

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Public Oversight Hearing on
B23-0203, the “Close Relative Caregivers Subsidies Amendment Act
of 2019”

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee on Human Services
The Honorable Brianne Nadeau, Chairperson

Council of the District of Columbia
Room 123
John A. Wilson Building,
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

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10:00 a.m.

Good morning, Chairwoman Nadeau, councilmembers, and staff. I am Ransom Washington, Jr., Assistant Deputy Director for Program Operations for the District of Columbia's Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Bill 23-0203, the "Close Relative Caregivers Subsidies Amendment Act of 2019."

We support the purpose of the bill and look forward to working with you on refinements that we believe will make it more effective in supporting families and helping children remain in familiar surroundings instead of entering foster care. I would like to discuss the bill, our current support of kinship caregivers, and recommendations for strengthening the bill.

As we know, relatives raising children in their immediate or extended families for the short or long-term is not a new phenomenon. These types of formal or informal caregiver arrangements occur for a variety of reasons. When children lack familial supports ready to commit to their care, they are at risk of entering foster care. In 2006, the District enacted the *Grandparent Caregivers Pilot Program Establishment Act of 2005* (D.C. Law 16-69; D.C. Official Code § 4-251.02 *et seq.*), which established the Grandparent Caregivers Program (GCP) within CFSA to administer a monthly stipend to eligible District residents with low incomes who are raising their grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great nieces, or great nephews. The subsidy awarded assists grandparents, great-grandparents, great-aunts or great-uncles to care for a child relative in their home. The Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Support Act of 2009 moved the Program out of pilot status, creating the permanent GCP. We currently serve 806 children through GCP.

Bill 23-0203, the "Close Relative Caregivers Subsidies Amendment Act of 2019" proposes to grow the GCP by amending the law to expand eligibility to include "close relatives" defined as an adult brother, or sister, adult aunt or uncle, or adult nephew or niece to receive a subsidy. The expansion of eligibility will give more families the opportunity to apply and be awarded a subsidy based on funding availability. CFSA generally supports this bill as a means through which monetary support is provided to intergenerational relatives residing in the District who commit to be the long-term primary caregiver for a child in their family. For low-income families, this subsidy can be the difference between fulfilling their commitment and being unable to afford to do so.

CFSA's Current Support of Kinship Caregivers

CFSA is already expanding services and supports to relative caregivers. Through the Kinship Navigator Program, we will administer a robust kinship support program within the Office of Program Operations. There, the Kinship Support Services Program will engage relative caregivers (and potential relative caregivers) of children both inside and outside the foster care system. CFSA will use FY2019 and FY2020 Kinship Navigator Program funding to augment existing services and supports and leverage community-based services to help improve community and caregiver capacity to keep children safe and well in the homes of their relatives.

In addition, CFSA will administer a dedicated Kinship Caregiver Mobile Support line to provide direct support as well as information and referral services to callers. The line will be staffed by trained members of the Kinship Support Services Program. Support line operators will serve a dual function of providing real-time facilitation or mediation of conflicts or issues, as well as referrals and linkage to nearby community-based resources that are equipped to address any number of issues.

We will concurrently develop an online Community Services Resource Directory that will feature a custom module with tools and resources by location and service type to address the particular needs of Kinship Caregivers. CFSA Kinship Support Services Program will also partner with community-based partners to staff and facilitate emotional support groups in the neighborhoods where kinship caregivers reside.

We recommend that the program first be implemented as a pilot program similar to how GCP began. CFSA has no real way of estimating the demand of the expanded program other than looking at data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count Data Center, which indicates that 7,000 District children younger than age 18 were living in grandparent-led households and an additional 9,000 were living in households led by a relative caregiver in 2017.¹ Any calculations based on the bill's broad "close relative" definition would be entirely speculative, since the number of families who are not asking for assistance is unknown. A pilot would allow the program the time to assess the demand and identify any program adjustments to be made in serving the expanded population.

A "close relative" is defined as "an adult brother or sister, or adult aunt or uncle, or adult nephew or niece" in the bill. We recommend further defining the definition of "close relative" to provide that the close relative is related to the child by blood, marriage, domestic partnership, or adoption. In addition, consideration should be given to a targeted approach to identifying families by referring relatives that have come to the attention of CFSA, but their children are not in foster care. CFSA serves a number of families through referrals to the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives for additional support that would benefit greatly from financial support.

In closing, this bill aligns with the important upstream prevention strategies that CFSA will be administering under the District's new Family First DC plan, given that Ward 7 and Ward 8 constituted 73 percent of the caregivers participating in the GCP. As an effort to further strengthen our family safety net, CFSA would like to work with the Committee to further refine the bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

¹ "Time for Reform: Support Relatives in Providing Foster Care and Permanent Families for Children." Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now and Generations United, Washington, DC. 2007 and Conway, Tiffany and Rutledge Q. Hudson. "Is Kinship Care Good for Kids?" Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, DC. 2007.