



Homes and  
Community Renewal

New York State  
**Grandparent  
Housing Study**  
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## ***Section 3: Qualitative Research on the Housing Needs of Grandfamilies***

### **Introduction**

This section of the report documents the findings of a qualitative study on the housing needs of grandparents and other relatives<sup>19</sup> who are raising grandchildren/relative children. The overarching goal of this qualitative study is to better understand the housing and service needs of grandparent and other relative caregivers in New York State, from the perspectives of the caregivers, children/youth being raised by the caregivers, and key informants with knowledge and expertise regarding kinship and housing issues.

Eleven focus groups were conducted throughout different regions of New York State: Rochester (Monroe County); Plattsburgh (Clinton County); Middletown (Orange County); Yonkers (Westchester County); Harlem (New York City); and the grandfamily housing development in the Bronx (New York City). Additional phone interviews were conducted with grandparents in Olean (Cattaraugus County). Six of the focus groups were conducted with grandparents and other relatives (n=61) and five were conducted with the children/youth in their care (n= 42). To obtain a comprehensive view of the policy and practice implications of grandparent housing and support needs, nineteen key informant interviews were conducted with state professionals familiar with grandfamily housing and service needs (n=5), as well as kinship coalition members (n=4), county-based kinship directors (n=8), and individuals involved in grandfamily housing facilities (n=2).

This section details the housing and support needs of grandparent and other relative caregivers in New York State, drawing from a synthesis of the literature, the focus group findings, and the key informant findings. The report begins with a literature review on the housing and service needs of grandparent and other relative caregivers. A brief methodology is presented, which provides an overview of the study participants and study procedures. Findings from the focus groups and key informant interviews are then described. The report concludes with a summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for policy and practice.

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<sup>19</sup> Grandparents and other relative caregivers are often termed “kinship caregivers” in the literature.

## Key Findings

The following key findings emerged from the focus groups and key informant interviews:

- Grandparent and other relative caregivers (referred to in this study as “grandparents”) are raising grandchildren due to parental drug addiction and incarceration, parental neglect and abuse, youthful parenthood, or the death of a parent. These grandparents are committed to raising the children to keep the family together, to keep them safe, to prevent foster care placement, to provide the children with a sense of permanency, and to foster their healthy development.
- Children and youth report benefits and challenges of being raised by grandparents. Benefits include safety, permanency, and the avoidance of foster care. Challenges include generational differences and separation from parents.
- Most grandparents preferred obtaining formal custody of the children to ensure greater decision-making capabilities, to foster a sense of permanency for the children, and to protect the children in the event that parents wanted to take them back. Custody arrangements impact the amount and types of assistance grandparents are eligible to receive.
- Grandparents indicated they received insufficient information about how custody arrangements impact the amount of financial support they might receive. Key informants (State professionals and kinship program directors) noted that caseworkers lack awareness about different custody arrangements and endorsed the need for more caseworker training in this area.
- Both grandparents and key informants emphasized the importance of stable, quality, affordable housing and described many challenges associated with securing it. The problem of affordable housing is situated within the broader issue of poverty and financial struggle among this population. Many key informants and grandparents advocated for grandparents to receive the same amount and types of assistance that non-kinship foster parents qualify for, regardless of their custody status.
- Grandparents who rent struggle to find safe, affordable housing conducive to their needs and the needs of the children in their care. Rents continue to rise, while incomes are fixed. Section 8 subsidies are scarce, with long waitlists. Affordable rental housing is often substandard. Common issues include mold, insect infestations, broken elevators, leaks, and general disrepair. Landlords are often unresponsive to the needs of older tenants. Available housing is often located in unsafe neighborhoods.

- The housing issues of concern to grandparents vary by age and housing status. Older grandparents are more likely to indicate needs for elevators and amenities on one-floor due to physical limitations or illnesses.
- Grandparents may have to leave their apartments when taking in their grandchildren, due to specific regulations and/or rental agreements. Senior housing is typically not an option for grandparents.
- Grandparents who own homes struggle to pay for the mortgage and utilities, and home repairs and upgrades are cost prohibitive. Some grandparents who own their homes reported financial struggles, but earn slightly too much income to be eligible for housing assistance and social services.
- Grandparents report receiving little or no formal information about housing assistance. Many lack awareness about assistance options and learn about types of assistance informally from other grandparents. Grandparents are most aware of or likely to be using public housing options, Section 8, and the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP). In terms of social services, grandparents are most likely to be using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Medicaid.
- Grandparents living in grandfamily housing, which is housing developed for grandfamilies with on-site support services, were generally more satisfied with housing quality compared to other affordable housing options in the area. Grandparents in grandfamily housing benefit from a sense of community and on-site support services. Some key informants, particularly those in New York City, endorsed the need for more grandfamily housing developments. Other key informants discussed challenges in terms of bringing this solution to scale to address grandparents' housing needs.
- Key informants described the need for greater awareness and advocacy for grandparents, including support for grandparents as they apply for benefits and seek appropriate housing, legal assistance, and support services (e.g. kinship programs, respite, counseling, grandparent support groups).

## Literature Review

In New York State and throughout the country, many grandparents and other relatives face the challenge of assuming caregiving responsibilities for their grandchildren/relative children. Kinship caregivers<sup>20</sup> typically do not expect to become primary caregivers of relative children, and are often faced with a lack of resources, support, and preparation for the role (Cox, 2007; Landry-Meyer & Newmann, 2004). Kinship caregivers face

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<sup>20</sup> In this literature review, the term "kinship caregiver" is used when describing studies with inclusive samples (grandparents as well as other relative caregivers). The term "grandparent" is used to describe studies that focused exclusively on grandparents.

poverty and financial strain (Erle & Geen, 2002), as well as significant barriers as they attempt to secure safe, quality, affordable housing that is appropriate for raising children (Generations United, 2005).

This literature review on the characteristics, circumstances, and needs of grandparent and other relative caregivers is organized by the following topic areas: 1- Factors Contributing to the Need for Kinship Caregiving Arrangements; 2- Benefits of Kinship Care to Caregivers and Children; 3- Poverty and Financial Strain Impacting Kinship Caregivers; 4- Kinship Caregivers' Use of Social Services; 5- Housing Challenges Encountered by Kinship Caregivers; 6- Grandfamily Housing Facilities; and 7- Impact of Caregiving on Physical and Mental Health.

