

## TESTIMONY

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Thank you for your invitation to address your panel today. I am here today because I want to make you aware of the lost member of this epidemic – the Family and how it is destroying so many families. My story is not unique. I have learned in these last two years there are many of us raising our grandchildren because of the devastation of this epidemic.

### **Our Story –**

December 15, 2012 –A state trooper is sitting in our living room and our 27 year old daughter telling him she was stealing my jewelry because she was addicted to heroin. Kimberly and her 3 children had been living with us since July when she left VA to come home from an abusive situation. Why did we not know and how could this be happening to us? I felt like I was having a horrible nightmare and just needed to wake up. It is a nightmare but you can't wake up from it.

When we learned of her addiction we wanted her to go to rehab but the treatment plan for pregnant women are to be given methadone throughout the pregnancy and mainly because rehabs do not want pregnant women because of their increased risk. She started on Methadone – every morning she would traveled the hour drive down and back to get her dose. Cameron was born June 22, 2013. We were blessed -he was healthy and had very little withdrawal from the methadone. She continued the methadone after Cameron was born- it seemed to be working for her.

She was sentenced in October for the charges from stealing of my jewelry- the plan was drug court but miraculously with help from her case worker she got a job and her own place to live a month before sentencing so the legal system believed drug court would be a step backwards for her since she had been making progress- they gave her probation.

Her life and her children's lives have continued to be destroyed. She lost her job in January 2015, was evicted from her home in April. April 15<sup>th</sup> she had a car accident demolished the van her grandparents had given her. All four children were injured with Xavier being life lighted to Children's Hospital with a concussion. The next Sunday, April 23 after church she walked out of our home-did not say she was not coming back, could we take care of the kids, nothing. We did not hear from her for three weeks. She was telling her probation officer she was living with us- I had been speaking to the probation officer for at least three months telling her Kimberly was not doing well and she was not living with us – the probation officer believed the addict. In June they placed a warrant out for her arrest and she did her first jail time. While in jail they gave her the option of rehab or jail- now why would there be a choice? Jail or Rehab?? And why would you give an addict that choice? She went to rehab and for about 20 days and was free to do as she pleased. In September she was sent back to jail for probation violation of not having a permanent residence.

On Feb 23, 2016 I received a call from the jail to come and get her – I had been talking with her probation officer, sent a letter to the judge who was to sentence her -telling both she was not coming to live with us and she needed a longer rehab process like a halfway house or whatever else they could have her do. But they released her with no call to us to see if we consented to her living with us. She told me she needed to be with us to make a fresh start, to be with her children and because if she went back to where she was she would be dead. So she came home to live again because I wanted to believe with this clean time she was OK and her children needed her.

She was assigned to go to a court mandated outpatient drug rehab program five days a week in the mornings so we got her there because she had lost her license because of the accident in April for driving without insurance. It took several months but in August she got a job at a rehab facility cleaning and at a local store as a cashier – she had everything going for her – but she got some money and it didn't take her long to relapse. On November 9<sup>th</sup> she was with a friend -they used – he overdosed and died. She was sent back to jail where she has been since. The state trooper told me there is no reason why my daughter is here because when they tested her blood it was 100% fentanyl. She should have died.

I look back over the last almost four years and especially the last two; I don't know how we got through it. I love being a Grandma- it is such a joy and blessing

to me. But because of my daughter's heroin addiction we are no longer able to be just grandparents to Isaiah 9, Madison, and Xavier are 8-year-old twins and Cameron 3 – we are now in a parenting role.

### **What are the Challenges of being a “grand family” we face?**

The number of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren is going up and increasing because it is our own kids who are addicted to heroin or prescription drugs, or have died from an overdose. It's a challenge with little help available for us. In 2005, 2.5 million children were living with grandparents who were responsible for their care, by 2015 that number had risen to 2.9 million.

You've got grandparents who thought they were going to spend their retirement relaxing, traveling and enjoying their grandchildren now instead we are raising our grandkids.

Federal law requires states consider placing children with relatives in order to receive foster care and adoption assistance. Grandparents often are the first and best choice when a child must be taken out of a home and find someone else to take custody to minimize the trauma and help them feel some normalcy, you obviously want to seek out whoever is closest to that child.

