**Summary**

**Raising the Children of the Opioid Epidemic: Solutions and Support for Grandfamilies**

**Generations United**

**2018**

**Prepared by Shan Choudhri**

1. *Grandfamilies Provide Safe Homes for Children Affected by the Opioid Epidemic*

Over two and a half million children are raised by extended family and family friends (i.e., in “grandfamilies”) when parents are unable to step forward. Parental substance use is the most common reason for which grandfamilies must step forward to raise children. As the Opioid Use Disorder (OUD) crisis continues to worsen, increasing numbers of relatives and friends are stepping up to raise children whose parents have been affected. The number of children in foster care is increasing as a result of the opioid epidemic, and the strain on the child welfare system is unsustainable in many parts of the United States, forcing family members and friends to look after children. It is estimated that grandfamilies who opt to raise children out of foster care save taxpayers $4 billion per year.

1. *An Overview of the Opioid Crisis*

More than 100 people die each day in the United States from opioid-related overdoses.

Opioids are highly addictive, and prescription opioids can often serve as a gateway for illicit substances – about 80% of new heroin users admit to having abused prescription opioids previously. Due to costs of healthcare, loss of productivity, addiction treatment, and criminal justice involvement, opioid misuse costs the United States approximately $78.5 billion per year. Non-urban areas are the most significantly affected due to several factors including stigma and fewer treatment options. White people are also more heavily affected than other racial groups, most likely due to physicians’ reluctance to prescribe painkillers to minority patients.

1. *Opioid and Other Substance Use Disorders Affect Each Generation in a Grandfamily*

Birth parents who suffer from substance misuse are often unable to parent despite their desire to. This creates challenges both for them and their children. Children who experience early traumatic events are more likely to develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and substance use disorders than the general population is. Caregivers in grandfamilies also face unique challenges. They personally have to navigate any physical or cognitive challenges that their children face as a result of exposure to parental substance use, and they also have to pay for appropriate healthcare and developmental services. Caregivers may suffer from grief, mental health issues, social isolation, or depression.

1. *Children Thrive in Grandfamilies*

Research has shown that children who cannot remain with their parents thrive when raised by relatives and close family friends. Compared to children in foster care with non-relatives, those in grandfamilies are more likely to have a permanent home, experience fewer school changes, have better behavioral health outcomes, and report feeling loved. They are more likely to remain connected to their siblings, their communities, and their cultural identities. Caregivers also report benefitting from their relationships with the children in that they feel an increased sense of purpose.

1. *Supporting Grandfamilies Helps Children Thrive*

Grandfamilies are a demographic in significant need of support. Many caregivers are over 60, retired, and/or living on a fixed income, and one in five lives in poverty. Caregivers are also often not aware of the supports and services for which their families may be eligible. Relatives raising children outside of the foster care system tend to have even less support than those raising children in the formal system. Research has shown that children of caregivers who receive services and support have better social and mental health outcomes than children of caregivers who do not receive services and support. Examples of services and supports that improve outcomes include support groups, mental health services, case management, and kinship navigator programs.

1. *Policy and Program Recommendations*

Recommendations for policymakers, advocates, and professionals serving children,

caregivers, and parents in grandfamilies affected by substance use disorders:

* Encourage states to offer a continuum of tailored services and supports for children, parents, and caregivers in grandfamilies available through the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First Act).
* Ensure children in foster care are placed with families, prioritize placement with relatives, and give them support to care for children with high level needs.
* Promote services to grandfamilies through the Network of Organizations Serving Older Americans.
* Provide an array of legal options to grandfamilies by educating relatives on the full range of legal options and improving their access to legal assistance; identifying and engaging relatives from the beginning; and addressing barriers to foster family home licensure.
* Ensure grandfamilies not licensed as foster parents can access financial assistance to meet children’s needs, child care assistance, and help securing employment.
* Elevate and promote best practices through a National Technical Assistance Center on Grandfamilies.

**Reference**

Generations United. (2018). *Raising the Children of the Opioid Epidemic: Solutions and*

*Support for Grandfamilies.* Retrieved from

<https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2018/09/Grandfamilies-Report-SOGF-Updated.pdf>