### ***Factors Contributing to the Need for Kinship Caregiving Arrangements***

The most commonly cited reason for the placement of children with grandparents or other kin is child neglect and maltreatment associated with parental substance abuse (Kelley, 1993; Ross & Aday, 2006; Pecora, Kessler, O'Brien, et al., 2006). Other reasons typically include parental divorce, youthful pregnancy, school attendance, unstable jobs, deaths, and incarceration. These events can leave parents unable to properly care for their children (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997; Casper & Bryson, 1998; Kelley, 1993; Ross & Aday, 2006; Generations United, 2005). Recently, the economic recession and housing crisis have contributed to the presence of multi-generation households. In such cases, parents with children move in with their own parents because they cannot afford to live independently (Taylor, Kochhar, Cohn, Passel, Velasco, Motel, & Patten, 2011).

### ***Benefits of Kinship Care to Caregivers and Children***

Despite the challenges faced by grandparent caregivers, most report that they enjoy raising their grandchildren. In a telephone survey, over three-quarters of grandparents responded that they found raising their grandchildren "extremely rewarding" (Giarrusso, Silverstein, & Feng, 2000).

Additionally, research findings suggest that children benefit from being cared for by kin. In the event that a biological parent cannot care for a child, it is often preferable to place the child in the care of family members, as this care situation enables the child to stay within the family system and connected to the family of origin (Dubowitz, Feigelman, & Zuravin, 1993; Landry-Meyer & Newmann, 2004). Children who are cared for by kin were more likely to maintain regular relationships with family members than those in non-kinship foster care; they were more likely to maintain contact with their biological parents and siblings (Fox, Frasch, Berrick, & 2000; Berrick, et al., 1994). In addition, children in kinship foster care were more likely to describe their relationship with their

mother as warm than children in non-kinship foster care (Berrick, 1997; Berrick, et al., 1994).

### ***Poverty and Financial Strain Impacting Kinship Caregivers***

Grandparent caregivers are disproportionately impacted by poverty (Berrick et al., 1994; Ehrle & Geen, 2002). In New York State, 23% of grandparents responsible for and living with their grandchildren have incomes below the poverty level (ACS, 2013). Poverty impacts grandparent caregivers in both skipped and multi-generation households. A “skipped generation household” is a household in which the grandparent is raising grandchildren without the child’s parent/s present. A “multi-generation household is a household in which the grandparent provides care for grandchildren, but the child’s parent/s also reside in the household (Casper & Bryson, 1998; Mutchler & Baker, 2004). In the U.S., skipped-generation households have a poverty rate of 60% and multi-generation households have a poverty rate of 40%, compared with a 27% poverty rate for two-parent households (Baker & Mutchler, 2010). In New York State, the median income for skipped generation households is about half that of an average grandparent household income, at \$28,961 versus \$63,454, respectively (ACS, 2013).

Kinship caregivers, particularly grandparents raising grandchildren late in life, often face unexpected financial challenges resulting from the cost of raising grandchildren (Padilla-Frausto & Wallace, 2013). These costs are associated with the need for larger housing to accommodate grandchildren in some instances, as well as basic costs of care including food, transportation, healthcare, school supplies, clothing, and other miscellaneous costs (Padilla-Frausto & Wallace, 2013; Padilla-Frausto & Wallace, 2014). These financial pressures are especially challenging to grandparents who need to quit their jobs, reduce work hours, or draw on their savings to raise grandchildren (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler & Driver, 1997).

### ***Kinship Caregivers’ Use of Social Services***

Despite significant financial need, kinship caregivers are less likely to receive social services than non-kin foster caregivers (Ehrle & Geen, 2002). Social service agencies often direct their focus to non-kinship caregivers rather than kinship caregivers. Kinship caregivers are offered fewer services and have fewer contacts and visits with caseworkers than non-kinship foster parents (Berrick, 1994; Gebel, 1996; Geen, 2003; Brooks, & Barth, 1998).

Many kinship families are not receiving certain social services, even when they are eligible. For example, a lower percentage of kinship caregivers were receiving foster care related income, compared to non-kinship foster parents (Berrick et al., 1994). Only



27% of children in kinship care are receiving foster care or non-parent caregiver grants (Ehrle & Geen, 2002).<sup>21</sup>

Research documents additional barriers that prevent kinship caregivers from receiving social services. Grandparent caregivers with informal arrangements (e.g. without legal custody) can be difficult to identify and may be unaware of options for assistance (Cox, 2009). A major barrier to obtaining needed services is lack of information and awareness (Silverstein & Vehvilainen, 2000; Baird, 2003; Burnette, 1999). This is especially the case for families who do not have previous experience applying for benefits or services. Grandparent caregivers who have a low education, poor health, and more life stressors are likely to have unmet assistance needs (Burnette, 1999). Other commonly reported reasons why kinship caregivers are not receiving needed assistance include services being difficult to access and services being currently unavailable (e.g. waiting lists) (Silverstein & Vehvilainen, 2000)<sup>22</sup>. In addition, some types of social and housing assistance have specific age and/or custodial relationship requirements that make certain kinship families ineligible (e.g. housing funded under Section 202).

### ***Housing Challenges Encountered by Kinship Caregivers***

As kinship caregivers take on a caregiving role, it is critical for them to acquire safe, quality, affordable housing that is appropriate for children. However, research and policy articles describe numerous housing challenges experienced by kinship caregivers. For instance, a report from HUD in 2008 (one of the provisions of the LEGACY Act) identified two “priority problems” faced by grandparent and other relative caregivers. First, these caregivers were spending 50 percent or more of their income for housing; second, they were living in “severely inadequate” housing (e.g., severe plumbing, heating, electrical, upkeep, or hallway problems)” (HUD report, 2008, pg. 14). In regard to grandparent caregivers as a specific group, about 32% of those who rented and about 12% of those who owned their homes reported at least one of these problems (HUD report, 2008).

