

Written Testimony of Laurie Tapozada

The Family First Prevention Services Act: Successes, Road Blocks, and Opportunities for Improvement

United States Senate Finance Committee

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Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Crapo, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for your leadership, for holding this important hearing, and for inviting me to share my story and perspective. It is an honor to be here.

My name is Laurie Tapozada, and I am a Kinship Grandma. Today I am speaking to you wearing two hats-one is my personal experience, and one is my experience working in Rhode Island with hundreds of grandparents and other relatives raising children, also known as grandfamilies or kinship families. I am also a member of the Grand Voices Network of Generations United, which treats me to a wider view of kinship care across the country. I am raising my now nine-year-old grandson, who is the light and love of my life and the biggest blessing I have ever received. At the time that it all happened, I was not thinking like that. I was in the process of selling my home in RI and I had already purchased a house in Florida, where I was heading to start a new career in real estate and where life was finally going to be all about me now that the kids were grown. It had been a rough few years with one of my daughters who had some serious mental health challenges.

One day this same daughter asked if I could babysit my infant grandson while she went to the mall. Well, she did not come back and DCYF placed my grandson in my care. It felt like a scary disaster which blew up all my plans, and it had also been a long time since I had cared for an infant. I was at a loss! I needed to find childcare for my grandson so I could go to work. I had to get a quick education on modern safety methods for babies. You mean you can't even cover them with a blanket to sleep!? No stuffies, no crib bumpers? I felt like I needed an engineering degree to install the car seat-backwards! At first shock kept me going, and then as the reality sank in that I would be caring for him for the foreseeable future, a tidal wave of emotions swept through. My grandson, at eight months old sank into a depression and cried and screamed out his pain that his mother had disappeared. I had nobody to turn to and was very isolated. I had to sell my home in Florida and take the one I was in off the market.

Today we are here to talk about the Family First Preventive Services Act and the impact it has had. I am here to say that the impact is immeasurable. It recognized and invested in services that help kinship families like mine even if our kids aren't in the foster care system. When this was all happening to me, the Act had not been passed yet. I did not know a single other family like mine. My lifelong friends began to drift away because there were so many things I could no longer do with a baby in tow, and many had lost their patience for babies anyway. My family system was fractured, and always giving unwanted and unloving advice. I had to leave my job

because it required long hours and travel, so finances began to be very stressful. I was not aware of a single resource for families like mine, partly because there weren't any! So that was pre-Family First Preventive Services Act- nothing! A desert!

One day a friend of mine called to say to call a small grass roots organization, the Village for RI Foster and Adoptive Families! They will understand! They support families like yours! I called, cried my heart out for one straight hour, then became very involved with the Village. They became my community. It is a peer support organization and everyone in the Village had been through their own journey. Having them changed my life, and once I was through the worst of my experience, and I had finally adopted my grandson, I wanted nothing more than to help other families going through all this. I did not want them to feel the fear, the grief, the anger, the resentment, the isolation, the stress, all by themselves. We did our best for kinship families but had very limited resources to provide any type of material help.

In 2019 when the kinship navigator funds came through, the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families hired me to build supports for kinship families involved with the Department. We created a peer mentor program that is a kinship navigator program in which the navigators are all kinship families with lived experience themselves. We formed a Statewide Kinship Advisory Council, we partnered with community organizations (including the Village) to offer kinship specific support groups and kinship targeted family events. We also designed and developed some training for staff working directly with kinship families. We helped them to understand the stressful nature of the kinship experience. We explained why kin families are reluctant to ask for help. We gave them strategies for working effectively with our kin families. Now, when kin families receive sudden placement of their kin children, they are given resources right away, from material things, like beds, cribs, car seats and clothes, to connecting them with community resources and training.

While the supports for families involved with the Department had come a long way and did so much good, my concern for families not involved with the Department was growing. So many families out there were isolated and not having a clue about resources and supports available. For every child raised by kin inside the child welfare system, there are eighteen children being raised by kin "informally" outside of foster care. The funding that RI had received for the peer mentor program was not enough to cover all the kin families involved in the Department, much less those not involved.

In January I left the Department to begin outreach work with the Village to those informal kin families. They are not always easy to engage, for several reasons including fear, trust, and embarrassment. When we do engage with a new family, they always say, "Where were you x months/years ago!?" The needs for these families are significant from financial, to legal, to mental health services, to help their children in school get the services they need, to a growing and heart-breaking problem-housing!!!

