

**Michigan House Committee on Families, Children and Seniors
February 12, 2020**

Testimony on House Bills 5443 and 5444

Kinship Caregiver Navigator Program and Kinship Caregiver Advisory Council

Christine Vanlandingham, Chief Operating Officer, Region IV Area Agency on Aging

Good morning, Madame Chair and members of the committee. I am Christine Vanlandingham, Chief Operating Officer at Region IV Area Agency on Aging in St. Joseph, MI and I am pleased to testify in support of House Bills 5443 and 5444.

When the phone rings and an official-sounding voice informs you that your granddaughter is being removed from her parents' home and asks, "Are you willing to take her in?", you have only moments to respond.

There's no training ground, no exploration of best options for her or for you, no garnering the needed support network. There's only time for a "yes, I'll leave right now to pick her up"; or "no, I cannot do that" and let the Foster Care system provide for her as best they can.

In May of 2016, the answer from me when I received that call was a prompt "yes".

DHHS workers inspected our home, gave us a business card, a thick packet of papers, said they'd be in touch, and our very scared, more than slightly angry, teenage granddaughter moved into our previously empty nest that afternoon.

While the 'yes' answer came easy for us, the task of navigating systems, meeting unique needs of a teen who has experienced trauma, and parenting again in a new era over the next four years was harder than we could have imagined.

Rotating caseworkers, securing a health care plan, locating appropriate counseling services, navigating the education, health, legal and social systems not set up to recognize grandparents as primary caregivers only paled in comparison to the efforts required to provide the nurturing supportive environment a young teen needed to process and heal from childhood trauma.

These were uncharted waters for us, and no navigation maps existed at the time.

House Bills 5443 and 5444 aim to change that for the thousands of kinship caregivers providing critical supportive care for Michigan's youth every year.

The Kinship Caregiver Navigator program and Kinship Caregiver Advisory Council will provide targeted, informed navigational services to the thousands of Michigan grandparents and other relative caregivers enabling them to better access supportive services for the children in their care as well as for themselves. Providing a roadmap and network of supportive services is necessary to support kinship families. Further, it will promote public and private partnerships to increase awareness of the needs of kinship families and increase responsiveness to those needs.

Kinship caregiving is a multi-generational issue and crosses all socio-economic sectors. Findings from the 2019 Older Michigander Needs and Solutions Assessment indicate there may be twice as many grandparents raising grandchildren in Michigan today than there were in 1987.

There's no single profile of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. Kinship caregivers come from all socio-economic backgrounds and ages vary widely. Kinship caregivers in their 30s to 50s have very different needs from their older counterparts. Many Michigan kinship caregivers are raising grandchildren while they are in their 60s, 70s and beyond. These older Kinship Caregivers have unique needs and often experience distinctive challenges in accessing services to meet the needs of the children in their care as well as meeting their own age-related needs.

What kinship caregivers of all ages hold in common is the challenge of navigating disparate systems most often without any formal guidance or support network. This coupled with meeting the unique needs of children who experienced trauma without formal training or support makes this a multi-generational issue impacting youth, younger kinship caregivers and older Michiganders raising children alike.

The Kinship Caregiver Advisory Council provides for broad representation from service sectors supporting kinship families as well as key roles for kinship caregivers to ensure lived-experience perspective informs the Council's work.

Area Agencies on Aging provide targeted information and assistance to Grandparents Raising Grandchildren such as Grandparents as Parents support groups, access to Title III E programs and services and general information and referral services to a broad network of community-based programs.

As such, the Area Agency on Aging role on the Kinship Caregiver Advisory Council is appropriate and will provide a critical link to resources and expertise targeted to the unique needs of older kinship caregivers.

Thank you for your attention to the issues facing Michigan's growing kinship caregiver population and the unique needs of older adults providing care for relative children.

As a representative of the Aging Network, and as someone with lived experience raising a granddaughter, I strongly urge your support of House Bills 5443 and 5444.

Thank you. I am happy to take any questions.

Christine Vanlandingham
Chief Operating Officer
Region IV Area Agency on Aging
2900 Lakeview Ave.
St. Joseph, MI 49085
269-983-0177