise to Hawaii. I tell them I go on cruises every day. I cruise to school, I cruise to the doctor's office, I cruise to the skateboarding park. Joey is my 'cruise to Hawaii' and you know what, I wouldn't trade my cruise for theirs."

**- Adrian Charniak,
grandparent caregiver**



The caregivers in grandfamilies impacted by substance use disorders face unique challenges, too. Because the children may have physical or cognitive health challenges resulting from their parents' substance use, caregivers have to both navigate those challenges and access and pay for appropriate health care and developmental services.

Caregivers may suffer from grief, their own mental health issues, stemming from feelings of shame, loss or guilt about their adult child's inability to parent due to their substance use disorder.⁵⁴ Relative caregivers may suffer social isolation and depression because they do not want their peers to know about their situation or because their peers

are no longer parenting.⁵⁵ Caregiver stress may be exacerbated by trying to maintain or navigate an ongoing relationship between the child and parent, often unaware if the parents are currently using drugs or alcohol and how their behavior will impact the child.⁵⁶

Culture Is Prevention: Strengthening Protection From the Opioid Crisis in Native American Communities

Ray Krise feels blessed that he was raised by his grandparents, Steven and Naomi Johns, who took him in as a newborn when his parents couldn't care for him. They all credit their cultural identity for their well-being. In their earlier years, Steven and Naomi strayed far from their tribal roots. But the year before Ray was born they were swayed by the wise man's prophecy which guided them to give up alcohol and begin studying their ancestors' ancient ways so they could pass on their identity and culture. Eventually, young Ray's grandfather became a great spiritual and tribal leader and, from 1965 until his death in 1980, he was an elder in the Native American Shaker Church. His grandmother became known as one of the best fishermen among the Skokomish, a great honor in tribal tradition.

"If not for being raised by my grandparents, I would not have a cultural identity," Krise explains. "I wouldn't know my family lineage and my son would not bear the name Tcha-LQad—a name that is 17 generations old.

"My grandparents raised me in old, traditional ways—no running the streets or going to dances like other kids my age. Instead, I was involved in the spiritual side of life. My passion was going to drum circles and listening to old people talk and perform ceremonies. That helped me develop a real sense of pride and belonging."

The IAMNDN Drug Free Nations program headquartered in the Comanche Nation Prevention and Recovery Center in Lawton, Oklahoma, recognizes the protective effects that come from that sense of pride and belonging. "Culture is Prevention" is the mantra of the IAMNDN movement whose goal is to "bridge the generational communication gap between adults, young adults and teenagers, to inspire and initiate dialogue between younger tribal members and current tribal leaders." Among their efforts, they co-sponsor an annual Native American Summit along with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The goal is to improve the self-esteem of local youth by building

connections with their culture. In turn, the program seeks to strengthen protective factors in native youth against the impact of substance use on native communities.

Recent studies have begun to point to the devastating impact the opioid crisis is having on the Native American population. According to a 2015 report by the Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality (CBHSQ), the rate of non-medical use of prescription pain relievers among Native Americans was 6.9 percent, which was significantly higher than that among Asian Americans (1.8 percent), African Americans (3.6 percent) and Caucasians (4.3 percent).⁵⁷ Similarly, the CDC's 2014 report on opioid overdose deaths by race shows that Native Americans fatally overdosed at a rate of 8.4 percent, which was over double and triple that of African Americans and Latinos, respectively.⁵⁸

The adverse effects of historical trauma, discrimination and unresolved grief transmitted from one generation to the next have been shown to be strongly connected to substance use disorders in Native American communities.⁵⁹ At the same time, Indian health resource services are limited, making it difficult to seek quality medical treatment and rehabilitation.⁶⁰

Programs like IAMNDN show promise. They engage community members and leaders and emphasize the importance of traditional culture in combating opioid use in Native American communities, an approach that matches particularly well with the strengths of grandfamilies.

Ray Krise understands the power of that culture. Now he is a spiritual leader, speaker and heredity chief, passing the protective traditions on to his children and grandchildren.

For more information on the IAMNDN Drug Free Nations Program visit iamndn.dwgdev.net

"If not for being raised by my grandparents, I would not have a cultural identity. I wouldn't know my family lineage and my son would not bear the name Tcha-LQad- a name that is 17 generations old... [They] helped me develop a real sense of pride and belonging."