Many of the housing challenges faced by kinship caregivers are attributable to the disproportionate experience of poverty and financial instability. In a recent study, about a quarter of kinship caregivers reported housing insecurity, defined as inability to pay

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<sup>21</sup> Children in kinship care are eligible for the non-parent caregiver grant, which is a special public assistance grant based only on the child’s income and resources, as opposed to the caregiver’s income and resources. The non-parent caregiver grant provides approximately \$400 per month for the first child in kinship care, and \$150 for each additional child. Kinship caregivers do not need legal custody or guardianship to apply for these grants. The non-parent caregiver grant is sometimes referred to as the “child only” grant (personal communication, OCFS, 2/11/15; see [www.mybenefits.gov](http://www.mybenefits.gov)).

<sup>22</sup> Baird recommends disseminating information about services for grandfamilies in the community, at pediatricians’ offices, churches, schools, and daycares (2003).

their rent, mortgage, or utility bills in the last 12 months due to of a lack of money (Sheran & Swann, 2007). Another study that documents data from a nationally representative survey found that 48% of grandparent caregiver renters spent 30% or more of their household income on gross rent (including utilities and fuel), and a quarter spent at least half of their household income on gross rent. Of additional concern, more than 140,000 (60.6%) grandparent caregiver renters living below the poverty line were not receiving any housing subsidy from the government (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2003).

Kinship caregivers often experience overcrowded housing conditions (Kolomer & Lynch, 2008; Generations United, 2005). The issue of overcrowding warrants particular mention, as some states have specific bedroom occupancy requirements associated with custody and permanent placement agreements (e.g. regulations that mandate one bedroom per child or separate bedrooms for children based on gender) (Cox, 2009). More than a quarter of grandparent caregiver renters are living in overcrowded conditions (Fuller-Thompson & Minkler, 2003). In New York State, with an average of 1.8 children per grandfamily, apartments should primarily contain 2-3 bedrooms to efficiently house the grandfamily units.

Kinship caregivers often live in substandard housing within unsafe neighborhoods (Kolomer & Lynch, 2008; Generations United, 2005). According to one study, kinship caregivers tend to live in homes with more structural issues, hazards, and dangers than non-kinship foster homes (Berrick, 1997). Kinship caregivers also had significantly more hazards outside the home than non-kinship homes, including damaged walkways/steps (Fox, Frasch, & Berrick, 2000). Neighbors' homes in kin neighborhoods also tended to be in greater disrepair than in non-kin homes (Berrick, 1997). Children of kinship caregivers tend to have more exposure to neighborhood violence such as stabbings, shootings (Fox, Frasch, & Berrick, 2000), and drugs (Berrick, 1997). The neighborhoods where kinship caregivers live also tend to have less pleasant atmospheres, more garbage, more loitering, less green space, less space for playing, and more homes in disrepair (Fox, Frasch, & Berrick, 2000). Kinship caregivers may be unable to move from these neighborhoods due to insufficient financial resources (Kolomer & Lynch, 2008). Little is known about the experience of homelessness among kinship families, including the risk of homelessness experienced by youth in kinship care as they approach adulthood. There is a need for more research in this area.

### ***Housing Needs of Aging Kinship Caregivers/Kinship Caregivers with Disabilities***

Older adults generally encounter more health problems as they age (Whitley, Kelley, & Sipe, 2001), which warrant specialized or accommodative housing (e.g. handicap accessibility; elevators; amenities on one floor). Nationwide, 25% of all grandparent caregivers have a disability, compared with 33% of those age 60 or older, and 20% of



those aged 30-59 (ACS, 2013). Among grandparents responsible for their grandchildren in New York State, 27% of those 60 or older report a disability, compared with 18% of 30-59 year olds (ACS, 2013). In New York State, 22% of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren under the age of 18 report having a disability (ACS, 2013).

Older kinship caregivers often lack accommodative housing features to meet their needs (Kolomer & Lynch, 2008; Generations United, 2005). While physical needs of the elderly are more easily managed in senior designated housing, children are usually restricted from this type of housing. Older adults who reside in housing with accommodative features may become ineligible to stay in their accommodations when they take in relative children, due to lease restrictions that prohibit children or the addition of more household members (Kolomer & Lynch, 2008).

### ***Grandfamily Housing Facilities***

To address the housing needs of kinship caregivers, several communities have developed housing facilities specifically for grandfamilies or kinship families, some of which provide on-site supportive services. These facilities and developments are often termed “grandfamily housing”. Formal custody arrangements are required for many grandfamily housing facilities.

There is a lack of research on the overall effectiveness of grandfamily housing as a strategy for the housing challenges faced by kinship caregivers. Only the original GrandFamilies House in Dorchester, Massachusetts has formal evaluations available (Gottlieb, Silverstein, Brunner-Canhotot, Montgomery, 2000; Gottlieb & Silverstein, 2003). The major recommendations resulting from the evaluation were to provide activities for the older youth and teens; to develop activities including computer training on site for grandparents; to facilitate community building for grandparents; and to involve residents in building/community decisions (Gottlieb & Silverstein, 2003). See the case studies in Appendix 3.A for an update on the status of the original GrandFamilies House in Dorchester. Section 4 of this report describes prevalent and best practices in grandfamily housing.

### ***Impact of Caregiving on Physical and Mental Health***

In addition to housing needs, research documents physical and mental health challenges faced by kinship caregivers that require additional services and supports.

Evidence suggests that caring for grandchildren negatively impacts grandparents’ physical health status (Leder, Grinstead, & Torres, 2007; Bachman & Chase-Lansdale, 2005; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000; Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 1999; Whitley et al., 2001). Custodial grandparents are more likely to report impairments to physical abilities,

such as more difficulty climbing stairs and walking several blocks, than non-caregiving grandparents. Custodial grandparents also self-reported poorer overall health, and less satisfaction with health than non-caregiving grandparents (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 1999).

Some studies find a negative impact of caregiving on psychological/mental health (e.g. Leder, Grinstead, & Torres, 2007; Minkler, Fuller-Thompson, Miller, & Driver, 1997), some studies find a positive impact (e.g. Bachman & Chase-Lansdale, 2005; Whitley et al., 2001), and other studies find no or minimal impacts, once other factors were considered (e.g. Hughes, Waite, LaPierre, & Luo, 2007). Despite these inconsistencies, the literature indicates that kinship caregivers appear to be at greater risk of mental health challenges when they first take on caregiving responsibilities, as levels of stress and depression were found to be heightened at this time (Minkler, Fuller-Thompson, Miller, & Driver, 1997; Ross & Aday, 2006; Baker & Silverstein, 2008a).

