How Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Helps Children in Grandfamilies

One of the four primary purposes of TANF is "to provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives."

What are Grandfamilies or Kinship Families? Grandfamilies, also known as kinship families, are families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so.

Why is TANF Important to Grandfamilies? Grandfamily and other kinship caregivers usually step into their caregiving role unexpectedly. They are often retired or living on a fixed income and do not have additional resources to pay for the cost of raising a child. The vast majority of children in grandfamilies are being raised outside of the foster care system. In these cases, the caregiver does not have access to a monthly foster care payment to help provide for the child's needs like a licensed foster parent does. For many of these families, other than Social Security, the only financial assistance available to help them provide for the child's needs is TANF.

What is TANF Child-Only? TANF Child-Only grants are monthly cash grants provided to caregivers to help meet the basic needs of the children they are raising. The majority of grandparents and other relative caregivers raising children who access TANF do so through child-only grants. Different than TANF Family grants, child-only grants were designed to consider only the needs and income and assets of the child, not the caregiver. A child's income might include child support payments or a public benefit like Social Security survivor's benefits. Because most children have limited income, most relative caregivers can receive a child-only grant on behalf of the children in their care.

The assistance is typically quite small and often insufficient to meet the needs of the child but a critical help for older relatives raising children who have carefully saved for retirement. The amount varies widely across the country. Maximum monthly benefit amounts for one child range from $81 (Arkansas) to $780 (California). The national average monthly TANF child-only benefit is $304.

How many families are served by TANF Child-Only?

Nationally, over 45% of TANF recipients receive child-only grants (serving nearly 670,000 children in FY 2023). Children raised by grandparents or other relatives make up the majority of these cases. In some states, child-only TANF grants accounted for over 90% of the state's TANF recipients in FY 2023.

What federal changes can improve TANF to better help kinship/grandfamilies?

While TANF is a critical source of support to kinship families, large numbers of kinship families face inappropriate barriers to accessing the program. In fact, only 13% of kinship families nationally access TANF. Congress should work to improve kinship/grandfamilies access to TANF, not create additional barriers to an already burdensome process to get support.

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RECOMMENDATIONS: Generations United recommends the following federal improvements to ensure TANF funds serve kinship families effectively.

- **Require state TANF agencies to develop and implement an outreach plan to make kinship families aware of the availability of and eligibility criteria for child-only TANF grants.**
- **Support community-based kinship services with TANF non-assistance funds**, including youth and caregiver support groups, legal assistance, kinship navigator programs, child care assistance, and other supports to meet grandfamilies basic needs.
- **Encourage states to improve the adequacy of TANF child-only grants to better meet the needs of children** by increasing the monthly amount and by providing the same amount of TANF child-only support for each eligible child in the home.
- **Make clear use of the "good cause" exception** to complying with child support enforcement by clarifying that kinship caregivers do not have to pursue child support from the parents. Caregivers often do not pursue TANF for fear that the state's pursuit of child support from the parents could result in **putting the child or caregiver in harm's way**.
- **Eliminate asset limits for grandparent and other relative caregivers to qualify for TANF** as has been done by several states. Many grandparents and older relatives thoughtfully saved for retirement and now are not able to receive support. Like common exemptions for college savings, caregivers must be able to keep retirement savings.

Generations United urges Congress to NOT enact changes that would increase barriers to kinship families' access to TANF:

- **Work requirements are inappropriate and harmful to children in grandfamilies.** Work requirements do not account for older caregivers who may struggle to find employment and caregivers who cannot work due to health concerns or disability. Oftentimes children in grandfamilies have significant special needs due to the traumatic circumstances that brought them into care, which can make finding safe and appropriate child care difficult or impossible.
- **Cuts to TANF will reduce access and support to children in grandfamilies.** Historically, states have relied heavily on cutting their caseloads to meet the TANF work requirements with "caseload reduction credits". Enforcing harsh work requirements will push states to reduce the number of child-only families in order to achieve the sizeable caseload reduction needed to meet the required work participation rate. The overall impact of the expanded TANF work requirements would not only detrimentally disincentivize states from opening child-only TANF cases to support grandparents and other relative caregivers, but it would also scare grandparent and other kinship caregivers away from seeking the help that they need.

"My granddaughter was born at 29 weeks at 1 pound 2 ounces. Her lungs were not fully developed. She had two holes in her heart and a frontal lobe cyst. She had cloudiness in both eyes which we were told could result in limited to no vision. We could not find a childcare center that would accept responsibility or liability for her care. I had to quit work to care for her." – Victoria, Grandparent Caregiver, Arizona.

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