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Executive Director

May 1, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Minority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 2051

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer:

As the impact of COVID-19 continues to grow across the country, Generations United urges Congress to include supports in the next relief package for families where grandparents and other relatives are raising children. These “grandfamilies” face unique and especially daunting challenges during this crisis.

Adults over the age of 60 and people with compromised immune systems are asked to isolate themselves and not have contact with children and young people. This is not possible for the millions of grandparents and other relatives who are raising children when the parents cannot. Many of these caregivers are older or have health concerns that place them at significant risk if exposed to the virus.

More than 2.65 million children are being raised by grandparents and other relatives who stepped in to keep them safely with family and out of foster care, saving taxpayers more than \$4 billion each year. Without these caregivers, the already overburdened foster care system would be completely overwhelmed. Parental substance use and the opioid epidemic are some of the most common reasons grandparents and other relatives are raising children. Because of the opioid crisis, we’ve seen a dramatic, growing reliance by the foster care system on grandparents and other relatives. These grandfamilies are now having to navigate two crises—the opioid epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic. While we are grateful for Congress’ bipartisan actions to respond to the pandemic so far, they have not yet addressed the specific challenges these families are confronting.

Grandfamilies are facing issues accessing basic supplies, support and assistance including:

- **Food and Supplies:** Access to food, medicine and basic supplies without requiring they leave the house and risk greater exposure.
- **Information:** Accurate information from people they trust about the impact of the virus, how to protect themselves and their children, and where to go for help. Many of these families are especially vulnerable to misinformation.
- **Alternative Care Plans:** Emergency plans are necessary in the event caregivers die or become too ill to care for the children. For most caregivers, the children have come into their care unexpectedly and suddenly without the time or opportunity to plan where the children will go if they can no longer care for them. Without these plans, the children will end up in foster care.
- **Technology/Virtual Support:** Internet and technology assistance for tele-health needs, children's distance learning, and to reduce social isolation. Before the pandemic, caregivers often found critical help through support groups where they rely on one another for information about how to cope and where to go for help. They need help maintaining these connections through virtual support groups.
- **Financial Assistance:** Many caregivers have lost full- or part-time jobs. Caregivers often use retirement savings to pay for the children's needs. Now, those savings are plummeting.
- **Help with Children at Home:** Many grandparents and other relatives are caring for children who have special needs resulting from a history of trauma. They have lost access to education supports, specialized therapies, and other supportive services during the pandemic, and they need help.
- **Child Welfare System Issues:** Families involved with overwhelmed child welfare systems are experiencing major delays or not receiving key training or other services.
- **Managing Visitation/Relationships with Birth Parents:** Caregivers are concerned about continuing in-person visitation with birth parents because of the potential for increased risk of exposure to the virus, but they are fearful of violating court agreements. Many families are receiving little guidance from courts because of closures or decreased capacities as they transition to virtual systems.

**To help address the devastating impact of COVID-19 on children and older adults in grandfamilies, Generations United urges Congress to include the following in the COVID response package:**

**Provide Funds for Kinship Navigator Programs to Deliver Supplies, Information and Support to Grandfamilies:** Kinship Navigator Programs are information and referral programs that help grandparents and other relatives raising children connect to critical services and information to help them. Currently operating in most states and many tribes, these programs are trusted sources of information and support to grandfamilies. They can identify grandfamilies in need and coordinate with other community-based programs to help the families get critical supplies and support. The programs need more resources to meet the skyrocketing demand for help from the families during the pandemic. These nimble programs are often skilled at leveraging resources and securing additional support from community donations and local businesses, but these approaches are not working now that many of those community resources are overburdened and/or struggling. Furthermore, many kinship navigator programs are supported in part by state funds, which are being cut due to the unexpected demands from the pandemic and the prospect of reduced tax revenue.

**Request:** \$20 million for Kinship Navigator Programs to coordinate with local grandfamily service providers to get supplies, information and support to grandfamilies including those raising children outside of the foster care system.

**Provide Emergency Funding to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Urge States and Tribes to Increase Support for TANF Child-Only Grants:** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many grandparents and other relatives raising children were either working to support their families or were depleting their retirement savings to pay for the children's needs. Large numbers of these caregivers have now lost full- or part-time jobs and retirement savings are plummeting. The number of these families requiring support from TANF to make ends meet will likely grow both because of loss of other income and because cash-strapped child welfare systems will be relying on relatives to care for children and keep them out of an overburdened foster care system.

Unlike non-related foster parents, grandparents and other relatives usually are not given the opportunity to become licensed foster parents for the children they are raising and do not receive a foster care payment to help pay for the children's needs. For many grandfamilies, "child-only" TANF is the only financial support available to help meet the needs of these children. Child-only TANF provides critical support that does not require grandparents and other caregivers to spend down retirement savings or sell critical assets such as vehicles. However, the child-only TANF amount, which are determined by the states, are low. States should be urged to increase the amounts to ensure they are adequate to meet children's needs, especially during these challenging times.

**Request:** Provide emergency funds for TANF to protect families from the economic downturn and urge states to increase the dollar amounts of their TANF child-only grants for grandparents and other relatives raising children. Generations United supports the recommendation of the American Public Human Services Association to: *Authorize funding through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to reimburse states 80% of the cost of increased spending on non-recurrent short-term benefits, subsidized employment, and basic assistance to address economic needs during the recovery. In addition, Congress should provide a two-year extension for TANF so state efforts to support the economic well-being of families during the recovery are not jeopardized by the threat of short-term funding lapses."*

#### **Child Abuse Prevention, the Child Welfare System and Older Youth Transitioning from Foster Care:**

The impacts of COVID-19 are putting stress on families who are attempting to navigate new public health safety protocols, school closures, uncertain childcare arrangements, job losses, social isolation, and significant barriers to many critical support services. Without interventions to support families, the kinds of stress that the COVID-19 pandemic is creating contributes to increased risk of child abuse and neglect. Strengthening the child welfare system to face these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the entire child welfare continuum.

**Request:** Increase investments in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant (\$1 billion), the MaryLee Allen Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program (\$1 billion), the Title IV-E Prevention Programs (increase FMAP rate), and the Court Improvement Programs (\$30 million), and Title IV-E Chaffee funds (\$500 million).


**Social Services Block Grant:** The Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) helps states respond to the growing needs of some of the most vulnerable groups during the pandemic: older adults, people with disabilities, and children. SSBG can be used for critical services experiencing increased pressure including child protective services, child abuse prevention supports, foster care, domestic violence services, meals on wheels and adult protective services. These funds are flexible and can be tailored to meet needs of the community. SSBG has a history of being used to help states during national disasters such as hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

**Request:** Increase the Social Services Block Grant by \$4.1 billion. Extend funding to tribal governments and communities with a set aside of no less than 5%.

Generations United has more than 20 years of experience working with and on behalf of the grandfamilies and is home to the National Center on Grandfamilies, a leading voice for families headed by grandparents, other relatives and close family friends. Our 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. During this pandemic we must remember families are the foundation of our civil society and we must do all we can to protect all families, especially those most vulnerable.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Donna Butts", is centered on a light gray rectangular background.

Donna M. Butts  
Executive Director