

Written Testimony of Kim Clifton, MSW

Executive Director, HALOS

“Strengthening Support for Grandfamilies During Covid-19 Pandemic and Beyond”

United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

Thursday, June 23, 2022, 10:00 am

“I didn’t want my babies to go into foster care.” I have heard this repeatedly from grandparents describing the sacrifices they make to raise their grandchildren.

Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on grandfamilies. On behalf of HALOS, I am honored to provide this testimony highlighting the experiences of the resourceful, strong, and resilient grand and kinship families in our programs.

Children placed with grandparents and other relatives, also called kinship care, do better than those in traditional foster care. They tend to have fewer behavior problems and mental health issues, and it is this sense of belonging, of feeling that someone wanted them, and staying in the loving care of family that promotes these positive outcomes. Beyond the sense of belonging, grandparents and other relatives are more likely to keep siblings together and to be permanent placements for children compared to traditional foster care. However, they face unique obstacles, many of them exacerbated by the Covid-19 epidemic.

The mission of HALOS is to promote safe and nurturing homes for children in kinship care. Since 2008, we have provided services and support to approximately 1,500 grand and kinship families. This represents only a fraction of the kinship families in the state. There are 67,000 children living in true kinship care in South Carolina without a biological parent present, and over 51,000 grandparents in South Carolina alone are fully responsible for their grandchildren.

Grand and kinship families more often have lower incomes, yet they continue to take children into their homes with no financial assistance or other types of support. South Carolina, like some other states, seeks to place children with family before they are placed in protective custody, so they do not become licensed foster parents. When she took in her grandchildren, Ericka said, “I

prayed to God to help me provide for my grandchildren.” She was retired and living off her monthly social security income when she welcomed her young grandson and granddaughter into her home. “HALOS saved us. We had nowhere to go.”

State-wide and community-based navigation programs like HALOS fill the void for grandparents who take children outside of the child welfare system. HALOS connects caregivers to needed resources for themselves and the children in their care—resources that grandparents and kinship caregivers are less like to know about or have access to, even when they exist in their communities.

Navigation programs are not available in most regions of South Carolina and access to these services varies widely among states. Title IVB funds for kinship navigation are inadequate, and their use is not consistent among states. The funds renew annually, making it difficult for states to strategize long-term with community partners on how to best serve grand and kinship families.

Justin began living with his great-grandmother, Martha, when he was eight years old. Martha had not parented in over 40 years. In his first eight years, Justin suffered physical abuse and neglect. Martha, like most grand and kinship caregivers, did not receive training in understanding the effects of trauma on children or how to provide trauma-informed care for her grandson. She loved him and was determined to keep him with her, but she did not know what to do to help him deal with his anger and manage his violent outbursts. At HALOS, we were able to connect Martha with trauma informed mental health and child advocacy services for Justin, and we referred her to the Trident Area Agency on Aging for respite care for herself. We are lucky that our local Area Agency on Aging utilizes funds from the National Caregiver Support Program to support grandfamilies. This support is not consistent among the Area Agencies on Aging.

Financial requests rose dramatically at HALOS during the Covid-19 pandemic because caregivers were furloughed, laid off or forced to quit jobs due to lack of childcare. Hannah, a grandmother raising three grandchildren, worked as a janitor at a local school before Covid. When schools shut down, Hannah lost her job. When Hannah reached out to HALOS for help paying rent she said, “I have never had to ask anyone for help. I raised my kids and now my grandkids, and I have worked all my life.” HALOS sought out and was fortunate to receive and

distribute over \$450,000 for emergency financial assistance from private and government sources to mitigate the effects of the pandemic for those families.

But the return to work has not solved the persistent poverty already faced by most grand and kinship families, and special funds for financial assistance during Covid have dried up. Most kinship and grand families have low incomes and need financial assistance just to make ends meet. HALOS has served over nine hundred families since 2019, and 80% of these families' incomes fall below 200% of the federal poverty level, and 50% fall below 100% of the federal poverty level.

Delores is 77 years old and is raising her two teen-aged grandsons. They live off her \$1,278 social security monthly income. That amount of income does not cover their basic expenses. Like many people in their 70s, Delores struggles with health problems and is not able to work. Delores is not alone. We know that most grandparents raising grandchildren are older and tend to be in poorer health. Providing budgeting or job-finding assistance does not help. They just do not have enough money to survive.

But Delores has not given up since she took the boys as babies. Delores is another example of why grandparents and other relatives are the best placement for children when possible. Delores took her grandson Erik in as an infant. When his brother Shawn was born two years later, Delores was not sure if he was her biological grandchild. But, she said, "I always worried that if I didn't take him, one day Erik would ask me why I didn't help his brother." Grandparents and other kin are more likely to keep siblings together in the same home, connected to their families and communities.

In most cases, grandparents and other relatives step in *before* children must be placed into foster care. Because of that, they do not receive financial compensation or support. They are doing it selflessly without thinking of the costs to themselves—emotionally, physically, and financially. For every child placed in foster care in South Carolina, 164 live in the care of relatives outside of the foster care system.

Grandparents and other relatives are more likely than foster care to be a *permanent* placement for children when they cannot live with their parents. Because of this, as the children grow their

needs change over time. But because they are not biological parents, everything is much harder. Grand and kinship caregivers must deal with complicated bureaucracies like Medicaid, Social Security, and SNAP, among others, but they are time consuming, and often caregivers give up. HALOS helps them navigate these systems. They often need the children's birth certificates and other documentation that is not accessible because they are not birth parents. Policies, services, and systems that touch kinship families should ensure that kinship caregivers have the same access and rights as birth parents.

Grandparents and other kinship caregivers often must step in without notice and are not able to plan or prepare to care for children. Shelana and her husband were both working when they had to take in three grandchildren due to their daughter's drug use. They had not planned to have three children in daycare and were using their savings when they found HALOS. Our staff were able to help them advocate for childcare assistance through the state, and they saved over \$25,000. But childcare assistance is not available for most grand and kinship caregivers.

Grandparents step in because they love their grandchildren, but they need support. They need access to financial assistance, childcare, and legal services. Systems like Medicaid, SNAP, TANF and Social Security need to evaluate how their policies make it harder for grand and kinship families to access their services. Navigation programs need to be consistently available in and throughout each state. Lastly, caregivers need respite and access to quality mental health services for themselves. They often neglect their own care to ensure that their grandchildren, their babies, can thrive.