

Testimony to the Senate Special Committee on Aging
“Grandparents to the Rescue: Raising Grandchildren in the Opioid Crisis and Beyond”
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Good afternoon Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey and members of the Special Senate Committee on Aging.

I am honored to speak with you today regarding both my professional and personal experiences with this topic. My name is Bette Hoxie. I am first and foremost a mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. I raised my grandson since his infancy. Today he is 17 years old, and he will graduate from high school in June. He plans to go into conservation law enforcement after college.

I am also the executive director of Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine Inc. and the Kinship Program.

Like so many other states, Maine is severely affected by the opioid crisis that permeates our nation and its vulnerable families. More and more infants are being born to mothers who are using opioids while pregnant. These births are taking a toll on a population of caring people who would -- if they could -- simply love their grandchildren, spoil them, and send them home to be raised and nurtured by their parents. But for an all too growing number of families, this is no longer an option. Instead, the grandparents have become the primary caretakers.

Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine and the Kinship Program have a great team of professionals working daily to support these grandparents – who, in most cases, were never expecting to parent again. They may not have a spare bed at home or clothing for the children. In these instances, we are there to help. We collect new and gently used items including beds, furniture, clothing, bedding and other material goods, and provide them free to grandparents. If we do not have what a grandparent needs in stock, we send out a request to the list serve, and usually receive it within a few days. This office works with over 3100 kinship families state-wide. 85% of the families are grand or great grandparents. 1/3 of the total is licensed as the foster parent to the child/children.

We also provide licensing and legal education. We guide grandparents on how to work through Maine’s Health and Human Services system or gain guardianship through the Probate Court system depending on where things are in time and space. We walk grandparents through the licensing process, which can be lengthy, complicated, and costly. To attain the license, grandparents

must be mentally and physical fit to care for children. We guide grandparents to medical providers in their localities to attain physical and mental health assessments. In some situations we are able to use donated funds to support grandparents with the financial costs for filing paperwork and or finger printing if they cannot afford it. Their home must also be licensed. It must meet certain safety standards, including bedroom space and windows that meet fire codes. Many of the older homes in Maine have small windows and do not qualify. We try to work with the grandparents to come up with solutions.

Our organization provides specific support groups so families can share their stories and get emotional support from others like them who are walking the walk and talking the talk! Childcare is provided for children during the meetings so, like their caretakers, they are less isolated and can learn that they are not the only child being raised by grandparents. These support groups also serve as a mini respite for the grandparents for that evening. In rural areas of Maine, where transportation is difficult and families are unable to attend the groups, mentors with similar life experiences are invited to assist the families by phone. Respite is still a much-needed requirement for the families served and it is very difficult to attain. Frequently at the support meetings, families will develop their own respite amongst other members.

We also provide kinship training. The training explains how DHHS works and where to go for support. Relative caregivers participate and share what they needed the most when they first started. We provide referrals to appropriate legal guidance and mental health services, as well as other resources as needed. For instance, we find that many of the grandchildren have special needs, suffer from trauma, or may be living with the effects of pre-natal substance abuse. We connect the grandparents with resources to help, such as the Maine Autism Society or the Maine Drug Awareness Program.

One of the most powerful sources of support for grandparents is to meet others who are also raising their grandchildren. We organize a statewide conference, which brings together grandparents all across the state for education, training, and networking. We provide complimentary registration to the first 20 new grandparents to participate and we cover hotel accommodations for those who are coming from far away. When the grandparents come together, they feel a sense of solidarity in knowing that they are not alone, and they leave with a new set of tools to support themselves and their grandchildren on their second parenting journeys.

I mentioned earlier that I raised my grandson. Well, today -- I am also raising a 19-month-old boy. He is the nephew of one of my adopted sons. The baby's biological mother is addicted to opioids. When I agreed to raise my grandson nearly 18 years ago, I wondered if I'd be able to walk down the aisle at his graduation. Now I find myself at 70 plus years of age wondering, "Am I the

right person to take on this little boy?" I am no stranger to caring for my children. I'm the parent to 19 children and 40 grandchildren and 2 great grandchildren.

I work with families on a daily basis that resembles mine. Helping the families understand that our small office is here really helps - despite the fact that they know what they are struggling with includes a long tough road ahead. Grandparents need to know that this country supports them as well. Funds to meet the basic needs of families taking on a relative's child needs to be a priority. There are barriers in the foster care system but they are small compared to the needs in kinship/ grandparent care!

Many of the grandparents raising grandchildren had planned to be retired. Others are younger and still raising children of their own in addition to their grandchildren. Trying to make small or fixed-incomes cover the costs of such things as diapers, and childcare are often insurmountable obstacles for the families who are giving their all to keep our nation's children within their families of origin and above all else safe!

Thank you for recognizing this important issue. I appreciate the opportunity to share just a bit of what is happening in Maine both in terms of what works and what continues to be challenging. I hope I can respond to any questions and be useful as you work to support grandparents raising their grandchildren who have been affected by the opioid crisis.