- Ray Krise, raised in a grandfamily

Children Thrive in Grandfamilies

Despite challenges, decades of research repeatedly confirms that children who cannot remain with their parents thrive when raised by relatives and close family friends. Children in foster care with relatives have more stable and safe childhoods than children in foster care with non-relatives, with greater likelihood of having a permanent home.⁶¹ They experience fewer school changes,⁶² have better behavioral and mental health outcomes,⁶³ and report that they “always felt loved.”⁶⁴ They are more likely to keep their connections to brothers and sisters, family and community, and their cultural identity.⁶⁵ Moreover, children in foster care with relatives are less likely to re-enter the foster care system after returning to birth parents.⁶⁶ If returning to parents is not possible, relatives are willing to adopt or become permanent guardians.⁶⁷ In fact, 34 percent of all children adopted from foster care are adopted by relatives and 10 percent of all children who exit foster care exit to guardianship with relatives.⁶⁸

In addition to the many benefits to children, relative caregivers report benefiting from providing this care, often citing an increased sense of purpose.⁶⁹ Birth parents may also value that their children remain connected to family and friends.

“I feel blessed to have this boy in my life. He is a treasure, and most likely, I would not be here without him. He gave me something positive to focus on, rather than the heartaches and sadness and grief. I have a renewed sense of hope, that I’m doing something worthwhile.”⁷⁰

- Bonnie Martin, grandparent caregiver



Shaheed Morris: "If not for her, who knows how my life might have unfolded"

Drug use makes people do tragic things. For Shaheed Morris, 28, his mother's addiction to crack cocaine drove her to walk out of a Trenton, N.J., hospital a couple of days after giving birth to him, never looking back. His incarcerated father was not there either.

Shaheed was born with fetal distress related to his mother's drug and alcohol use while she was pregnant. He had no ability to move his neck and head and not much hope for survival. "I'm thankful that my grandmother took the initiative to go to the hospital and claim me," Shaheed said. "Otherwise, I was en route to foster care. If not for her, who knows how my life might have unfolded."

Fast-forward to May 2016, when Shaheed graduated with a journalism degree from South Dakota State University – the first in his family to complete college – and is looking for a job that can build on his freelance reporting experience, as well as his internship with *The Salt Lake Tribune*.

"The impressive thing about my grandmother is that she had already raised my cousin. Now she was raising another grandson," Shaheed said. "Because of the drugs in my system when I was born, I needed a lot of therapy. She had no car so she used public transportation to get me to therapy every day for almost a year. She worked part-time as a custodian at the public schools, but that income was not enough to keep up with the expenses of a baby with special medical needs. So, with only a 5th grade education, she found a way to piece together the support she needed.

She secured critical help from what was then the AFDC program, Food Stamps, the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program and public housing.

"It was not easy for my grandmother to raise a child with serious needs while she was in her early 60s with little support," Shaheed said. "We need more support for grandparents like her who step up to care for us.

"I was fortunate. Along with my grandmother, I had a lot of mentors who helped me navigate. Somehow, I managed to graduate from high school. I realized, when I started reading a lot of books, that many people had higher levels of education. I got tired of working low-paying jobs – couldn't afford a car or go on trips or move up the social ladder. So, I researched and found South Dakota State where I could accrue less than \$30,000 in debt. "

Today, Shaheed is still close with his 89-year-old grandmother and the mentors who helped guide him to move beyond his circumstances.

"Now I tell kids to seek mentors in various forms and fashions, as well as various ethnicities. Find something you want to do in life – be passionate and work hard at it. And to grandfamilies who step up in challenging times, I will continue to advocate for you."

Shaheed is also in the process of writing his first book. He is an active member of the National Association of Black Journalists.



