



Testimony submitted February 24, 2011

To the Aging Committee

AN ACT CONCERNING GRANDPARENTS' RIGHTS

HB 6348

Carmen Stanford

Program Manager, Generations

A campus for grandparents raising their grandchildren

Community Renewal Team, Inc., Hartford, CT

Good afternoon Senator Prague, Representative Serra and members of the Aging Committee. My name is Carmen Stanford and I am the Program Manager of Generations, a unique community of 24 townhouses for grandparents raising their grandchildren, which the Community Renewal Team built here in Hartford. As you know, CRT is the community action agency for central Connecticut, and it is also the largest provider of human services in the state. I am here today to join many other advocates for grandparents, to speak on behalf of House Bill 6348, which would begin to provide equity and financial stability for grandparents who are willing to accept the challenge of raising their grandchildren. Some of the grandparents from Generations are here with me today, and one of our residents will be speaking when I am through.

Under the current system, a family providing care to two foster children placed through the Department of Children and Families is supported with a stipend of \$1,400 to \$1,500 each month. However, if those same children were placed with their grandparents or another relative caretaker, the stipend would be less than one-third as much – only \$443! The gap between foster care and grandparents' stipends increases as the number of children grows. Thus, with four children, a grandmother receives only one quarter as much as a foster family. Yet as we can all attest, the food, sneakers, winter jackets and other expenses are exactly the same for the kids – whether they are living with their grandmother or with a foster parent!

You may not be familiar with the extent of this issue throughout the State of Connecticut. The American Community Survey of the US Census says that there are more than 19,000 grandparents here in Connecticut who are responsible for raising their grandchildren. We're talking about a long term guardianship, or custody that is formally granted to the grandparents. The grandparent assumes full responsibility for all financial issues, including shelter, food, clothing, education, and medical care. At the same time, they are helping the children to deal with the tremendous emotional upheaval that so often comes with the loss of access to a parent.

At Generations, we see that grandparents may be in their 40's, or they may be in their 70's, when they step in to help their families. After raising their own children, they may be looking forward to their "empty nest years," they may go back to finish their educations, or they may be working full time and moving ahead in a career. In any case, their lives are turned upside down as they take in grandchildren – sometimes just one and often many more. In most cases, these are single grandmothers who are likely to cut back on their hours at work, or leave the job altogether, to manage the sudden growth of their families.

It's not a simple matter. A lease that allows only three occupants in an apartment is not going to work when the family grows to five or six, so many of these grandparents find that they are looking for larger and more expensive housing at the same time that their income is going down. Unless they can get subsidized housing, this family may be forced to move in with others or even move to shelters. In fact, at least four of the families at Generations came to us from family shelters.

Commissioner Joette Katz at DCR said that kinship care is a key element of her overall plan to improve the lives of Connecticut's children, and she acknowledges that the department needs to recruit more family members who are willing to take children into their homes. HB 6348 is an excellent start on this effort, offering "seventy-five per cent of the prevailing foster care rate" for relative caregivers. The grandmother in my first example, receiving \$443 each month? She moves up to approximately \$1,050 immediately. With four children, the new rate would be \$2,100.

Given the budget crisis in this state, some might say that it's not the right time to ask for an increase in funding. However, many of us believe that grandparents have waited long enough for fair and equitable treatment. This still doesn't put kinship care on a par with foster care. It does not close the gap on other inequities, such as the college funds available for children in the foster care system. But 6348 is a wonderful place to start, to make it possible for low-income grandparents to keep food in the refrigerator and a roof over their grandchildren's heads.

In closing, I would like to tell you what this new law could mean to some of the grandmothers who are in the audience today. I'm going to give you just one example, but I could tell you many stories, believe me!

For the past eight years, Jenny Colon has been raising three grandchildren, making ends meet as best as she can. She left a job doing quality assurance for a pharmaceutical company when the court awarded her three little children. There were two tiny tots in diapers and a four-year-old who was traumatized from his exposure to violence. When they came to Generations, this family had spent nearly two years in various shelters. Jenny had absolutely nothing, except for the fierce love and determination that she was going to keep this family together. After months of paperwork, she was recently told that she could receive approximately \$400 per month toward her grandchildren's care, and \$102 each month for Food Stamps. With the changes that the new law will bring, this family could be receiving at least \$1,500. School uniforms and fees, medical co-pays, an overdue electric bill – Jenny has a lot of ideas on how she would spend this money. Let's just hope that she gets the chance!

I would be happy to take any of your questions.

Community Renewal Team, Inc.

555 Windsor Street, Hartford, CT 06120

Contact information:

Nancy Pappas, Communication Officer
(860) 560-5689 or pappasn@crtct.org

Speaker information:

Carmen Stanford, Program Manager, Generations
Community Renewal Team, Inc.
(860) 895-6605 or stanfordc@crtct.org