I don't need to tell you about the affordable housing crisis in this country but seeing its impact on grandparents who have sacrificed everything, including retirement savings, to care for these

children is more than I can take. You have to trust me when I tell you that working frantically with a grandmother in her seventies raising her two grandchildren, trying to keep them out of her car as a home is a horrible and haunting experience. And that is just one experience. We need stable, affordable housing for our kinship families!! In some states, kinship designated housing is a reality, like the Plaza West grandfamilies apartments right here in DC for example. I have a dream for dedicated apartments like these for RI but in the meantime, there must be ways to keep kinship families housed in safe and stable housing. We need funds that can be put toward housing expenses and emergencies.

In addition to housing assistance, more peer mentor programs are needed, meaning kinship navigator programs where the navigators are also kin families with lived experience. Having a peer navigator makes establishing trust much easier and smoother. When working with a peer navigator, you feel understood. You know this person has been through it. You don't feel judged, and you let go of the shame. The nicest agency person in the world still faces formidable obstacles to build trust and engage with kinship caregivers. These navigator programs are needed for ALL kinship families, whether they are involved with the child welfare system or not, whether they are headed by grandparents, aunts and uncles, adult siblings or a neighbor or teacher. We need sufficient resources to serve all families who need support. In the US we have more than 2.4 million kids being raised by kin. Supporting these families is **preventative** work, helping to keep kids out of foster care.

Leaving kinship families struggling on their own with no supports means that sometimes they come to the end of their ability to carry on. Without support these kids are at risk of ending up in the foster care system where we were trying to prevent them from going in the first place. Are you aware that kinship caregivers save this country approximately four billion dollars each year by preventing kids from having to enter foster care? Not to mention the more priceless contribution of minimizing the trauma of being removed from home, and raising healthier kids who have better long-term outcomes than kids that must go into foster care to be raised by people who are strangers to them!!

You asked about roadblocks. One huge barrier to getting more kinship navigator programs up and running and meeting criteria for evaluation are the stringent evaluation requirements from the Title IV-E Clearinghouse. For many years I worked in large corporations and believe me, these corporations want to know if the money they are spending on a program is producing the results they are looking for. There are many ways to evaluate a program's effectiveness and the rigorous requirements outlined by the Title IV-E Clearinghouse, including using an experimental model with control and experimental groups, are not necessary. No state can do this without using expert consultants which adds a significant cost burden to the organization. Revisit those requirements and redefine the methodologies to measure the effectiveness of a program to put them within reach of the organizations building these programs.

Another barrier is the restriction often placed on what the navigator funds can be spent on. Every kinship family has a unique story and unique strengths and unique needs. At the Village we spend a fair amount of time running around trying to help a family with a pressing need that

there are no readily available funds for. We need a flexible budget for these material needs. For example, camp or activities in the summer, driving education and car insurance for a youth, money to catch up on utility bills or rent, and transportation is a chronic need. Federal policy should make explicit that kinship navigator funds can be used to help families with concrete needs.

We as kinship caregivers don't fit neatly into any existing systems. We sort of have a small place in systems for older adults for the caregivers who are 55+, but we are largely an unknown minority in the systems created to support family caregivers. We are ignored on the outskirts of systems for parents with school aged children. We need to evolve systems so they place us at the center. We are critical for the well-being of this nation and its children. And we are not going away. Because unfortunately the problems that make kids end up in our care are not going away. In fact, more and more grandfamilies are forming every day. The opioid epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic have played a significant role in the growth of our numbers. I mentioned that there are more than 2.4 million kids living in a relative kinship home. That is three percent of our children. In some states the percentage of children living in kinship homes is much higher. In RI, a staggering 9 percent of our kids live in kinship homes.

Please help us to do the important stuff-raising our kin children to be happy healthy adults with a strong sense of self and family, who can be self-sufficient and successful. Our work is not easy especially for us grandparents at our age. We feel silly running (or an approximation of running) around the field playing Mommy and Me soccer with all the 20 and 30 something parents. But we do it with all our heart and all our love. Please support us.

Recommendations:

1. Put an emphasis on developing peer to peer programs including peer kinship navigator programs, which have been demonstrated to be more effective than programs that do not engage peers.
2. Develop dedicated funding to assist with housing for kinship families.
3. Review the Title IV-E Clearinghouse requirements for evaluation of kinship navigator programs by, removing unnecessary barriers to getting programs accepted into the clearinghouse.
4. Continue annual funding for kinship navigator programs to help them operate and pay for evaluation.
5. Have a budget item for providing for necessary concrete goods and material needs that is not predefined in order to give the families what they need without requiring the children to come into foster care!