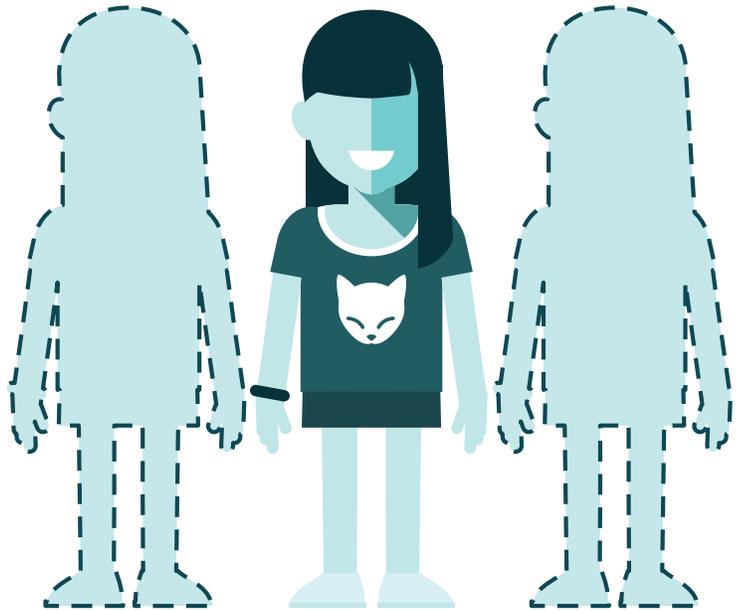
"It was not easy for my grandmother to raise a child with serious needs while she was in her early 60s with little support. We need more support for grandparents like her who step up to care for us."

- Shaheed Morris, raised in a grandfamily

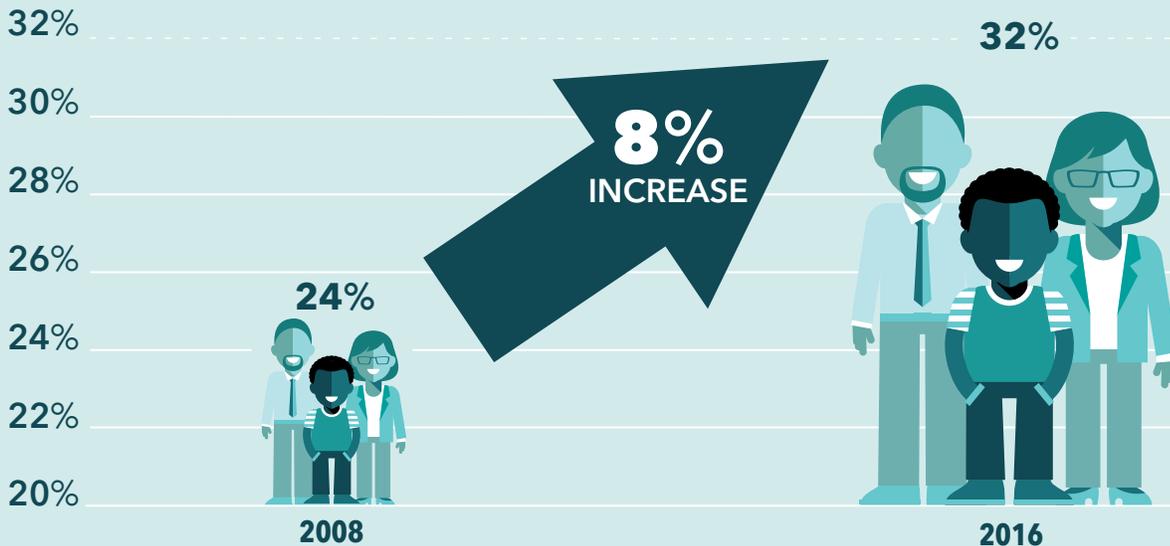


Between 2015 and 2016 there was a **29%** increase in overdose death rate among adults of childbearing age.⁷¹