Twenty-one percent of grandparents caring for grandchildren live below the poverty line, according to Generations United. About 39 percent are over 60 and 26 percent have a disability. Most of us are not licensed in the system, we are not eligible for the same services and financial support as licensed foster parents.

Our government has left bills die that could help us as grandparents. In September, U.S. Senate's inaction effectively killed a bill that would have provided federal funding for substance abuse programs for families with children at imminent risk of entering foster care. The bill also would have allowed states to waive foster care licensing standards for grandparents and other relatives.

Addiction is a family disease- but the family is the “lost Member”. Nar anon Family Support readings sums us what we face- “Addiction affects the relationship of those close to the addict: parents, siblings, children, long time friends and employers. Those of us who care the most suffer from the addict’s behaviors. We try to control and are ashamed of the situations caused by our addict. Soon we begin to think we are to blame and assume the guilt, fears and responsibilities of the addict. Thus Addiction is a chain reaction. It is a disease that affects the addict as well as family members, friends and coworkers. We try to control, cover up and take on the responsibilities of the addict. This sickness spreads to those of us who care the most. In time we begin to feel used and unhappy. We worry, lose trust and become angry and we become sick too.”

### **These are some of the challenges we have faced since April 2015**

1. The biggest and most heartbreaking is for me personally **not being able to be “GRANDMA”**- I love these children so much – I have raised my four children and love just being the one to spoil, share special times with, being able to take them one on one and making memories with them- Our Madison has said – “It is not like it used to be here- it was the fun place” I want it to be the fun place again. We have lost the greatest blessing joy being the grandparents.
2. There is no preparation time – that evening when she did not come back – we didn’t know what to do- babysitters had to be arranged, we didn’t even know what all we needed to do to care for these children so their dads could not just come and take them, their medical care and all other issues- there was nothing legally in place for us to have them.
3. Family Relationships- marital stress, loss relationships with other children and family members because of the addict but also because of the needs for four children. Mike and I have been blessed to have a son and some dear friends give us an occasional evening to go out for a few hours but four children are a challenge for a young couple – so you can imagine what it is like for 55plus couple. This has been a real challenge for our marriage- differences in parenting the kids, managing all the activities that the kids are involved in and all the parenting.

4. Financially- legal fees, babysitters, income for family of 6 instead of 2, plus the expenses of the addict- money for her to call her children and on her account for the essentials – the prison system penalizes families again with the cost of the phone for calls and the surcharges for the phone and account setup. We are taking care of all the needs for our grandchildren- My husband and I both work – two jobs each to make ends meet. What I don't understand is if mom had these children she receives free babysitting, whether working or not, \$800 food stamps a month and heating assistance, WIC, free phone and I don't know what other programs she had. If these kids were in the foster system and involved with

CYS- the family they are placed with would get money for each of them, childcare, and assistance with legal and counseling needs. These are some of the cost to have them in the “system” All I wanted was some help with daycare and I was told I did not qualify after spending hours filling out confusing paperwork and 3 appts.

5. Stress/Health- I feel ambivalence about starting over with raising children. You don't have the energy and stamina as you did when you are a young parent. You are going, going, going along with all the other life issues you have in this season of life.

There is much stress and worry –

a. How will we handle all the childrearing responsibilities? Failing our grandchildren

b. Daughter's death and/or her future,

c. Financial difficulty, job loss- I was planning on going part time to enjoy the grandchildren but now I must continue to work fulltime to provide for them. The money we was able to put in retirement savings is now once again needed for raising a family so retirement is a concern. The impact this has on our employment- days off work for appts, trying to have a schedule to be able to do what is needed for the kids is very difficult –my employer has told me I am a “scheduling hindrance”

d. Our grandchildren's mental, emotional and behavioral problems due to the circumstances they have been through in the last several years and their adjustment to living with grandma and grandpa

e. Defeated, disillusioned and depressed- in myself, my daughter, government officials and treatment programs

f. Our death and the kids not being raised

g. Future- What will be our future, our grandchildren and daughter's future be? Will our marriage handle this second parenting role? I don't see an end to this— How can a single mom with 4 children, an addict and criminal background become independent – find a job to support her children and can she get well enough to be able to do this.?

