



Children's Defense Fund
LEAVE NO CHILD BEHIND®

Testimony of Carlos Rodriguez Children's Defense Fund – New York

The Council of the City of New York
Committee on the Aging
April 27, 2004

Madam Chairperson and Members of the Committee: Thank you for holding this hearing on the challenges facing grandparents raising children.

I am Carlos Rodriguez, Senior Field Organizer for the Children's Defense Fund – New York. The mission of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is to Leave No Child Behind® and to ensure every child a *Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start, and a Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. The Children's Defense Fund has long recognized the crucial role that grandparent caregivers play in the lives of children and we are grateful for the opportunity to discuss how we can work together to ensure that these special families have the supports they need.

In New York City, **nearly 1 out of every 8 children is being raised by their relatives.** In many of these homes, grandparents and other relatives have become the primary caregivers, or kinship caregivers, for children whose parents cannot or will not care for them due to substance abuse, illness, child abuse and neglect, economic hardship, incarceration, divorce, domestic violence, or other serious problems.

The attached analysis of census data reveals children are not just staying with their grandparents on a short-term basis and that often grandparents are raising more than one child. **In NYC over 58% of grandparents are responsible for them for more than three years; and statewide, on average, two children are being raised for every one grandparent raising grandchildren.**

Grandparents provide a vital safety net for children, giving stability and support to children and families in crisis. Yet, these grandparents and other relative caregivers often face serious challenges. In addition to coping with the physical and emotional needs of children whose parents aren't there, these grandparents often have their own health problems and may be struggling on a fixed income.

Many children being cared for by grandparents are eligible for assistance through publicly funded programs providing health insurance, child care, cash grants and more. However, obtaining these resources is far from easy. Many grandparents simply do not know that help is available. Those who ask for help often find that the application workers are not equipped to meet the special circumstances of grandparent-headed families. Despite the enormous challenges they face, kinship caregivers understandably may be afraid to ask strangers

for the help they need. Some are embarrassed about their family situations. Many others are afraid that the children they are raising will be taken away from them if they admit they need help.

Programs designed to help low-income families get the assistance they need provide crucial support to kinship care households. Grandparents and other relative caregivers need trusted sources to which they can turn for help. The state-funded “Help for Caretaker Relatives” program does just that, providing grandparent’s raising grandchildren with legal information, counseling, support groups, and referrals through 18 local programs across the state. Yet these programs have limited resources, and even their current funding is threatened. It also is vital that program workers are aware of the special needs and circumstances of grand parents.

For all of these reasons, **the Children’s Defense Fund enthusiastically supports the Council’s Resolution No. 165**, acknowledging the “crucial role that grandparents in NYC play.” We thank you for moving this issue and these families to the fore, and look forward to discussing further how we can work together to meet their needs.

We also hope that we can count on the Council’s support on two timely and important issues that could greatly impact grandparent caregivers and their children in New York City. The Council’s vigilance on these issues is important to the well being of **over 240,000 children in NYC raised by grandparents or other relative caregivers**. Specifically, we ask that the Council:

- **Oppose Governor Pataki’s budget proposal to eliminate the “Help for Caretaker Relatives” program.** The Help for Caretaker Relative program provides grandparent’s raising grandchildren with legal information, counseling, support groups, and referrals when they have no where else to turn. The programs receive a mere \$1.4 million to fund 18 community-based sites throughout New York State, 9 in New York City. The total cost of the program equals about \$10 per grandparent caregiver statewide. We hope that you will urge our leaders in Albany to continue the support for these programs.
- **Support Senator Clinton’s Kinship Caregiver Support Act.** The Kinship Caregiver Support Act has three components:
 - First, it establishes a Kinship Navigator Program to help link a broad range of caregivers to the help they need. The Navigator program builds on similar programs that are already underway in New Jersey and Ohio.
 - Second, it establishes a Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP), which will help a smaller group of kinship caregivers who are caring for children in foster care and who get legal guardianship to care for these children permanently outside of the public child welfare system. States will have the option of getting federal funds to help them provide subsidized guardianship payments to these families.
 - Third, it creates a refundable Grandchild Care Tax Credit.

Senator Clinton is currently seeking broad, bi-partisan support for the bill, which we support and hope will be introduced soon. We encourage you to support these efforts, as well. Although there is no companion bill yet on the House side, the KinGAP Provision is included in the comprehensive Act to Leave No Child Behind (H.R. 936/S. 448).

Thank you for your time today and your commitment to this important issue. I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure that grand parents and other relative caregivers will be supported in their efforts to Leave No Child Behind®.