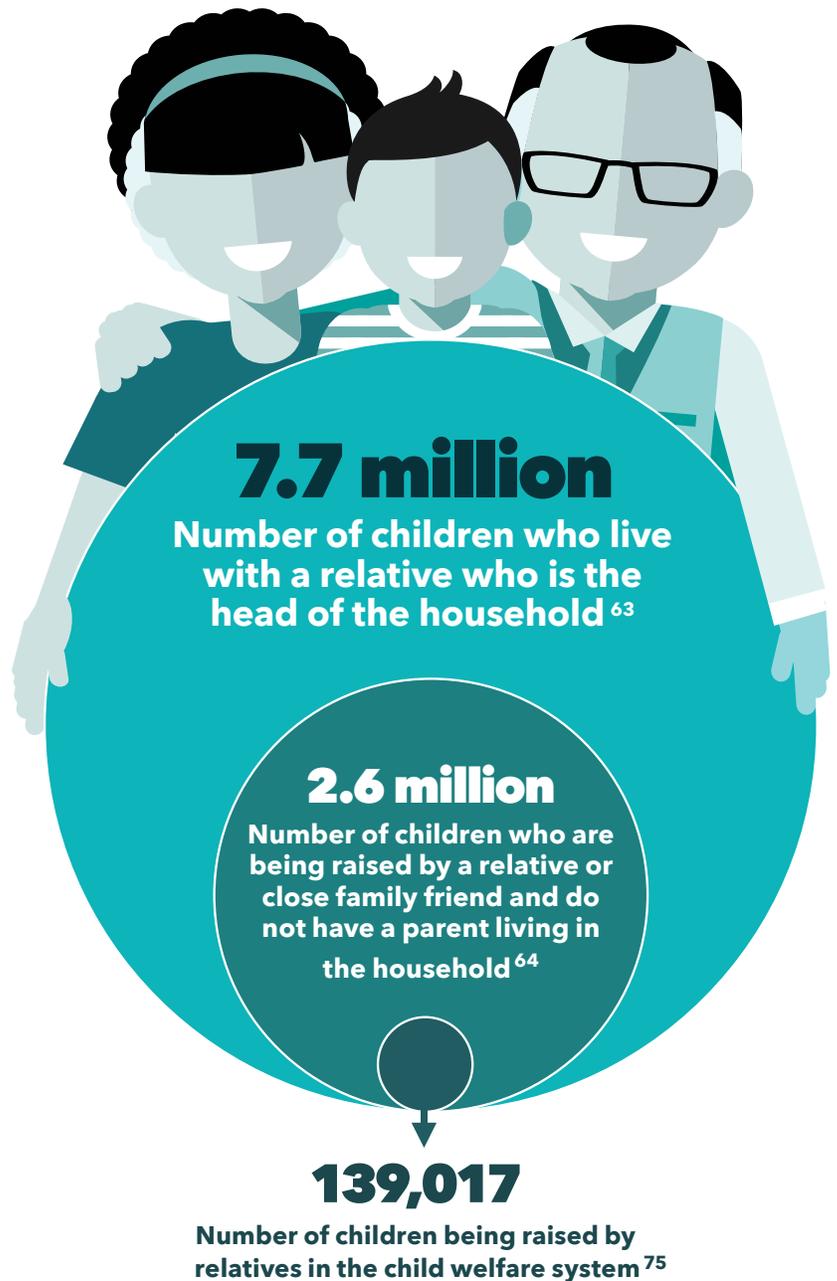
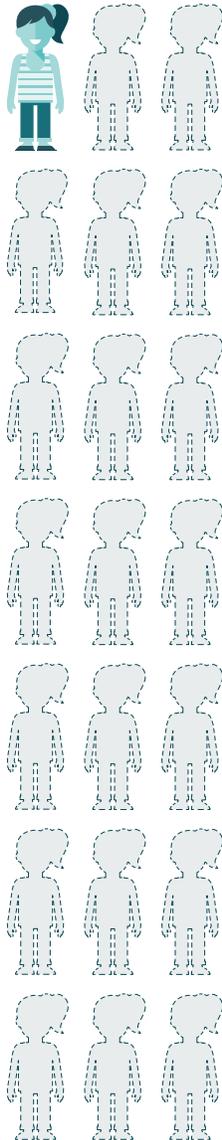
More than **1/3** of all children placed in foster care because of parental substance use are **placed with relatives.**⁷²



Percent of Children in Foster Care Being Raised by Relatives⁷³



For every **1** child in foster care with relatives there are **19** children being raised by grand-parents or other relatives outside of the foster care system.⁷⁴



GRANDPARENTS RESPONSIBLE FOR GRANDCHILDREN (2016)

2,519,737 Grandparents are responsible for grandchildren⁶⁶



57 percent of them are in the workforce⁷⁷



19 percent of them live below the poverty line⁷⁸



26 percent of them have a disability⁷⁹



43 percent of them have provided care for 5 years or more⁸⁰



41 percent of them are over 60⁸¹



Supporting Grandfamilies Helps Children Thrive

“I would have lost my mind without the Kinship Program. They helped me navigate the court process, secure Social Security for the children, and connect to support groups. When my grandson got in trouble they helped me fight to keep him out of a juvenile justice facility and get him the treatment he needed. Now he is working full time and recently graduated cum laude.”

