Grandparents are raising the children of the opioid crisis

By Jaia Peterson Lent

For my fiftieth birthday, I got a 2-year-old. My story isn’t unique. This [opioid] epidemic has devastated communities all over the country. It doesn’t discriminate against age, race, gender or income. It affects all of us. But sometimes it feels like folks in Washington don’t hear these stories,” said Pamela Livengood, a grandparent caregiver quoted in an article in the Washington Post, on July 26, 2016 (goo.gl/EVzNGH).

As the nation grapples with how to address the devastating opioid crisis, little attention has been given to a growing group of silent heroes who are stepping up to help our children and communities heal—our nation’s grandparents. Across the country, more than 2.5 million grandparents like Pamela are raising grandchildren as the nation faces sharp increases in the number of “children of the opioid crisis” (goo.gl/aw38bH). These children’s parents are addicted, incarcerated or dead from an opioid overdose.

**Grandparents Filling Foster Care Void**

During her remarks at a recent Senate HELP committee hearing (goo.gl/YCyHLY), Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) noted the far-reaching impact of the crisis on our nation’s grandparents: “Our children are dying of overdose. Our children are suffering because the parents are checked out. I went to a senior center. I was sitting with a group of primarily senior ladies, and I said, ‘Well, if I weren’t having lunch with you today, what would you be talking about?’ And they looked around and they said, ‘Where we would find services for our grandkids, because all of us—all of us—are taking care of our grandkids.’ ”

The crisis has turned senior center lunches into support groups.

It is transforming child welfare systems, too.

Struggling to keep up with the need for foster parents, child welfare agencies are looking to grandparents and other relatives to fill the void. Nearly 30 percent of children in foster care are living with relatives, up 6 percent from less than a decade ago. And for every child in foster care with relatives, there are 20 being raised by grandparents or other relatives outside the foster care system (goo.gl/6uk5CU).

The good news is that research shows that children raised by grandparents can thrive (goo.gl/pHupSa). Compared to children in foster care with non-relatives, children raised by a caring relative have fewer behavioral problems, better mental health and more successful long-term outcomes than children in foster care. In fact, grandparents and other relatives have a special protective role with these children that helps to mitigate trauma (goo.gl/tmGW2).
Grandparent Caregivers Face Stigma

Yet these grandparents face staggering challenges.

One in five grandparents raising grandchildren lives below the poverty line. One in four has a disability (goo.gl/Wtj7SG). Most are thrust into the role suddenly: they are not prepared for that call in the middle of the night telling them to pick up the children or else they will end up in foster care. At a moment’s notice, these grandparents are forced to navigate unfamiliar and complex systems to help meet the challenges of children who have come into their home, often after experiencing significant, sustained trauma.

And the grandparents frequently face this unexpected challenge alone. They may suffer from social isolation and even depression because they do not want their peers to know about their situation or because their peers are no longer parenting. Caregivers of children whose parents are using drugs may have their stress exacerbated by trying to maintain or navigate an ongoing relationship between the child and parent.

As grandparent caregiver Chris Mathews explains in a 2016 Generations United report on the state of grandfamilies, “Grandparents are doing whatever it takes to bring their grandchildren to safety. We spend all of our savings. We lose our friends. We lose our identity” (goo.gl/aw38bH). She calls on leaders to work with grandparents to get the financial aid, the legal help, the counseling and everything else she and other grandparents need to help the children to succeed.

Yet grandparents and other relatives are less likely to get access to needed supports and services that traditional foster parents receive. Because of the backward way our child welfare system is funded, there is little help for those who step in proactively to protect and care for the at-risk child. Only after a tragedy occurs, and Child Protective Services is called, are some relatives given information or access to financial help, training, professional counseling and in-home supports to help meet the child’s needs.

Caregiver Crystal Purdue of Tennessee wrote KNOX News a letter to the editor on Jan. 3, 2017, in which she said, “In times of crisis children’s television hero, Mr. Roger’s famously invited children to look for the helpers. In this opioid crisis, those are our nation’s grandparents, aunts, uncles and others stepping up to raise the children” (goo.gl/J9ihnV).

Let’s give these helping heroes the recognition and support they need to help our nation’s children thrive. For more information on grandparenting in the United States, visit goo.gl/8WunFL.

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Congressional Action Is Crucial

Even in our current divisive political climate, helping our nation’s grandparents and grandchildren is one place where we must find common ground. Congress and the Administration should respond to calls from grandparents like Pamela Livengood, and take action by doing the following:

√ Reforming our child welfare system to ensure children and grandfamilies get the support they need;
√ Investing in trauma-informed care and prevention programs;
√ Protecting healthcare for young and old, including Medicaid, Medicare and the Children’s Health Insurance Program;
√ Ensuring that federal support through programs like SNAP and the Social Services Block Grant will continue to be available so grandparents can provide for the basic needs of the children they are protecting and nurturing; and
√ Passing the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act (goo.gl/3Esi5i) to create a federal task force on grandparents and other relatives raising children and a one-stop-shop for federal resource to help them.

—Jaia Peterson Lent