Evidence also suggests that kinship caregivers experience an adverse mental health impact when raising grandchildren with special needs. Grandparents raising children with special needs reported more depressive symptoms and stress compared with grandparents who are caring for children without special needs (Burnette, 2000; Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000). Children in the care of their grandparents are at increased risk of physical, mental, and behavioral health issues. Custodial grandchildren have higher levels of emotional and behavioral difficulties than children in general in the U.S. (Smith & Palmieri, 2007).

The challenges experienced by kinship caregivers often require the provision of both informal and formal support services. There is some evidence that services may help to mitigate the risks to health and well-being that are associated with caring for grandchildren. Use of professional counseling and special school programs was associated with less stress among grandparent caregivers (Ross & Aday, 2006). Grandparent caregivers rely on and benefit from informal social support, such as relationships with family and friends (Ross & Aday, 2006; Brown, Jemmott, Outlaw, Wilson, Howard, & Curtis, 2000).

## Methodology

Qualitative data were collected to provide greater context and depth to the quantitative data captured in other sections of the report, and to give voice to the grandparent and relative caregivers whose needs are being considered. As defined in Section 1, the term “grandparent” is used when describing both grandparents and other relative caregivers.

Focus groups of grandparents and children/youth in their care were held to capture the perspectives and experiences of these families, including an in-depth assessment of

their housing and service needs. Interviews with state professionals and kinship care professionals were conducted to obtain a broad sense of what administrators and service providers are seeing in the field, including trends that are not quantified elsewhere.

## Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted to obtain rich qualitative data about the experiences of grandparents and the children/youth in their care. Locations for the focus groups were selected in conjunction with the study sponsor, with the goal of obtaining a sample that represented the diversity of communities within New York State, including both homeowners and renters. Once locations were selected, organizations that serve kinship families were contacted and asked to host focus groups. These family resource centers, housing communities, and kinship care service providers recruited both grandparents and youth to participate in the groups. Sites hosting focus groups were:

- **Bronx's** Presbyterian Senior Services/West Side Federation for Senior and Supportive Housing Grandparent Family Apartments in New York City. Participants were current residents of grandfamily housing. The entire borough of the Bronx has a population of 1,397,315 (ACS, 2013).
- **Harlem's** Steinway Child & Family Services/NORC in New York City. Participants meet regularly as a kinship caregiver support group, and several participants are involved in kinship caregiver advocacy. Harlem has a population of 227,479 ([www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com)).
- **Middletown's** Cornell Cooperative Extension, Relatives as Parents Program (RAPP) in Orange County. Participants regularly meet for kinship caregiver programming and support groups. Middletown is a city of 27,953 people (ACS, 2013).
- **Plattsburgh's** Family Connections family resource center in Clinton County. Participants were from a kinship caregiver support group. This site was once a formal kinship program, but lost its funding. Kinship caregivers continue to meet informally with the help of support staff. Plattsburgh is the primary city (population 19,907) in a micropolitan area (population 81,865) in the Adirondack region of the State (ACS, 2013).
- **Rochester's** Southwest Family Resource Center in Monroe County. Participants were from the Skip Generations support group that meets weekly. Rochester is a city in Western New York, with a city population of 210,624 (ACS, 2013).
- **Yonkers's** Family Service Society: Kinship Support Program in Westchester County. Participants were from a kinship support group that meets regularly. Yonkers is a suburb of New York City with a population of 197,493 (ACS, 2013).

Focus groups for grandparents and the children/youth in their care were conducted separately. This allowed each group to be more honest and open about potentially sensitive issues without having to worry about family members' feelings or perceptions. It also allowed the researchers to ask developmentally appropriate questions and to

focus on the issues and concerns most likely to affect each group. Focus groups were guided by a semi-structured focus group protocol, which was tailored for grandparents, youth, and the grandfamily housing participants. Two research staff were typically present at each group; one to facilitate and one to take notes and record the audio.

Grandparent focus groups lasted approximately two hours, and youth focus groups lasted approximately one hour. Grandparents were provided with a \$35 incentive gift card and youth were given a \$15 incentive gift card for their participation.

To ensure that grandparents in a more rural area were adequately represented, seven grandparents in Olean, a city of about 14,000 in Cattaraugus County in Western New York, were interviewed by telephone. These semi-structured interviews were analyzed to validate and confirm the focus groups findings.

A total of 61 grandparents and 42 youth participated in focus groups.

**Table 1. Focus group participants by site**

Site	Number of caregivers	Number of youth
Bronx	15	8
Harlem	9	-
Middletown	7	7
Plattsburgh	7	7
Rochester	11	9
Yonkers	12	11
<i>Total</i>	<i>61</i>	<i>42</i>

Nearly all (93%) of the caregiver participants were grandparents. Other caregiver participants included two great-grandmothers, an aunt, and a great-aunt.

**Table 2. Relationship of Caregiver to Children (N=61)**

Grandparent	93%
Aunt/Great Aunt	3.5%
Great Grandmother	3.5%

All but three were women. Nearly two-thirds (62%) had babies come into their care before they were one year old. Ninety percent had legal custody of at least one of the children in their care.

**Table 3. Demographics of caregivers participating in focus groups**

<b>Age of caregiver</b> (N=58) (Mean=68)	45-54	9%
	55-64	24%
	65-74	38%
	75-84	22%
	85-94	7%
<b>Gender</b> (N=59)	Female	95%
	Male	5%
<b>Race/ ethnicity</b> (N=59)	Black	66%
	White	19%
	Hispanic	15%
<b>Has legal custody of any child</b> (N=52)	Yes	90%
	No	10%
<b>Rents or owns home (N=59)</b>	Rents	76%
	Owens	22%
	Shelter	2%
<b>Youngest age of child when began living with caregiver (N=58)</b> (Mean=2)	Under 1	62%
	1-5	22%
	6-10	12%
	11-15	4%
<b>Current age of youngest child who lives/ lived with caregiver</b> (N=57) (Mean=13)	Under 1	2%
	1-5	14%
	6-10	19%
	11-15	32%
	16-20	19%
	21-27	14%

The grandparents had significant demographic differences across sites, as seen in Table 4. For instance, participants in Harlem, Rochester, and Yonkers were mostly black renters, while participants in Middletown and Plattsburgh were mostly white homeowners<sup>23</sup>. Participants in Harlem and the Bronx were older on average, while participants in Middletown and Plattsburgh were younger.