- Chris Mathews, grandparent caregiver



Whether inside or outside the child welfare system, grandfamilies are in need of support. Many of the caregivers are over 60, retired or living on a fixed income. Nearly one in five lives below the poverty line.⁸² Thrown into their caregiving role with little or no warning, caregivers are often not even aware of supports and services for which their families may be eligible, such as housing or child care assistance, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families or SNAP (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program).⁸³ At the same time parents of the children both inside and outside the foster care system often face challenges accessing substance use disorder treatment, mental health and other services to help them safely parent again or to prevent the need for the children to be removed and placed with relatives in the first place.

Grandparents and other relatives raising children outside of foster care are often struggling with even less support than those in the formal system. They do not have access to the same level of monthly financial support or other support services. Moreover, many caregivers outside the system may have serious challenges enrolling the children in school, consenting to health care or accessing health records if they lack a legal relationship to the children.⁸⁴

Both within and outside the system, there is a dearth of trauma-informed services to help children heal from the experience of living with a parent with a substance use disorder and the trauma of separation from their parents. Moreover, training for dealing with this trauma and other caregiving needs is typically only available to relatives involved in the child welfare system. Yet it is usually not designed with grandfamilies in mind and does not take into consideration the unique circumstances and loyalty issues facing these families.

Research shows that when caregivers in grandfamilies receive services and support, children have significantly better social and mental health outcomes than children of caregivers who do not receive services and support.⁸⁵ Examples of services and supports that demonstrate improved outcomes include support groups, mental health services, case management, and kinship navigator programs. Navigators provide a single point of entry for learning about housing, household resources, physical and mental health services, and financial and legal assistance. Research also shows that families receiving support from such programs experienced increased permanency and stability, improved safety, lower rates of foster care re-entry, reduced behavioral problems in children and youth and increased caregiver strengths.⁸⁶

Through the Ups and Downs: Utah Grandfamilies Program

Seven years ago, Ron and Felecia* got the call. Their daughter, suffering from heroin addiction, was going to jail for drug possession. Their struggles were twofold. They had a grieving 3-year-old granddaughter, Harper*, to raise and comfort. They were also grieving for their daughter and a new situation they hadn't planned on. Harper is among the more than 17,000 children in Utah whose relatives are raising them.

Ron and Felecia's story resonates with many of the 800 grandfamilies, 40 percent of whom are affected by opioid misuse, that the Children's Service Society (CSS) of Utah helps annually. Their Grandfamilies program – operating in Salt Lake, Davis, Weber and Cache counties – helps these families access grants and helps relative caregivers become legal guardians.

Besides crisis prevention services, the program provides services such as Grandfamilies First Class, Friend 2 Friend and Children's Groups. Grandfamilies First Class is a 10-week series for grandparents and other relatives raising children that meets weekly throughout the year. "We talk about the legal issues and establishing boundaries with their adult children," said Bacall Hincks, program coordinator with Grandfamilies. "We discuss what substance abuse is and how it's a disease."

In the Children's Groups, held at the same time as Grandfamilies First, children ages 4 through 11 engage in psycho-social classes led by trained professionals. "We also do age-appropriate substance abuse discussions with them," Bacall explained. "We discuss emotions, coping strategies and how to manage their anger because a lot of them are angry. They've seen abuse and have been neglected."

Once those families complete the group sessions, they join Friend 2 Friend, an activity and support group that hosts events like Easter egg hunts and parties for Christmas and Halloween. Families in this group get free tickets to sporting events and

other community activities. This group especially helps grandparents whose retired friends can't relate to their living situation. Bacall said, "This is an opportunity for these families to create a peer network and support one another."

That support can be a family saying, "My daughter messed up and relapsed again," and another family saying, "So did mine, and it's OK. We'll get through this together."

It's that support that helps sustain Ron and Felecia, Harper's grandparents who took her in when she was three years old. She's now 10. Her mother was recently arrested again on drug possession. Harper wants her mom to get better, especially after watching her schoolmates whose parents are in their lives.

Bacall said elected officials should know that even though they work with grandfamilies, it's important not to exclude the parent who's suffering from addiction.

"That parent is still a parent to their children," she explained. "We have to do our best to try to reunify them with these kids so that grandma and grandpa can go on being grandma and grandpa, and mom and dad can become mom and dad again."

