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Relatives Provide Safe, Stable Foster Care and Permanent Families

Senators Clinton and Snowe support legal guardianships by relative caregivers

Washington, D.C. – Grandparents and other relatives play a critical role in ensuring the safety and well being of a significant number of children in foster care. According to a report released today by Generations United and *Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now*, a project of The Pew Charitable Trusts, reforming how the nation’s foster care system is financed by expanding the use of legal guardianship could provide vitally important help for these children and families.

In addition to the release of the report, titled “Time for Reform: Support Relatives in Providing Foster Care and Permanent Families for Children,” Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) announced the reintroduction of the Kinship Caregiver Support Act with Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME).

Also speaking at the Capitol Hill event were researchers from the University of Illinois Children and Family Research Center, youth in foster care, foster care alumni from Iowa and Michigan, and a Maine grandfather raising his granddaughter, all of whom shared personal insights gained from their experiences in the foster care system.

In the U.S., more than a half million children in foster care are waiting for safe, permanent families. Approximately one-quarter of them live with relatives. The report provides a summary of the most recent research showing that:

- Children in relative foster care tend to be just as safe as, or safer than, children placed with non-relative foster families.
- Relative foster placements tend to be more stable, with children more likely to remain in familiar neighborhoods and schools.
- Children in relative care are more likely to live with their sisters and brothers.

Clinton and Snowe’s bill would give states the option to provide guardianship assistance to relatives through Title IV-E funding. Also, the Guardianship Assistance Promotion and Kinship Support Act, introduced last year by Rep. Danny Davis (D-IL), provides financial assistance and human services to relatives and foster parents who become legal guardians, and is expected to be reintroduced soon.

"So many grandparents and other relatives are making great personal sacrifices to provide safe and loving homes for the children in their care. But these generous caregivers, many of whom often become parents unexpectedly, face unique physical, emotional and of course, financial challenges to successfully raising children," Senator Clinton said. "The Kinship Caregiver

Support Act attempts to address these challenges. With these changes to the system, we can make it a lot easier for families to stay together.”

“You ‘age out’ of a system, but you don’t age out of a family,” observed Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United. “Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives known as ‘Grandfamilies’ provide an important safety net for children across the nation whose parents are unavailable or unable to safely care for them.”

“My aunt says that when I first came to live with her, I would always hold my head down,” says Brian Rote,” an Iowa youth who formerly lived in foster care. “Now I walk with my head up straight, because I feel good about myself.”

Nearly 20,000 children in foster care for whom reunification or adoption is not possible could exit the system today if their caregivers could become legal guardians and receive financial support. While limited federal support exists for adoptions from foster care, there is no broad, federal support for guardianships to help children leave foster care for permanent families with relatives.

“We should be doing what is best for children,” said Jim O’Hara, director, Health and Human Services, The Pew Charitable Trusts, “If the current financing policy doesn’t do that, we should change it, whether that means providing prevention services or creating incentives to help children leave foster care permanently and safely through reunification with parents, adoption, or, in some circumstances, through legal guardianship with relatives.”

Sponsors of the Capitol Hill event included Generations United, University of Illinois Children and Family Research Center, *Kids are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now*, The Pew Charitable Trusts, AARP, Center for Law and Social Policy, Child Welfare League of America, Children’s Defense Fund, and the National Indian Child Welfare Association.

Generations United (www.gu.org) is the only national membership organization focused solely on improving the lives of children, youth, and older people through intergenerational strategies, programs, and public policies. GU represents more than 100 national, state, and local organizations and individuals representing more than 70 million Americans. Since 1986, GU has served as a resource for educating policymakers and the public about the economic, social, and personal imperatives of intergenerational cooperation.

Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now (www.kidsarewaiting.org) is a national, nonpartisan campaign dedicated to ensuring that all children in foster care have the safe, permanent families they deserve by reforming the federal financing structure that governs our nation's foster care program. Led by The Pew Charitable Trusts, Kids Are Waiting is a collaboration of leading child welfare, family, judicial and other organizations promoting federal foster care financing reform.