

Date: July 22, 2020

To: Members of the Senate Committee on Families, Seniors and Veterans

RE: Support for House Bills 5443 and 5444

Thank you for this opportunity to lend support to your conversation today about House Bills 5443 and 5444 that would provide critical guidance and attention to efforts that support a group of caregivers essential to raising healthy and successful children and youth.

Many children and youth in Michigan are being raised by grandparents and other relatives when their own parents are unwilling or unable to care for them. In some situations, this “kinship care” with grandparents, aunts and uncles, older siblings and other relatives is informally arranged. In other situations, the child welfare or court systems get involved and relatives are given legal status as guardians or licensed as foster parents. Beyond the knowledge that this caregiving has been part of successful family functioning through time, there is also ample evidence showing that in the majority of circumstances, children thrive in the culturally relevant and stable environments created through kinship care, which is why child welfare systems have stated priorities that include placing children with suitable relatives when possible and utilizing relatives to support parents so that their children do not need to be removed in the first place.

In Michigan, several thousand children and youth live with relatives who are licensed foster parents or unlicensed caregivers who are engaged with the formal child welfare system. According to Generations United, it is estimated that more than ten times that many children outside the foster care system live with a grandparent or other relative. Despite efforts on the part of some communities to better understand and serve this population, the full picture of Michigan children in informal living arrangements with relatives is not well known.

We applaud the Legislature’s efforts through HB 5443 to create a much needed Kinship Care Advisory Council to remedy that knowledge gap, and pursue effective strategies to prioritize supports for these families. Functions included are to:

- Advise and support key functions of Michigan’s Kinship Navigator Program, including devising a plan of action for engaging with the groups and programs who work with kinship families to better understand issues facing them.
- Gather consistent data about the status and needs of kinship families.
- Address the prevalence, challenges, and needs of kinship families.
- Identify and evaluate current state and federal policies, programs, and services for kinship caregivers in this state and other states.
- Develop methods to promote and improve collaboration between state, county, and local governments and agencies and private stakeholders.
- Investigate the benefits of creating a program dedicated to providing support and assistance to kinship families utilizing child placing agencies or similar agencies.
- Provide policy options for supporting and empowering kinship caregivers
- Inform the public about the status and needs of kinship families.

Similarly, the efforts intended through HB 4444 to codify in state law and more clearly support Michigan's current Kinship Navigator program are a move in the right direction, serving to provide consistency in those efforts to build on current federal requirements and support, but also recognizing the need for Michigan to commit ourselves to prioritizing that work regardless by setting up the Kinship Caregiver Navigator Fund where other resources could be brought to bear in addition to those committed through DHHS.

While we understand that the fiscal needs of these bills, beyond setting up the Fund, are not under the purview of this committee, we encourage you all to not only pass these bills through the Senate, but to champion adequate funding for the work that they are mandating with your legislative colleagues and the administration. To fully recognize the scope of intent of these pieces of legislation will require consistent commitment to funding. In the current fiscal climate, this may seem like a daunting task, but prioritizing the needs of these families is essential now and well into the future. Employing funding strategies that include a combination of public and private revenues will be required.

Fortunately, both of these efforts would be well supported by the Michigan Kinship Care Coalition, more than 30 organizations and individuals recently gathered by the Kinship Resource Center at the MSU School of Social Work that is working to strengthen and increase support for kinship families through networking, advocacy, increased education and raised awareness.

Keep in mind, however, that while establishing the Advisory Committee and codifying the Kinship Navigator Program are essential first steps, best supporting families requires many other priority supports and investments.

The undersigned stand ready to support the passage of this legislation through the Senate and its implementation over the coming years. And we look forward to working with you and your colleagues to bring forward additional concerns and opportunities for action that will improve outcomes for children, youth and families in our state.

Michael Karson, President and CEO, Area Agency on Aging 1-B

Ora M. Williams, Director, Grandparents Parenting Again & Kinship Caregivers Support

Lara Bouse, President and Executive Director, Fostering Forward Michigan

Karie Ward, Director, Fostering Success Michigan

Alicia Guevara Warren, Kinship Care Resource Center at MSU

Michele Corey, VP for Programs and Policy, Michigan's Children

Denise Kolakowski, Poison Center Educator, Michigan Poison Center/ WSU School of Medicine

Joe Kozakiewicz, Director, MSU Chance at Childhood Program

Maxine Thome, Executive Director, National Association of Social Workers – MI

Derrick McCree, Executive Director, The New Foster Care

Susan Harding, CEO, Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency

Margaret Ann Ashworth, Rochester Hills, MI

Lisa Bica Grodsky, Troy, MI

Jeanette Elizabeth Brown, Southfield, MI

Lisa F. Martinez, Warren, MI

Antoinette and Anthony James, Oak Park, MI

Cynthia Louise Jenkinson, Sterling Heights, MI

Jeanette Jones, Member AFSN, Lake Ann, MI

Sherri Elaine Livingston, Eastpointe, MI

Brenda Owens, Waterford/Oakland County

Patricia A. Schulte, William G. Schulte, Oxford, MI

Leanne Van Overbeke, Shelby, MI

Tomoko Wakabayashi, Bloomfield Hills Township, MI

Susan White, White Lake Township, MI