h. Anger and resentment- before all this happened I believed and trusted our legal and government systems. But I have seen many inconsistencies in both. Anger at my daughter for causing this, not having time and support, legal system/government agencies not assisting and involving the family in the addict's treatment, they listen to and believe the addict who is a superb liar and manipulator.

i. Guilt and grief- The **loss of “Being GRANDMA”** The loss of our empty nest and our independence – of just having to care for ourselves, the loss of our daughter, loss of hope and dreams. Our responsibilities should be dwindling, but we have more now than ever; the guilt and responsibility you feel for your child's mistakes and failures.

6. Legal issues – the legal process in general -. You need help in knowing what is needed to do to be able to care for these children legally. First you need assistance in attaining custody of your grandchildren, expense of a lawyer- I am sure you are aware of the cost of retainer fees - many of us don't have \$3-5000.00 to give. We need assistance to find the right lawyer to help you with the paperwork and judicial system- never being involved in anything like this you have no idea what you need or the process. You also need assistance with getting birth certificates, social security cards, and more. I started the process the first week of May and it was not until mid-September that we had official custody of the kids. This lengthy process is expensive and time consuming with many days of missed work for hearings. We are still working on a birth certificate and social security card for the youngest. You also have the issue of child support. Isaiah's dad after two years called and was harassing us regarding child support- said he had been paying \$500 a month to my daughter – he was not concerned about Isaiah or being a part of his life just wanted to not pay child support since I had Isaiah. When I spoke with domestic relations they said he was paying \$34 a month!!! They told me to file for support because it is his responsibility – it cost me money to file against him and my

daughter, lost day of work for hearing and guess what we have heard nothing which was no surprise to us.

7. Childcare – My husband and I are in are mid fifties so we both have to work – I am a nurse – I work 12hour days and weekends, my husband has worked two jobs. We have been blessed to have a couple friends help us with the kids. Affordable childcare for four children – it would cost me \$200 a day to have the kids in care in the summer. It is also very difficult to find someone to come before and after to get kids on and off the bus.

8. Time for self- There is no time for yourself or your spouse- school, activities, Dr appt, counseling appts – any day I may have off is spent doing what needs done to keep the kids well physically and emotionally. I would love to go family support meeting but there is no time because I have to work or get the kids someplace.

### **What would be the biggest blessings and help for us**

When I was thinking of what would be the biggest help to us as grandparents – I wanted to assure I was talking for all grandparents so I addressed the question to online support group- grandparents raising grandchildren for their ideas. It was reassuring to me that what I am experiencing is not unique to me. These are the main ideas shared by the members- loss of being a grandparent, kinship programs – not to have barriers since we are not in the foster system or CYS, legal help, financial help, housing assistance, the rights of biological parents need to be addressed after a time period of no involvement with child.

### **Barriers to Help**

As grandparents we face a host of emotional and financial challenges in our renewed parenting role. There is few state or local resources to draw on for help. Grandparents especially those who don't become licensed foster parents or legal guardians of their grandchildren face a host of emotional and legal challenges in getting help. Many grandparents are living on social security – when the family increases social security does not. Many of us don't want to apply for legal custody because that would mean taking our own children to court and an absent parent who had never been involved in the child's life. Did you know that a parent who has not been a part of their child's life has more rights than the grandparent and has the right to the custody of that child because they are biological? I don't understand how this is in the welfare of our children. If we apply for welfare, the state tries to make our own children, who are already struggling with addiction, pay child support. How do you get money from an absent parent??

Licensed foster parents have access to services and can get financial assistance with everything from medical care to a clothing allowance. But to qualify, grandparents would have to go through a lengthy process and meet certain requirements. To be a licensed foster parent, for instance, states have specific requirements about square footage and bedrooms for each child. This makes sense if a child is being placed with a stranger, but creates barriers for grandparents who may need to accommodate multiple grandchildren in their homes. Many of us don't qualify because we are not retirement age and work so we make too much money. Some advocates say that what's needed is more help for "kinship care" — relatives taking in and raising the children who've been neglected. Many agree this is what is needed but there is no funding for this — this is where government needs be concentrating. There could be a payoff if some help was provided for grandparents who aren't part of the foster care system. According to analysis of foster care payments by Generations United, grandparents and other relatives raising children save taxpayers \$4 billion each year by keeping the children out of the foster care system.

