



Testimony submitted February 24, 2011

To the Aging Committee

AN ACT CONCERNING GRANDPARENTS' RIGHTS

HB 6348

Deborah Fowlkes, Grandmother raising 5 grandchildren

Good afternoon. My name is Deborah Fowlkes and I am a grandmother who has raised five grandchildren, starting back in 1998. I live in a townhouse at Generations, a beautiful community that CRT built for grandparents raising their grandchildren. I'm lucky enough to live where the rents are kept low, there is enough space for my family, and there is plenty of support from staff and other grandparents. But I am here to speak for all the grandfamilies in Connecticut, in favor of House Bill 6348, which would create a more realistic and fair system of support for grandparents who take in their grandchildren.

As you have heard, the system right now is very lopsided. If a child is placed in the foster care system, the family who takes her in receives an average of \$750 each month, along with annual assistance for school clothes, summer camps, and more. But the assistance for the same child, in the same home placement, is cut to \$333 if the caregiver becomes the permanent guardian through the court system.

The gap widens with each additional child. While the DCF foster care system adds more than \$650 for each child, the guardian receives only an extra \$100 per child. And the guardianship stipends end when the child turns 18, but DCF foster care continues to help the whole time that the child is attending college. I would really appreciate that right now, since one of my grand daughters is in her second year at Providence College!

Oddly enough, I have been on both sides of this picture. In 1998, I got a call from the police that three of my grandchildren had been taken from their mother, and that they were on a “96 hour hold” in a Safe Home. They were going to be placed in foster homes unless I was willing to take them in – and I had to let them know right away! Of course, I wanted to keep our family together, so I said that I would take care of them! I don’t know how things work today, but at that time, even a grandmother had to become a licensed foster care provider to take in grandchildren. I began working with DCF right away – they said that I needed a larger place to live, but they also told me to give up my business. The social worker warned me that there would be so much to do for a while, I really wouldn’t have time to work. That was absolutely true! But fortunately, foster families received around \$650 per child at that time, I think the monthly check was around \$1950. That’s not a lot for four people, but the grandkids were small and we could get by!

Pretty soon things settled down at home, and I was able to look for work again. But I wanted to work third shift, so that I could be home in the mornings to get the children ready for school, and be again in the afternoon when they got home from school. I have a BA from the University of Hartford, but there isn’t much interesting, professional work available on third shift. You’re stuck in some pretty low wage jobs, doing repetitious work. Still, it helped to pay the rent and keep food on the table. Only two challenges: I didn’t get much sleep, and I always had to have someone else in the house while I went off to work.

All this time, we were going back and forth to court, as my daughter fought to get her children back. After a few years, it looked like the children were going to be moved back to their mother. Then at the last minute, DCF to leave the children with me on a permanent basis. They asked me if I would like to be their permanent guardian, and of course I said ‘yes.’ What they did NOT tell me was that, as a permanent guardian, my payment would be slashed and I would no longer have access to educational stipends, support programs, respite funds and many other positive things that have been built into the foster care system.

I’ve told many of my friends that the first payment I received through the Department of Social Services, I thought was a mistake. For three children, I was getting what I had previously

received for just one of them. Same children, same grandmother, same rent payments, right? Only now the support was around \$500 – 600 a month! At one point, when I had five grandchildren under the age of 18 living with me, the checks were a little over \$700 each month. I understand that they might have gone as high as \$3,500 if I had stayed within the DCF system.

Believe me, I'm not saying that I feel sorry for myself. I'm not saying that I should have refused to become the permanent guardian for my grandchildren. But does it make sense to punish grandparents who are willing to make that commitment? Even more important, does it make sense to punish the children who are living with their grandparents? To have to tell them that they can't go on school field trips or get a bicycle, when a foster family would have been able to provide those things?

This new law is offering to make the system a little more fair for the grandmothers and grandfathers who step in and take care of their families. It still doesn't bring us up to the level of payment for foster families, but it's a great improvement. We'll still be clipping coupons and going to the store on "senior discount" days. We'll still pass around school uniforms that our grandchildren have outgrown. But with payments that are more in line with the actual costs that we face, we won't have to dread opening the mail – to dread that utility bill we can't pay or the third notice from our landlord.

I hope that you will give Bill 6348 some careful consideration. I think our society values the idea of keeping families together. Children who can't live with their parents can move in with their grandparents. But those grandparents need a little help to keep that family safe, fed and housed.

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:

Deborah Fowlkes
(860) 816-1607