

n4a Input RE: ACL Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Advisory Council RFI  
February 7, 2020  
Submitted Electronically: <https://acl.gov/form/sgrg-form>

**Please tell us about any existing information, resources, programs and/or best practices that help grandparents, older relatives and/or kinship caregivers do the following:**

**Meet the mental/physical health, educational or nutritional needs of those for whom they provide care**

On behalf of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), which represents the country's 622 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and is an advocacy voice in the nation's capital for the more than 250 OAA Title VI Native American aging programs, we recognize that the number of grandparents and other older relatives who are caring for children is significant and growing.

Established in the first authorization of the Older Americans Act (OAA), the original goal of the Aging Network was to develop and provide older adults with the local services and supports needed to age with health, independence and dignity in their homes and communities. This aim remains foundational and means that AAAs and other Aging Network entities are uniquely positioned to address many of the support needs of the increasing number of older adults serving as primary caregivers for younger relative children.

Numerous national, state and local systems and services—including, but not limited to, public education, child protective services, law enforcement and other entities—directly address the mental and physical health, educational, and nutritional needs of children experiencing tumultuous circumstances and receiving substantial care from a grandparent or older relative. The Aging Network, established through the Older Americans Act, is an essential partner in promoting the mental and physical health of the older relatives who are providing care to younger relatives.

Ultimately, younger care recipients will have an improved chance to prosper if their older caregivers are receiving the supports that they need to promote their own health, stability and longevity as well as their caregiver role. The NFCSP offers critical caregiver supports and services to ensure that healthier caregivers can better support care recipients. The Older Americans Act and the Aging Network are vital resources to promote older relative caregiver

health and well-being, and therefore are an important component of ensuring that younger care recipients thrive.

**Address other concerns such as legal assistance, financial support and affordable housing associated with this population of caregivers and care recipients**

While the federal Older Americans Act is not the primary provider of services such as legal assistance, financial support and access to affordable housing, Area Agencies on Aging serve an important role in supplementing some of those services and connecting older caregivers to other local resources. Creative and coordinated local initiatives offered through AAAs and other Aging Network stakeholders are a vital component of the wrap-around support network serving older relative caregivers and their care recipients.

For example, the OAA identifies access to legal services as a priority within Title III B Supportive Services. In San Diego, Aging & Independence Services (AIS) has implemented a program that can serve as an example of how these AAA services can be important to kinship caregivers.

In San Diego, 24,000 grandparents have primary responsibility for the welfare of their grandchildren. To help address this situation, AIS joined with community members to create the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren initiative, which provides education, support and resources for grandparents and kinship caregivers who are raising children; advocates for grandparents; and creates awareness about the unique needs of grandparents. The committee hosts an annual Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Symposium and created a handbook that includes information on determining legal status of grandparents, navigating the child welfare system, and finding resources for childcare, housing and mental health services.

Furthermore, while some Area Agencies on Aging do offer direct financial assistance in emergency situations, most often they help secure services and items that would otherwise be a financial burden to older relative caregivers. For example, studies show that older adults are 16 times more likely to experience food insecurity when children reside with them. The Area Agency on Aging of Northwestern Ohio has implemented a program to help mitigate malnutrition in older adults with fresh food delivery to kinship care families. Through the Fresh Fruits and Vegetable Program for Kinship Families, local farmers provide a large box of produce to participants monthly, substantially alleviating food insecurity and preventing malnutrition in grandparents and grandchildren. Cooking demonstrations and nutrition education are also provided. One hundred percent of participants reported the produce

packages enabled them to expand their food budget, serve more nutritious food and have more time to spend caring for their grandchildren.

These are just two examples of the work undertaken by AAAs to support grandparents and other older relative caregivers.

### **Maintain their own physical and mental health, and emotional and financial wellbeing**

Area Agencies on Aging across the country share the common mission to provide home and community-based services and supports to enable older adults and caregivers to live with dignity and independence in their homes and communities for as long as possible. These services—targeted specifically toward older adults—are an important component of maintaining the emotional and physical health for older relative caregivers. In addition to core Older Americans Act programs that all AAAs must offer, over 90 percent also offer evidence-based health and wellness programs. These programs are proven approaches to supporting health and well-being and focus on issues such as falls prevention, chronic disease self-management programs, and other health promotion strategies.

Additionally, caregiver support groups are an important component of the OAA Title III E NFCSP. AAAs are increasingly targeting outreach and programming to older relative caregivers. For example, Thrive Alliance in Columbus, IN, developed a support group for relatives raising family members' children to ensure they focus on their own health and can connect with others who are experiencing similar challenges. The monthly meetings include an educational seminar, therapist-facilitated conversation, evening meal and childcare. Older children who attend also have the opportunity to participate in a therapist-facilitated conversation. A 2017 evaluation of the program indicated that 71 percent of grandparents reported an improvement in knowledge about community resources and 57 percent saw an improvement in their ability to understand and better manage their emotions.

Recognizing and emulating best practices implemented by local AAAs and other Aging Network entities will be an important component in enhancing the Aging Network's capacity to expand supports for a growing population of older relative caregivers.

## **What are the support needs that are not being met for:**

### **Grandparents and other older relatives who are raising or supporting grandchildren**

In 2018, n4a conducted an informal survey of its member Area Agencies on Aging and Title VI Native American aging programs. From that survey, nearly 30 percent of AAAs responding said that they had seen an increase in demand for caregiver support services for grandparents raising grandchildren. Additionally, a majority said that they believed that creating a peer-to-peer learning model among Aging Network stakeholders would be valuable in order to learn how to better serve these caregivers in the field.

While nearly 90 percent of respondents said that their state unit on aging permitted AAAs to use funding to target caregiver services for grandparents raising grandchildren, only 60 percent said they were able to offer those services. Agencies cited a lack of sufficient funding as the primary reason that they were not offering these supports. When asked if they would support eliminating the 10 percent cap for kinship care services under OAA Title III E, a majority said they would support removing the cap and/or creating a separate expenditure under the NFCSP targeted toward serving older caregivers raising children.

Given this input from the field, n4a believes that overall caregiver supports for older relative caregivers are generally lacking, and new investments in, and a commitment to, serving older relative caregivers would be an important endeavor.

### **Do you think additional federal legislation is needed to better support and serve grandparents and older relatives raising children? Please describe:**

The National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP, Title III E) funds programs offered at the community level through AAAs that assist caregivers and family members caring for older loved ones. The NFCSP offers a range of in-demand supports to family caregivers in every community, preventing billions in additional care costs to taxpayers if their loved ones are placed in a more expensive institutional setting.

To better address the caregiving needs of grandparents and other older relatives raising children, AAAs should be allowed to exceed the current 10 percent cap on Title III E National Family Caregiver Support Program funding available to serve this population. In some areas of the country, additional state and local flexibility is warranted due to the rapidly escalating need for these caregiver services as a result of the opioid epidemic. The cap was instituted when NFCSP was created in 2000, presumably with a concern that most resources should go to caregivers of older adults. AAAs administer the NFCSP locally and should be allowed to determine the best use of the funds within congressionally directed mandates.

Fortunately, Congress has included a proposal to remove this cap and allow additional flexibility to support older relative caregivers as part of the bipartisan, bicameral proposal to reauthorize the federal Older Americans Act in 2020. This modest change to the service parameters of the NFCSP is supported by n4a and other advocates and promoted by the Administration for Community Living in their recommendations for reauthorization. n4a appreciates that lawmakers have adopted this additional flexibility, and we hope to see this provision enacted soon.