But not every grandparent goes back to being grandma or grandpa. For them, Bacall said, it's important for the Senate to pass the Family First Prevention Services Act, which supports grandfamilies. Funding for grandfamilies will not only help families access community resources, it will also provide specific therapeutic supports and other preventative services designed to keep families together.

"These families don't just deal with the drug abuse once and then it's over," she explained. "That's what's so important about our program. We have that on-going support for families. We're able to be there for them when these ups and downs occur."

** Names were changed to protect the family's privacy.*

Grandfamilies Programs Report Service Needs in Response to Opioid Use

A survey of programs across the U.S. that primarily serve grandfamilies raising children outside of the foster care system revealed that the opioid crisis is having a significant impact on the children and families. Almost all of the responding programs reported serving families impacted by parental alcohol or other drug use. More than 70 percent identified opioids, including heroin, as one of the most common types of drugs impacting the families. The services most frequently requested and used by grandfamilies impacted by substance use were: kinship navigation services, mental health services and financial assistance / counseling, pointing to a strong need to further develop and expand these services. Families also made frequent use of support groups and often requested legal assistance and respite care. Reported barriers to accessing services included: transportation and scarce availability of services in rural areas, limited eligibility criteria, issues with the children's birth parents, reading and comprehension issues, and poor relationships with child welfare agencies.⁸⁷

Policy and Program Recommendations

While the impact of the opioid epidemic is still being uncovered, the effect of parental substance use disorders on children and caregivers in grandfamilies is not a new challenge. Each new drug epidemic points to the need to provide improved supports and services to the children and to the caregivers who often step in to care for the children with little to no formal help. The following are recommendations for policymakers, advocates and professionals serving children, caregivers and parents in grandfamilies affected by substance use disorders:

Encourage States to Offer a Continuum of Tailored Services and Supports for Children, Parents and Caregivers in Grandfamilies Available through the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First Act):

- ▶ **Prevention and Post Permanency Services** - States should use available title IV-E federal child welfare funds for evidence-based, trauma-informed prevention services for families of eligible children. Eligible children are candidates for foster care, identified by the state as being at imminent risk of entering or re-entering foster care, but who can safely remain with a parent or with a kinship caregiver if provided services. Parents or kin caregivers are also eligible for relevant services. Such trauma-informed services must be shown to improve outcomes for children and include: mental health treatment, substance abuse prevention and treatment, and in-home parent skill-based supports.⁸⁸ Eligibility for services is not limited to children who meet title IV-E income requirements.
- ▶ **Kinship Navigator Programs** - Research shows kinship navigator programs are successful portals to services and supports for many grandfamilies, including those impacted by substance use. States and tribes should offer evidence-based kinship navigator programs which may receive partial federal reimbursement through the Family First Act. Developing a quality evidence-based program requires time and additional initial investments. Congress appropriated funds in 2018 to help eligible states, territories and tribes who apply, to create, improve and/or evaluate kinship navigator programs that meet Family First Act evidence-based standards. Generations United recommends appropriating additional parallel funding for kinship navigator programs in 2019.

Ensure Children in Foster Care Are Placed With Families, Prioritize Placement With Relatives and Give Them Support to Care for Children With High Level Needs:

Consistent with the principle that children do best in families,

implement the Family First Act, which encourages the placement of children in foster care in the least restrictive, most family-like settings appropriate to their needs. Moreover, in line with current federal law, first look for relatives who can serve as the best possible family homes for children whose parents are unable to raise them due to a substance use disorder or other child welfare issues. Families should be given the services and supports they need to care for the children who often come with high-level emotional, behavioral and/or physical health challenges.

Promote Services to Grandfamilies Through the Network of Organizations Serving Older Americans:

Urge all states to maximize use of the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP). NFCSP funds may be used to provide supportive services to children and caregivers in grandfamilies where the caregiver is age 55 or older, regardless of child welfare involvement or if the child is a candidate for foster care. Among the services are those that are helpful to grandfamilies impacted by substance use including support groups, counseling, respite care, training, and even direct legal services. Although up to ten percent of the program's funds can be used for grandfamilies, most states do not make full use of this program to help support these families.