**Table 4. Demographics of caregivers participating in focus groups, by site**

	Bronx (N=15)	Harlem (N=7 <sup>1</sup> )	Middletown (N=7)	Plattsburgh (N=7)	Rochester (N=11)	Yonkers (N=12)
Mean age (years)	74	76	63	54	69	67
Race <sup>2</sup> :						
Black (%)	53%	100%	29%	14%	100%	83%
White (%)	7%	0%	43%	86%	0%	8%
Hispanic (%)	40%	0%	29%	0%	0%	8%
Renters (%)	100%	86%	29%	14%	91%	92%
Mean age of youngest child (years)	18	14	11	9	12	10

<sup>1</sup> Demographic data were not collected from two participants.

<sup>2</sup> Totals do not always equal 100% due to rounding.

## Key Informant Interviews

Professionals knowledgeable about or working in kinship care were interviewed to obtain an overarching view of grandparents' housing challenges, to learn more about existing programs and services, and to hear what experts in the field believe to be the most important issues facing these families. Key informants were chosen based on the sponsor's and researchers' knowledge of and contacts within kinship care professionals. Snowball sampling<sup>24</sup> was used to identify additional participants to interview.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone or when possible, in person. Topics included:

- Key challenges facing grandparents, in housing and in other areas.
- The effectiveness of different types of housing assistance in addressing the needs of grandparents.

<sup>23</sup> Participants from Olean, who were interviewed by phone, were white homeowners.

<sup>24</sup> Snowball sampling is an approach where those recruited for a study suggest other key informants to include, based on knowledge and expertise.



- The impact of custodial arrangements on eligibility and receipt of housing and support services.
- Need and availability of supportive services to grandparents.
- Suggestions for rule, regulation, or policy changes that would help address the needs of grandparents.

Interviews were conducted with nineteen participants: five state agency professionals, four kinship care coalition leaders, eight county-based kinship care directors, and two representatives of a grandfamily housing community.

Table 4. Interviewees by affiliation

Interviewee affiliation	Number of interviewees
State agency	5
Kinship care coalition	4
County-based kinship program	8
Grandfamily housing community	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>19</i>

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on both the interview and the focus group data. Data were reviewed to find patterns and common threads, as well as unique perspectives. The data were analyzed using Miles & Huberman’s approach, which explicates processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (1994). Specifically, analytic matrices were developed to help categorize and interpret data. The researchers coded and analyzed data collaboratively to ensure consistency.

## Methodological Limitations

A weakness in these data is that all of the grandparents were in some way connected with the service providers who recruited them. This means that the experiences of those without such connections, who may have different needs and concerns, were not heard. Further, this method of recruitment likely contributed to the overrepresentation of grandparents with formal care arrangements (e.g. legal or physical custody), as opposed to informal arrangements, as grandparents with informal arrangements are less likely to be connected with support services.

## Focus Group Findings: Grandparents

The findings from focus groups in the five sites<sup>25</sup>, excluding the Bronx, follow.

The focus group findings from the Bronx grandfamily housing development are reported separately below so as to discern possible differences in perspectives and experiences that may result from living in a new supportive, grandfamily development compared to living in other housing situations.

The grandparent focus group findings are presented in the following sections: (a) reasons why grandparent are raising the children; (b) perspectives on custodial arrangements; (c) benefits and challenges of current housing situations for grandparents who are renting; (d) benefits and challenges of current housing situations for grandparents who own homes; (e) experiences with rent subsidies and other forms of housing assistance; (f) financial, employment, and legal challenges; (g) physical, emotional, and mental health challenges; and (h) perspectives on changing needs as children in the care of their grandparents reach young adulthood.

### Reasons why grandparents are raising children

Across the focus group sites, the most common reasons why grandparents were raising grandchildren included parental drug addiction and incarceration, parental neglect and abuse, youthful parenthood, and death of the parent. In most instances, there were multiple reasons why the children's parents could not raise them. For instance, several grandparents described how the children's parents experience a revolving door of incarceration due to drug addiction. Drug addiction also contributed to child neglect and the loss of parental rights:

*It's all the drugs, and going to jail. When she starts with the drugs, she goes right back to jail again. And I got the kids. –Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

*[I have my grandchild] because her mother and her boyfriend, they were on drugs. [The children] were taken away from them. There were seven of them, they were taken away from them. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

*[The children's father] is in prison, has been since he was 16 years old. And [the children's mother] is just useless. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

Other grandparents reported that the children's parents struggled to take care of the children, due to youthful parenthood:

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<sup>25</sup> This section also includes the perspectives of grandparents in Olean, who were interviewed over the phone.

*My daughter was a young mother. She is still struggling trying to take on the responsibility of raising kids. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

*My daughter, she was too young. She wanted me and her father to raise the child. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

In Rochester and Harlem, a few grandparents described how their children died violently, leaving them to raise their grandchildren. In these focus group sites, the grandparents also described raising the kin of several of their other children:

*I had a daughter who was killed...she was 8 ½ months pregnant and the baby died with her. I raised her two...and then my other daughter was strung out on drugs, she had ten kids, I raised five of hers and still have three of hers. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

*I have my grands because the mother is deceased. Before she died, she asked if I would take care of her baby. The day after that, she died. Then my son wanted me to take his too, he gave me custody of the kids...I've had them ever since and I've raised them. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

The grandparents described a strong commitment to the welfare of their grandchildren, the unconditional love they feel for the children, and their commitment to ensuring that the children had a sense of permanency:

*The family has been kept together. Their sense of family is solid. They don't understand how bad it could have been for them. For them, life is great, and that's a benefit. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

*The benefit I got, is she knows there's love. She knows there's a better way of life than what her mother portrayed. And raising her keeps me going. –Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

They also described the importance of keeping the family together and preventing the children from ending up in non-kinship foster care or “the system”:

*My main motivation is that I didn't want them in the system where they wouldn't be able to be with family. The other reason is I wanted the children to be safe. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

The grandparents also reported that their decision to raise the children centered on the need to ensure that they grow up to become successful young adults and do not succumb to negative outcomes:

*If I hadn't had these two boys and raised them, they wouldn't have graduated from school. When they [became] sixteen years old, I made them get a job. [I got them involved] in football, basketball, soccer...kept them in church. My grandson, he asked me why I made him do these things, I said, to keep him out off the street...keep him on the right path. –Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

## Perspectives on Custodial Arrangements

The majority of the grandparents had obtained legal custody of the children. Fewer grandparents described having informal custody, foster parent status, or having adopted the children. Some grandparents, particularly in Harlem, reported having different custody arrangements with different grandchildren; they had custody of some of the children and informal arrangements with other children, all of whom were living in the home.

