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House Finance: Health & Human Services Subcommittee
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Good morning Chairman Burke and members of the House Finance: Health & Human Services Subcommittee. My name is Barbara Turpin from Columbus and I am Co-Vice President of the Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

The Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition (OGKC) is a statewide organization consisting of kinship caregivers, kinship caregiver advocates and agencies throughout Ohio. The OGKC mission is to:

- Educate kinship caregivers and agencies regarding state and national programs /issues affecting kinship caregivers
- Advocate at local, state and national levels for support of kinship families
- Provide a networking system for caregivers and agencies
- Link caregivers with services in their communities
- Connect new kinship care programs with speaker's bureau
- Conduct statewide conferences

Ohio began addressing kinship care support issues as a result of the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren 1998 Survey* conducted by the University of Cincinnati for the Ohio Department of Aging's Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Task Force. In recognition of the growing number of kinship caregivers and the needs of these families, legislation was passed in the FY 1999 – FY 2000 Biennial Appropriations Bill that created the Kinship Care Services Planning Council.

The Council operated on a set of guiding principles which were used to direct its work and the development of recommendations to the Director of the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services (ODJFS) by December 31, 1999:

- Kinship care represents the most desirable out-of-home placement option for children who cannot live with their parents. It offers the greatest level of stability by allowing children to maintain their sense of belonging and enhances their ability to identify with their family's culture and traditions. For this reason, kinship caregivers are valued for the extraordinary role they play in shaping the future of Ohio.
- Kinship caregivers provide a vital resource to the State of Ohio. Without their commitment to the children in their care, Ohio's foster care system would be overwhelmed by the numbers of children in need of homes. This is compounded by the fact that there are not enough non-relative homes for all the children currently in need of out-of-home placement.
- Kinship caregivers save Ohio's taxpayers millions of dollars by caring for children who might otherwise be placed in the foster care system. Consequently it is in the state's best interest to ensure that kinship caregivers have access to formal and informal supports, services and other resources they need to properly care for the children in their homes.

The final report to the Director of ODJFS contained 11 recommendations to provide help and support to kinship caregivers. Seven of these recommendations were implemented over the last 9 years:

- Identify and support at least one “kinship navigator” in each county to serve as the point of contact for kinship caregivers who are seeking information regarding services and benefits and assist caregivers in accessing benefits and services for which they are eligible. **Note: Dedicated funding for this service was removed from the state budget in 2006. Although some counties maintain this service, it is no longer supported in the majority of counties. The provision in the federal 2008 Fostering Connections to Success & Increasing Adoptions Act for Family Connection Grants that has provide opportunities for grants for Kinship Navigator programs in states is modeled after Ohio’s navigator program. Ohio is a recipient of a grant which currently funds navigators in 7 counties.**
- Create a statewide Kinship Care Advisory Board coordinated with the Ohio Department of Human Services (ODHS) (currently ODJFS) to oversee and monitor the implementation of the Kinship Care Services Program.
- Develop a statewide information and referral service which includes establishment of a 1-800 number, resource directory and website to provide kinship caregivers with basic benefit/services information and provide them the contact information for the kinship navigator in their county.
- Hire a statewide kinship care resource coordinator responsible for expanding and enhancing existing training programs.
- Work with the Department of Education to provide for automatic eligibility to Head Start programs for children ages 3-5 in kinship care. **Note: Funding for the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) was cut from the FY 2010-11 budget and is no longer available for parents or caregivers.**
- Seek legislation to create a time limited “power of attorney” (POA) to enable parents to empower another person to exercise certain rights and responsibilities with respect to their children, and seek legislation to create a time limited “kinship caregiver affidavit” to enable kinship caregivers to assume certain specific rights, especially around school and medical issues, when the parents cannot be located. **Note: This legislation was passed, but the provision is limited to grandparent caregivers.**
- Provide additional financial assistance to kinship caregivers by creating a special subsidy for caregivers with guardianship or legal custody and by increasing Ohio Works First benefits across the board to assist caregivers without legal guardianship or custody. **Note: The Kinship Permanency Incentive Program (KPI) was originally funded at \$10M per SFY year, but was reduced to \$5M per year in the FY 2010-11 budget.**

Kinship Permanency Incentive Program (KPI)

Ohio’s KPI program became effective January 2006. This program, supported with \$10 million from TANF for each year of the biennium, is designed to promote a permanent commitment by kinship caregivers for minor children who are unable to safely remain in their own homes. The KPI program provides time-limited incentive payments to eligible caregivers who accept legal custody or legal guardianship of kin children on or after July 1, 2005. Eligible families received an initial payment of \$1,000 per child to defray the initial costs of assuming the child’s care. Additional payments of \$500 could be received at six month intervals within a thirty-six month period, up to a maximum of \$3,500. Participation in KPI did not preclude these families from receiving the Child Only TANF benefits or funds for the child’s participation in the Early Learning Initiative (prior to its elimination).

The Ohio Department of Job & Family Services produced a report that was released in April 2008, which provides data for the KPI program from January 2006 through December 2007. The following is from the report:

- 80 of the 88 counties received applications
- 5305 initial applications were submitted
- 4364 (82%) initial applications were approved
- 2454 applications were submitted for first redetermination
- 2391 (97.9%) applications were approved at first redetermination
- 544 applications were submitted for second redetermination
- 540 (99.3%) applications were approved at second redetermination
- Total KPI expenditure was \$3,618,500 for eligible children; \$1,000,000 county administrative reimbursement

The current investment of \$5M per year, which resulted in a reduced initial payment of \$525 for each child and an additional payment of \$300 every six months for thirty-six months, has provided support to over 8,000 children in safe and familiar homes, but the same \$5M per year investment in foster care would serve only 685 children.

Although these families are also eligible for the TANF OWF-Child Only benefit, this benefit is not applied equally to multiple children in the same family and is not sufficient to adequately cover all of the costs involved in assuming responsibility for the care of an additional person(s) to feed, clothe, house and educate, especially if living on a fixed income and/or a single parent household. The current \$5M funding has been fully utilized both years.

The recommendation by the Kinship Care Services Planning Council was finally fulfilled with the implementation of the KPI program. The TANF dedicated funding for KPI was removed in the FY 2010- FY 2011 biennial budget proposal. Given the financial crisis with most county budgets, it is unlikely that county agencies will be able to continue to fund the program from the general allotment of TANF funds. If the dedicated funding is not restored it will result in no support available for new kinship families and termination of ongoing support for those families currently eligible, which could lead to more children coming into the formal foster care system.

Ohio has been recognized as a national leader in providing needed supports to kinship families to make sure children who cannot live with their parents are in the next best possible home. A foster care placement is not only hundreds of dollars more costly for the state and counties, but does not always provide the necessary family connections that kinship arrangements do.

Let us not take a step backward. OGKC wholeheartedly encourages the return of funding to the biennial budget for the KPI program.

I am providing the committee with copies of testimonials from kinship caregivers and those who serve kinship families to the importance of support for the success of the children in their care.

Every step we take to improve the lives of children improves the lives of all of us.

Thank you.