Provide an Array of Legal Options to Grandfamilies by:

- ▶ **Educating Relatives on the Full Range of Legal Options and Improving Their Access to Legal Assistance** - Ensure that all grandfamilies impacted by parental substance use disorders, whether inside or outside the foster care system, have access to a continuum of legal relationship options and that they understand the differences - both legal and practical - of adoption, guardianship and legal custody. As part of this effort, grandfamilies' access to legal representation and assistance must be improved and expanded. Furthermore, all states should enact educational

and health care consent laws so that children outside the foster care system and without a legal relationship to their caregivers can access educational and health care services.

► **Identifying and Engaging Relatives From the Beginning** - Involve relatives as soon as children come to the attention of the child welfare system, starting with their identification and notification and continuing to engage them throughout. Ensure that relatives know they have options that range from becoming licensed foster parents for the children to offering homes the children can visit and that they understand the benefits and challenges of each option. Child welfare agencies should inform relatives that if they become licensed foster parents and if the children cannot return to their parents, the children may be eligible to exit foster care to adoption or permanent guardianship with them and receive adoption subsidies or Guardianship Assistance Payments (GAP) if their jurisdiction offers GAP. States that do not offer GAP should adopt the program.

► **Addressing Barriers to Foster Family Home Licensure** - Adopt model family foster home licensing standards which address unnecessary barriers that prevent suitable relatives non-relatives from becoming licensed foster parents. The Children's Bureau is identifying national model standards as required by the Family First Act. The standards are based on the National Association for Regulatory Administration (NARA) standards which were jointly developed with Generations United, the American Bar Association and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Generations United urges states to adopt the standards using the NARA standards, interpretive guide and crosswalk tool. Foster care licensure comes with significant financial support, services and other benefits that help grandfamilies provide for the needs of the child. Grandfamilies who are licensed are also usually eligible for guardianship assistance payments and/or adoption assistance if the child later exits foster care to a permanent home with the caregiver.

Ensure grandfamilies not licensed as foster parents can access financial assistance to meet children's needs, child care assistance and help securing employment:

States, tribes and localities must improve access to TANF for grandfamilies by ensuring that caregivers know it is available, streamlining the application process, facilitating the application for child-only TANF by offering it through its own short application, and defining "good cause" for caregivers not to comply with assigning parental child support to the state. Such assignment is often a huge barrier for grandfamilies.

The federal government can take steps, including requiring that each child on a TANF child-only grant in a family receive the same amount of assistance and eliminating asset tests for older caregivers so they can have savings for retirement. Detailed recommendations for addressing TANF issues for grandfamilies are available in Generations United's policy brief *Improving Grandfamilies Access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families* at www.grandfamilies.org.

Caregivers who are not in the work force but who seek and are able to return to the work force while still meeting the needs of the children should receive child care assistance and support as needed in their efforts to secure employment.

Elevate and Promote Best Practices Through a National Technical Assistance Center on Grandfamilies:

Create a National Technical Assistance Center on Grandfamilies that engages experienced experts to provide a clearinghouse of best or promising practices and programs for serving children, parents and caregivers in grandfamilies. This includes guidelines for states and tribes to encourage best practices to support grandfamilies impacted by parental substance use, including ways to help caregivers meet the children's needs and support birth parents' access, engagement and success in treatment. The Center can facilitate learning across states and provide technical assistance and resources to those who directly work with children, caregivers and parents in grandfamilies. The recently passed Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act creates an advisory council to identify best practices and gaps in services and provide information on federal resources. A technical assistance center will assist states and localities in implementing and applying the findings from the council.



Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies is a leading voice for issues affecting families headed by grandparents and other relatives. Through the Center, Generations United leads an advisory group of organizations, caregivers and youth that sets the national agenda to advance public will in support of these families. Center staff conduct federal advocacy, provide technical assistance to state-level practitioners and advocates, and train grandfamilies to advocate for themselves. The Center raises awareness about the strengths and needs of the families through media outreach, weekly communications and awareness-raising events. It offers a broad range of guides, fact sheets and tools for grandfamilies, which cover issues from educational and health care access to financial and legal supports and can be found at www.gu.org.