The most common custody trajectory described was an initial informal arrangement, and then a decision to pursue legal custody. Grandparents found several key benefits of obtaining legal custody. With custody, the grandparents reported greater decision-making power, particularly regarding the children's medical care and education:

*She was with me informally for a year and a half. Then I decided that informal wasn't working for me. So I went to court and got custody. I wanted to be able to make the decisions, that's what it was all about for me. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

The grandparents also reported that custody protected the caregiving arrangement and was an important way to keep the children safe. For instance, there was less worry that the children's parents could take the children back or seek to regain custody. This was a significant concern for many grandparents, who did not feel that the children's parents could be safe and suitable guardians.

*From rehab, their mother was threatening to take them away, to leave the county with them. They had been in my care for six months and I quickly filed for custody. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

*For a while [with informal custody] I was literally doing all the responsibility but I had no authority to do anything...going into court helped me to give them something stable. Because either one of their parents could have come to get them any time. To keep them from getting [the children], I would have had to call CPS. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

The grandparents also framed custody as a way to provide the children with a sense of permanency:

*[My granddaughter] needed a sense of permanency. Like she knew she had a home with me, but she often felt in limbo. I think she often felt like she didn't have a home. She wasn't really with mommy, she wasn't really with me...so we [formalized custody]. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

Some grandparents, especially in Harlem, noted hesitations about pursuing foster parent status. These concerns revolved around the potential of having the children removed from their care. As one grandmother explained:

*Even though a lot of the grandparents didn't want to adopt, there was a danger in keeping a child as a foster child because, see, they can take the grandchild away from you and you have no clue if the child is living or dead, and that's one of the reasons why a lot of the grandparents, even if they don't want to adopt, will adopt. – Grandparent, Harlem, NY*

Custody was also important for grandparents as they sought services for their families. With informal custody arrangements, the grandparents described being ineligible for social services to support the children. The grandparents also reported that employers were less likely to recognize their caregiving responsibilities when they had informal custody:

*I adopted two, but all the rest are living with me. They have been with me and they still are...the two adopted children came with a subsidy, they give you a certain amount every month...the rest I had to manage to take care of on my own, but by that time I was retired. It was a struggle you know, but we manage. – Grandparent, Harlem, NY*

*We started with an informal custody arrangement, but had to change that. With my work, if I had to take off for her, for being sick or whatever, they wouldn't recognize just the informal kinship arrangement. I needed papers to allow me to take time off, like for sick time. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

While custody was viewed as important and beneficial, many grandparents described the process of obtaining custody as difficult and filled with obstacles. For instance, some had insufficient financial resources to manage the court process. Some grandparents who were eligible for legal aid were concerned about the quality of the attorneys who represented them.

Of those who adopted the children, protection of the child and permanency were cited as primary reasons, consistent with the rationale other grandparents provided regarding the decision to obtain legal custody:

*With adoption, there are no parental interferences. Even when you have custody, there are still parental rights and they can undermine you in many aspects. It's a very stressful situation. My granddaughter [said to] me at one point, I wish you were my real mother. That was the start of the adoption. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

### **Benefits and challenges of current rental housing situations**

Overall, grandparents who were renting their housing reported few benefits about their current housing situations. A few grandparents liked their building and had positive relationships with their landlords. Others appreciated having apartments with more than one bedroom. However, even those who liked their rental housing noted that affordability is challenging. Others reported that while the apartment was suitable, the neighborhood was problematic for raising children:

*I had a nice two-bedroom apartment. When I chose to take them...it worked out well because she had enough space, but financially, it's a strain. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

*I've had an excellent landlord so far, but the rent is high. The neighborhood, it's real difficult living there. The people see you trying to live decent and next door is not. They'll do things to cause you problems. As an older woman trying to raise grandchildren, you've got to deal with all of this, and we're on a fixed income. If you've got a decent place to live, the rent is way up there and you can barely reach it. It makes it very stressful. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

Most grandparents described significant housing challenges in the context of affordability. They required apartments that were large enough to accommodate children, but rental costs for suitable housing were out of reach for many. The grandparents explained that their rents continued to rise, while their incomes were fixed and already strained by the need to care for grandchildren:

*When they are ready to raise the rent, see I'm on a fixed income. When the board gets together and decides they are ready to raise the rent...nobody gives us any extra money. – Grandparent, Harlem, NY*

*My rent was raised two times this year. It was devastating...when I first moved in, and I've only been there not even a year and a half yet, it went up from \$749 to \$900. I have to pay gas and lights, and I have Section 8 and they help, but even with the help....how do you live? And the area I'm living in is not that great, it's a drug area. It's like, what do I do? - Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

When describing the problem of a lack of affordable housing options, grandparents in Harlem discussed the issue of gentrification, which threatens affordable housing options for grandfamilies. These grandparents also discussed how rent controlled apartments were becoming increasingly scarce:

*What the landlord's doing, bringing in college students in packs of three, renting these apartments to college students, charging them like \$1,000 for a room each, to where he is receiving \$3,000 for that apartment. So you have a family sitting in a shelter that has three kids in a one-bedroom...and all these big apartments he would rather rent to college students. – Grandparent, Harlem, NY*

The grandparents described how apartment conditions are often substandard, in spite of the high rental cost. Several described living in housing with insect infestations, mold, leaks, and other damages. Some of these grandparents described how landlords were unresponsive to their needs and unwilling to address problematic situations:



*I have mold in my apartment. The rents are going up, and when things break down, they don't want to fix it. And I'm tired of fighting with these people. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

*Landlord don't want to do nothing....the landlords don't do nothing for you but they want the rent money from you. There should be somebody you can talk to about stuff like that because it's ridiculous. You pay your rent when it's due, but you've got a hole in the roof, it's raining through, something's leaking in the basement...they say tenants have got rights, but you say something to the landlord and they want to take you to court to get you thrown out. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

A common theme that emerged was the issue of living in neighborhoods perceived as unsafe, due to crime and drug activity. The grandparents frequently reported a lack of safe spaces for the children to play:

*I've had a couple break-ins, it's about the neighborhood. I'm trying to find a nicer neighborhood now. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

*The kids don't have sufficient places to play. Adults took [the playgrounds] over with the drugs and drinking, and you don't want them around that....the parks near the building, [my grandson] can't go to- he'd get shot. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

The grandparents frequently described how senior housing is not a viable option for them, given the children. This frustrated many of the grandparents, who perceived a lack of options for housing given their age and the presence of children:

*I was offered to go to senior housing, but when they found out I have my grandson, that was a no. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

*I rent. The problem is we're grandparents and we have grandchildren. That's the problem getting any apartments, senior housing, they don't want you to come in with your children. They're making all this housing and everything for seniors.....so this is our problem that we have. Since we took on the responsibility of having our grandchildren, we have problems getting housing. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

Several grandparents perceived discrimination when looking for rental housing, due to low-income status and the presence of children. The grandparents noted that this discrimination is typically not overt- landlords do not tell them they are being denied due to the children, but they strongly believe that the presence of children is the major barrier:

*Everywhere I go [to find an apartment], they slam a door in my face. But I pray one day it's gonna get better. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

*I've got six grandchildren and it's hard to find a place- they don't want to rent to me. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

While many grandparents expressed interest in grandfamily housing, most did not have this option in their location. Affordable grandfamily housing was of very strong interest to most grandparents in Rochester and Yonkers, and of interest to some grandparents in Harlem<sup>26</sup>:

*They don't have special housing for grandfamilies. We would need a common play area...a community center, where everything is in one area. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

*If we had grandfamily housing, we'd have no problem. We'd have housing, programs and everything, right there in the building. But in Westchester County, they won't do it. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

A common housing challenge described by older grandparents centered on a lack of accommodations for physical challenges or disabilities. For instance, older grandparents reported difficulties or an inability to climb stairs due to health challenges. Many housing accommodations were a poor fit for grandparents with physical limitations, as some of the buildings have many stairs, amenities on different floors, or have elevators that seldom work:

*I would like to have everything on one floor. I can't even go up the stairs. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

### **Benefits and challenges of current homeownership housing situations**

In Middletown and Plattsburgh, grandparents were more likely to report owning their homes. Grandparents who owned homes were more likely than those who rented to report aspects of their housing that they find comfortable and conducive to raising children. Grandparents appreciated having space in the home for the children and usually enough space for the children to have their own bedrooms; those interviewed in Olean concurred with this.

*We have enough room and like having a backyard. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

In general, grandparents who owned homes described a sense of stability and comfort associated with housing:

*Owning a home is nice over renting because you know you have it, you don't have to worry about, what if my lease comes up and they're not going to renew it for me? - Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

In spite of this sense of stability, many grandparents who own their homes described significant stress arising from worries about making mortgage payments:

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<sup>26</sup> Grandfamily housing was less relevant to grandparents participating in the Middletown and Plattsburgh focus groups, as most owned their own homes.

*When I got [my granddaughter], I got into a financial bind. I was in the process of losing my house and I couldn't pay a mortgage for two years...it was terrible to think about losing your home every day for two years. And I had to tell her too, in case we had to leave fast...she had to deal with it also. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

In addition to struggles to make mortgage payments, many home-owning grandparents noted that it was a challenge to afford utilities, especially heating bills in the winter. Grandparents in Olean reported struggling with high heating costs and a lack of money to enhance the energy efficiency of the home.

Some grandparents owned homes specifically because of the children. They were motivated to give the children a secure home environment with sufficient space. These grandparents reported “upsizing” rather than downsizing, and spending retirement savings on housing to accommodate the children:

*A lot of grandparents, you start thinking about downsizing at our age. And maybe being on one level because our backs are starting to go, but now we have three children, well you can't downsize, then you have to upsize. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

*I bought this house with my retirement....I invested everything in this, pulled from every corner I had for closing costs and all this garbage. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

Grandparents in Middletown, Plattsburgh, and Olean all reported a lack of money to replace windows and roofs when necessary, or to respond to maintenance issues as they arose. Many grandparents described how they would like to update their homes, make their homes more energy efficient, or improve the health of their home environments. However, these modifications were cost prohibitive for most:

*My grandson has a lot of allergies. I would love to be able to have that room really in a better condition that could accommodate his needs, his health. He has indoor and outdoor allergies. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

## **Experiences with rent subsidies and other forms of housing and social services**

When discussing their awareness of rent subsidies and housing assistance, the grandparents overwhelmingly reported that there was insufficient information for grandparents about potential options, eligibility, and how to navigate the application process. Many had to learn about benefits from one another or from the kinship programs<sup>27</sup>. The knowledge grandparents had about assistance programs varied, with some being more familiar than others:

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<sup>27</sup> The grandparents participating in the focus groups were recruited through kinship navigator programs and thus reported that the kinship program provides information about services. Kinship navigator programs are not available in all areas, and many grandparents raising grandchildren are not in contact with such a program.

*When I joined SKIP [the kinship program], I learned from other grandparents- [they would say] I go to this food store, I get clothing at this place, I found this resource- so we learn from the people around us. Not so much from the systems, because the systems fight each other. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

The grandparents reported a lack of quality and consistent information about available assistance, what they might be eligible for, and how custody arrangements factored into this. Several grandparents expressed a need for more information and more advocacy in this area:

*They don't give you any information about housing at all. It was never discussed. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

*For folks who don't know, there's no agency out there to get these questions answered. When you come here [the kinship navigator program], the director is a wealth of information. But otherwise, there's nothing out there to help people to learn where to go or who to call, unless you know somebody. There needs to be advocacy for grandparents. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

Most grandparents were aware of Section 8, public housing, the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Among grandparents who rented, Section 8 was discussed most frequently. These grandparents reported receiving Section 8 vouchers, or described the process of applying for Section 8.