### **What do we need?**

Back in the 2000s, some states passed legislation establishing "kinship navigator" programs that serve as one-stop shops linking grandparents and other relatives with services such as counseling, housing assistance and short-term financial help. This would be so beneficial to us as grandparents having a resource to help us through all the issues we are faced with and have no idea what to do. These programs, other grandparents raising children often served as the "navigators" to advise on how to get help with everything from legal advice to parenting skills.

A. No matter why parents can no longer take care of their children — death, divorce, neglect, abuse or poverty — it never, ever is the 'fault 'of the child. I want to make sure my grandchildren feel this and know it. A program for these children would be beneficial- they are dealing with so much and are the subject to so, from others. This could be coordinated with a grandparent program to assist them with the needs they are facing.

B. Make available the resources to the grandparents that would be available to the parents- WIC, child care, food stamps, community resources, etc support group, legal help, kinship/foster programs. Policies and programs at the federal, state, and local levels should encourage, rather than discourage, the responsible actions of relatives who step forward to take care of children. The lengthy process and information needed just adds to all the other concerns at this overwhelming time.

These programs need to look at how the income guidelines for these families are considered. I don't understand why if CYS is involved and/or places the child with family members these families are entitled to **Kinship payment** but when the children are blessed to not have been involved with CYS there is no assistance for the families who step up. This process needs to be revised. Kinship needs to be available to all families taking care of their grandchildren. We need you to relook at the kinship pay – there should be no difference in programs whether the children are involved with CYS or foster care this should not matter. There is a law

**The Defacto Custodial Law** which has done much for the grandparents in some states – this would also be beneficial for Pennsylvania grandparents.

D. Education to government agencies that the grandparent is not the “bad” person in all of this – we are doing our best and we want our best for our grandchildren- I was made to feel like I was the one who caused this situation and I was taking advantage of resources- when I was rejected for childcare. We are already struggling enough we don't need made to feel like we are taking from the government. When we care for our grandchildren we do not receive money from the state so we save the state money- if our children were placed in foster care we would be costing the state. Public awareness through community education and media outreach to support these families is needed.

E. Long term rehab programs – instead of more rehab programs enhance what we have – Teen Challenge, Penial Treatment Center, and Women at the Well- these programs have a commitment of one year. This is what statistics show the longer the person is in a program their chance of recovery increase. Addicts cannot be cured in 28 days they need a much more intense program and follow up. There needs to be family involvement in the addict's rehabilitation.

F. We need to look at the criminal and the addict = I did what I thought was in the best interest for my daughter I charged her for stealing my jewelry but what I have done is now made it impossible for her to get housing and jobs because of her criminal background. So, what did these charges 4 years ago? Much of the criminal activity an addict does is because of the addiction- I do believe in accountability – but I also know if we want these addicts to be successful they need to be able to get housing, employment etc. and with criminal records this is nearly impossible.

Our life is filled with many emotions both positive and negative. We assume our full-time child-rearing responsibilities would end once our children are grown and

out of the house, but we are on a new journey. Millions of grandparents across the country find ourselves nurturing another generation. Even in all the heartaches, pain and stressors when I come home after 12 hours of work and walk through the door and Isaiah, Madison, Xavier and Cameron run into my arms and greet me with hugs and scream “Grammie’s home”, “I missed you”, “I love you “in the best feeling there is. The love you feel from your grandchild is unexplainable; the joy in seeing them grow and learn; the relief of giving them a home and stable environment and the laughter and activity they bring to our lives makes any sacrifice worth it. When I go home tonight, and Isaiah, Xavier, Madison and Cameron run into my arms they will remind me that we will make it through this time.

In conclusion I believe the biggest need for grandparents is the kinship program. This would be a wonderful asset for us as grandparents and would coordinate many of the needs I identified today. [grandfamilies.org](http://grandfamilies.org) is a resource with information regarding other states and how they have developed kinship programs.

Thank you for your time and attention and allowing me to share our story.

