

## **Written Testimony of Elizabeth Mateer**

### **“Combating the Opioid Epidemic”**

**Hearing before the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging**

**Wednesday, February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2025, 3:30 p.m.**

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gillibrand, and members of the Senate Aging Committee, thank you for holding this important hearing, and for inviting me to share my perspective.

My name is Elizabeth Mateer. I am a grandmother raising my grandson due to the impact of opioids on our family. I also volunteer as a Generations United GRAND Voice caregiver advocate.

When my grandson was born, I had no idea that my life as I knew it would soon be forever changed. I did not know that the baby was suffering from Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). I also had no knowledge about Opioid Use Disorder and this made it difficult to identify and understand the harsh reality that both parents were addicted to painkillers.

A few months later my husband and I intervened. We arranged for the mom to be admitted to a treatment facility and suddenly we had a baby! Although we were very relieved and hopeful for the future, we had no crib, no diapers, no baby clothing, no formula and no idea where to start.

Ten days later I received a phone call that the mom was leaving treatment. What were we to do? How could we hand our infant grandson back to parents who were using? Fear drove us to contact an attorney who obtained emergency custody and we were relieved to have the baby safe in our care. However, a few weeks later the parents cheated a drug test and we were ordered to return the baby. Why do judges appear to misunderstand opioid addiction and the risk in placing children with parents who are struggling with it?

For years we lived an endless cycle of staging interventions and arranging for admissions to treatment. Early on, one interventionist told me to be prepared to keep my grandchild long term because this would go on for a long time.

Each relapse was a crushing blow and each time the recommended length of inpatient treatment increased.

The cost for all these treatment facilities was staggering. We paid \$30,000.00 deposits for admission and \$10,000.00/month. I constantly battled with the insurance company. If you have ever known a person to be caught up in opioid addiction, it is like none other. It takes a person's soul and turns them into someone you don't even recognize. We were desperate to save both mom and baby. The stress of living this opioid-created crisis landed me in the hospital with pneumonia in both lungs.

Usually, when your loved one heads to treatment you are relieved that they are safe, and you have a break from the crisis mode. Unfortunately, we did not have that break and were instead slapped with a custody case from our grandson's father and had to obtain legal counsel. Our legal fees mounted over more than two years of custody proceedings and exceeded \$85,000.00. The court permitted "supervised" visits that were not actually being supervised. We were treated like bad people who had stolen a baby. Every time we went to court, we worried. We requested that the court stop the father's visitation privileges when we learned that the father was charged with child endangerment when another child of his was under his supervision. Six months later, he died of a heroin overdose. When I told my then 4 & 1/2-year-old grandson that his father died the first question he asked was "Will I still be able to live with you?".

I found that working and caring for a child was harder than when I raised my own children. I tried to stay in the workforce but managing the daycare requirements of drop off, packing lunches, pickup on time and all the preparation that goes along with it while getting to the office on time was overwhelming. I resigned from my position.

My relationships slowly disappeared. There were no more co-workers. Friends stopped inviting me to social events since I did not have childcare, and social outings at my age are not typically conducive to bringing children along. I felt isolated at home while my husband traveled for work. The stigma of addiction, that the child I raised could not raise their child, made me feel ashamed. No one knocked on my door with a lasagna in hand to comfort our family in crisis.

The clergy where I was ordained an elder and served twenty-four years never called. Depression set in and I wondered, how could I go on?

By the grace of God our grandson's mother has been clean for a long time. Our relationship is challenging because her son, now age 13, wishes to remain in our home. During the years of battling her addiction he just grew up. This is his community, his home where his pets live, where his school is, where his friends are. If this is where he wants to be we will support his choice.

Though the years were difficult in many ways, there is great joy knowing that our grandchild is thriving and happy. We are now both retired, my husband delayed retirement so we could provide for our grandson. Our retirement is nothing like we thought it would be, driving the middle school carpool and hosting the baseball team picnic. We hope to stay healthy so that we can be there for our grandson.

The staggering number of grandparents who care for their grandchildren, often without any support from the child welfare system, appears to be one of the least recognized populations impacted by the opioid crisis. According to Generations United, grandparents and other relatives who step forward to keep children out of foster care and safely with family, save taxpayers more than \$4 billion each year. The child welfare system would collapse if grandparents did not take in all these children. Any grandparent raising a grandchild could use financial help.

I urge you to consider the following recommendations:

- **Encourage states to support grandfamilies with opioid settlement funds.** Why is there hardly any consideration to distribute opioid settlement money to help the children and caregivers in grandfamilies that have formed out of the opioid crisis? Anything would help. Seniors on fixed incomes struggle to pay for school supplies, activities, clothing, camps, and orthodontic treatment among many other things for a child they did not plan to raise.
- **Peer Support for grandparents raising grandchildren.** Peer support from Generation United's GRAND Voices Network has been an important way for me to engage with others in my situation and share

ideas. It has eliminated my feelings of isolation. There is a great need for grandparents to connect and support one another.

- **Increase availability of knowledgeable mental health providers who work with the whole family.** There are few mental health providers who are qualified to provide care to grandfamilies. How can the number of these providers be expanded? The dynamics in the family are difficult to navigate when the parent loses custody. I was once told that opioid addiction in a family is like pouring acid on it. None of the treatment facilities provided any support to our family, the only focus was on the inpatient and yet our whole family was suffering.
- **Ensure access to health care and social security for grandfamilies.** When we enrolled in Medicare, our grandson lost his health insurance. The Affordable Care Act ensures coverage of children up to age 26, but we had to purchase private health insurance for our grandchild in addition to paying for Medicare and a supplemental policy for us. Why are grandchildren not included in the Affordable Care Act? Allow grandchildren who are in the legal guardianship of their grandparent to qualify for survivor benefits if their grandparent dies. Social Security requires a grandchild to be legally adopted if they are to receive any benefit should the grandparent die. Legal fees for adoption can be \$30,000.00 on top of initial custody proceedings.
- **Protect SNAP.** SNAP can be a lifesaver when a grandparent suddenly takes in a child. I urge you to protect this critical program from cuts.
- **Continue federal support for kinship navigator programs.** When grandparents step in suddenly to raise children they often do not know where to turn for help. Kinship Navigator Programs offer important information, referral and support to help families connect to community-based services and supports.

Children in the care of grandparents are loved and thrive. I cannot imagine what my grandson's life would have been in foster care with strangers. Grandparents feel a connection and commitment to protecting the children in their care, but we need help. Any grandparent raising a grandchild could use support regardless of their station in life. Please, do what you can to help us.