

Supporting Grandfamilies through the COVID-19 Crisis

April 2020

Nearly 1 in 10 children live in households headed by a grandparent or other relative. These families are commonly known as grandfamilies or kinship families. Before the current COVID-19 crisis, opioid abuse has been forcing many children to be raised in grandfamilies. This has left caregivers and communities to simultaneously navigate two crises. However, these compounding challenges are often overlooked in communities, but local leaders can help. The following highlights actions local decision makers can take to support grandfamilies during these crises.

Grandfamilies in your Community

Grandfamilies, while most often headed by a grandparent, can also be an aunt, uncle, older sibling or close family friend that steps in when a parent is unable to care for the child(ren). The reasons vary including parental death, illness, substance use, mental illness, military deployment, incarceration, divorce, deportation, job loss, or out of state employment.

Regardless of the situation, children fare better in the care of their relatives compared to non-relative care. They have more stability, are more likely to maintain connections with siblings, preserve their cultural heritage and community bonds. Grandfamilies keep millions of children with family and out of an overburdened foster care system and saves taxpayers more than \$4 billion each year. Without them, the child welfare system would be completely overwhelmed.

Grandfamilies are Vulnerable

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, grandfamilies faced barriers to housing, health care, food, and financial assistance. The current crisis has heightened the fragility of these households. Grandfamily caregivers, because of their age and/or underlying health conditions, are at high risk for contracting coronavirus and suffering severe health consequences or death. They are unable to visit stores or other community resources without risk of exposure to COVID-19. They're struggling to get food, medical supplies, and computers, internet connectivity, and special education services so children can learn at home, along with the lack of respite and child care that school time had provided to caregivers. Many who were working are losing full or part time jobs. And older caregivers often use their retirement savings to pay for the children's needs. Now those savings are plummeting. Also, if grandfamily caregivers do become sick, it leaves the children with few options other than foster care.

Local leaders can develop a comprehensive approach to help mitigate these risks by connecting grandfamilies to:

- food and supplies;
- accurate information from people they trust;
- help with supporting the children's educational and special needs at home;
- financial assistance;
- technology support for telehealth, distance learning, and to reduce isolation;
- respite care and assistance making alternative care plans for children.



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Priorities to Support Grandfamilies

The **Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act** known as the “CARES Act” provides more than \$2 trillion to address the health, economic and well-being of individuals and families across the country. The new law focuses on direct economic relief to individuals and businesses in addition to expanding financial support to existing programs for families.

The following are top priorities during this crisis to aid grandfamilies in your community. Some of these programs have dedicated additional funds through the CARES Act. Others are important existing programs that serve grandfamilies in your community, which could be better supported through the use of flexible federal CARES Act funds or other COVID response dollars.

Health: Food and Supplies

Access to food and medical/health supplies without putting grandfamilies at higher risk are critical at this time. Prioritizing grandfamilies for delivery or no-touch access to food and medical supplies and telehealth are all key to lowering their risk.

- **Federally Qualified Health Centers & Rural Health Clinics** have been allowed to expand access to telehealth in homes or other settings for Medicare enrollees.
- **Emergency Food Assistance Program** supplemental funding helps food banks, soup kitchens and others provide no cost food assistance for low-income individuals.

Personal Supports & Planning

Each grandfamily’s situation is different and therefore needs assistance navigating programs and options available to them. Both caregivers and children need emotional and mental health support, and planning is necessary if a caretaker becomes ill and unable to care for the child(ren).



- **Kinship Navigator Programs** are administered locally to support grandfamilies with information and coordination of community-based programs to help obtain supplies and support they need.
- **Family Caregiver Support** additional funding is available through state and tribal agencies on aging to provide services and supports to family caregivers, including grandfamily caregivers.

Financial Assistance

Many grandfamily caregivers have full or part time jobs to help provide for children and/or rely on retirement savings to make ends meet. With high job losses and savings devastated by the stock market plunge, they need financial assistance for basic needs including food and rent.

- **Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)** supplemental funding is available to local eligible entities to address unemployment and economic disruption due to COVID-19.

- **Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)** TANF child-only grants help grandfamily caregivers meet the needs of the children. These grants are often the only source of financial support to grandfamilies, but the grants are generally not easily accessible. Improving access to these important grants and making short-term benefits available to the families are critical response tools.

Housing Assistance

Grandfamilies are often not recognized as “families” by public or private landlords when they seek assistance. Before the current crisis, less than 1/3 of income eligible grandfamilies received housing assistance. The increased federal investment in the following programs provides local policymakers the opportunity to step up to help grandfamilies.

- **Emergency Solutions Grants** provide support for the homeless or those at risk of homelessness.
- **Community Development Block Grant and Indian Community Block Grant** supports services for senior citizens, the homeless and other public health programs.
- **Housing for the Elderly** provides affordable housing for seniors.
- **Family Unification Vouchers** allow “families” in which inadequate housing is causing separation (or threat of) from children. Local decision makers can define “families” to include grandfamilies.

Technology and Internet Access

For many grandfamilies purchasing a computer and internet access may not be financially feasible, and they may struggle to understand how to use new technology. However with a growing demand on technology for education, health, and to prevent social isolation, local solutions are needed and new state funds are available.

- **Departments of Education** received additional funds to support the purchase of technology for students.
- **Governors Emergency Relief Education Fund** provided the state flexible funding for education in your community.

To learn more about the CARES Act and grandfamilies view a summary here:

<https://bit.ly/2xMFP3B>

About Generations United

The mission of Generations United is to improve the lives of children, youth and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies and programs for the enduring benefit of all. To learn more visit www.gu.org. For more resources on grandfamilies visit www.grandfamilies.org

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