Acknowledgments

Generations United gratefully acknowledges the following dedicated individuals and organizations whose work and support made this report possible:

- ▶ *Chris Mathews, Shaheed Morris, Ray Krise and the Grandfamilies Program of the Children's Services Society of Utah for sharing their stories;*
- ▶ *Generations United's Ana Beltran, Jaia Peterson Lent and Adam Otto for authoring and contributing to this report, Carolyn Walsh, Sydney Franklin, Diane Roznowski and Danica Derriennic for compiling research, Cathy Jenkins and Alan King for conducting interviews and writing personal stories and program profiles, and Donna Butts and Sheri Steinig for their review;*
- ▶ *Children & Family Futures for providing data and a detailed review of the report;*
- ▶ *The Brookdale Foundation Group for sending a survey on substance use out to their RAPP network;*
- ▶ *Rebecca Robuck and Jennifer Miller of ChildFocus, Heidi Epstein of the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, and Generations United GrAND members Joan Callander Dingle, Sharon Olson, Dolores Bryant and Sarah Smalls for their review and feedback.*

Finally, we extend our gratitude to The Brookdale Foundation Group, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and Verizon Foundation whose support made this project possible.

Design and Layout

Theodore Topolewski / orchardpath.com / OrchardPath Creative LLC 🍷 Printed September 2018

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Disclaimers

This report was funded in part by The Brookdale Foundation Group, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and Verizon Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the ideas, findings, and conclusions presented in this report are those of Generations United alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these organizations.

COLOPHON

Typography: *Abril Titling Italic*, Avenir Next & Avenir Next Condensed set in 10.875 point : Ultra Light, Medium, *Medium Italic*, **Demi Bold**, *Demi Bold Italic*, **Bold**, *Bold Italic*, and **Heavy**.

State	(%) Children in Foster Care Raised in Grandfamilies or Kinship Care ⁸⁹ 2016	(#) Children in Foster Care Raised in Grandfamilies or Kinship Care 2016	(%) Children in Kinship Care ⁹⁰ 2015-2017	(#) Children in Kinship Care 2015-2017
United States	32%	139,017	4%	2,632,000
Alabama	10%	509	6%	68,000
Alaska	26%	734	5%	9,000
Arizona	48%	7,999	5%	73,000
Arkansas	20%	984	6%	41,000
California	32%	17,437	3%	269,000
Colorado	26%	1,482	3%	42,000
Connecticut	37%	1,529	2%	17,000
Delaware	12%	96	4%	9,000
District of Columbia	19%	158	6%	7,000
Florida	44%	10,474	4%	179,000
Georgia	29%	3,633	3%	85,000
Hawaii	43%	677	6%	18,000
Idaho	31%	463	2%	9,000
Illinois	40%	6,437	3%	85,000
Indiana	37%	7,431	4%	57,000
Iowa	33%	1,978	3%	20,000
Kansas	30%	2,202	3%	21,000
Kentucky	4%	349	8%	81,000
Louisiana	36%	1,609	6%	63,000
Maine	31%	563	6%	5,000
Maryland	37%	1,418	3%	38,000
Massachusetts	27%	2,969	3%	35,000
Michigan	35%	4,057	2%	53,000
Minnesota	38%	3,343	2%	27,000
Mississippi	40%	2,162	6%	47,000
Missouri	28%	3,510	4%	50,000
Montana	46%	1,533	4%	8,000
Nebraska	33%	1,324	2%	12,000
Nevada	39%	1,597	5%	32,000
New Hampshire	24%	288	3%	7,000
New Jersey	36%	2,339	3%	67,000
New Mexico	22%	581	5%	26,000
New York	38%	7,420	3%	128,000
North Carolina	27%	2,807	4%	89,000
North Dakota	20%	277	3%	6,000
Ohio	19%	2,551	5%	119,000
Oklahoma	32%	3,197	4%	43,000
Oregon	33%	2,501	3%	27,000
Pennsylvania	35%	5,605	3%	90,000
Puerto Rico	14%	582	N/A	N/A
Rhode Island	39%	651	3%	6,000
South Carolina	6%	222	6%	64,000
South Dakota	24%	336	3%	7,000
Tennessee	9%	749	5%	71,000
Texas	35%	10,704	3%	259,000
Utah	27%	760	2%	15,000
Vermont	31%	416	3%	4,000
Virginia	6%	290	3%	57,000
Washington	34%	3,758	3%	43,000
West Virginia	21%	1,262	5%	20,000
Wisconsin	38%	2,774	2%	30,000
Wyoming	27%	270	3%	4,000

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