The grandparents commonly described their inability to receive Section 8 due to long wait lists. Some were on wait lists for years, or reported that they could not even get on a wait list:

*It's almost impossible to get Section 8, there's a freeze on Section 8. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

*I'm still on the waiting list; I've been on it for years. Every time I call them, they say they're frozen up. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

Those receiving Section 8 were grateful for this assistance, yet many still indicated difficulties affording rent:

*I've been on Section 8 for 36 years. I think it took me like a year...when I first got on there, I was paying maybe \$40-50 toward rent, now it's like you're paying half of whatever it is. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

Some reported disruption in their Section 8 housing after the children came to live with them:

*My Section 8 was for one bedroom. I told my landlord about the children, he said I'm so sorry, but you've broken your lease and you've got one week to find another place- but he helped me. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

Across the sites, two grandparents discussed their experiences with emergency housing. These grandparents were homeless or at risk of homelessness before moving into emergency housing:

*We went from a shelter to emergency housing. It's like your own, but you have a case manager come out and check on you. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

*I pray every day that they don't come and tell me, you have to move out. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

In addition to describing the lack of information about housing assistance and long Section 8 waitlists, grandparents often described a lack of available services in general to meet their needs:

*The problem is, there is nothing available. It's not just not knowing. What happens is, once something gets started, the money runs out and it's not available anymore. If you don't have Section 8, you're in bad shape. At one time, United Way was helping- now they're not helping. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

Among grandparents who owned their homes, HEAP was the service most often discussed<sup>28</sup>. The majority of these grandparents received HEAP, while a few were ineligible due to their income being too high. A few grandparents who owned their homes had accessed weatherization programs to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

Grandparents who owned homes again described how they were struggling to make ends meet, with most having slightly too much income to be eligible for housing and social services:

*If you work...I work, and I'm right in the middle. I make too much to qualify for assistance, but I live paycheck to paycheck. I know many people across the State are in that situation, but taking [my grandchild] in has stretched my already thin finances. And I don't, it's not enough to qualify for help. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

*What can we do? We do the best that we can. There are times when, do I pay the mortgage or do I buy food for him? You have to make these kinds of decisions- is it the house, or is it food for the child? Is it clothes? It does put you in a bind. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

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<sup>28</sup> Grandparents who rent also discussed receiving HEAP, though most feedback provided by renters pertained to Section 8.

*You don't want to lose what you worked so hard for. Just because we're trying to do what's right for our grandkids. And we have to pay the penalty. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

In addition to housing assistance, some grandparents reported receiving other forms of social services, including SSI, SNAP, and Medicaid. When applying for benefits, the grandparents found they were not eligible to receive assistance for children who were with them informally.

Of the grandparents who were currently receiving SNAP, many noted that the amount provided had been reduced over the years, and that it was very limited given the food needs of the household:

*I used to get \$169 for me and my grandson, but as of September, they cut it down to \$72 for our food stamps, for the two of us. He's fifteen years old, he eats that by himself! - Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

Others reported that their income was too high to be eligible for SNAP, yet they still struggled to buy food for the family on a fixed income:

*I've been trying to get food stamps [SNAP] ever since I had her. They say with my income, I can't get food stamps. – Grandparent, Yonkers, NY*

*I applied for food stamps, and she said I make too much- twenty-one dollars too much. And I couldn't get food stamps. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

Many grandparents noted that they were receiving non-parent caregiver grants as kinship care providers. This grant, sometimes referred to as the “child only” grant, is a monthly cash grant available to non-parent caregivers (both grandparents and other relatives) through Local Departments of Social Services. It is designed to support caregivers to meet the needs of the children. Grandparents who adopted their grandchildren were no longer eligible for this form of assistance.

Across the focus group sites, the grandparents raised the issue of a discrepancy between the amount of support that they were eligible for as (non-foster parent) kinship caregivers, versus the amount of support foster parents receive. The grandparents expressed strong disappointment and feelings of unfairness in this context. The grandparents perceived a lack of support as they kept the children out of foster care, and repeatedly stressed that the children experience many benefits associated with being raised by family members:

*The government isn't helping us with these kids. We're spending our money that should have been put away for vacation and retirement and it's going to the kids...we're keeping them out of the system, we're keeping them off the streets...and we're not getting any help from the government. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*



*If I were a foster parent, they would have a different quality of life. And it's almost insulting. To pay a stranger to do what we do. And to say a stranger can do it better. And to be much more willing to finance it for a stranger than a relative who has a connection - it's insulting. It really is. For foster parents, they pay for clothing, activities, memberships- they give them everything they need. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

## **Financial and employment challenges**

Consistent with the feedback grandparents provided about housing needs and rent subsidies, they indicated that financial challenges were significant as they were raising their children. Many grandparents struggled to meet the basic needs of the children, and some described postponing retirement due to financial needs of the family:

*It's very hard. Like clothes, I would have to wash out the clothes, let this [grandchild] wear this to school this day the other one wears it to school the next day. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

*I'm 53, I'd like to start thinking about slowing down...money for retirement, but forget that, because it's all going toward [my granddaughter]....any money that you would want to put toward retirement, forget it. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

In the context of employment, some grandparents described how they needed to reduce the number of hours worked or to leave the workforce due to childcare responsibilities. These responsibilities were exacerbated for grandparents who have grandchildren with emotional or mental health needs:

*Because of the issues with the girls, they have some issues and they need stability, constant structure, the same thing every day....I try to be there as much as possible. With medical appointments, psychology appointments, I have to be available. So I can only work, at max, 16 hours per week. That is my struggle. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

*I left my job when I got the kids because I had two of them in diapers. And with counseling and doctor's appointments and school events and everything going on, there was no way I could work. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

Working grandparents indicated pressure to report to work even when ill, as they need the money. Those who left the workforce due to childcare responsibilities reported struggles to rejoin the workforce given their advanced age:

*I stopped working for a while with the babies, and it's hard to get back to work at my age. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

## Physical, emotional, and mental health challenges

For older grandparents in particular, physical challenges, illness, and disabilities made caregiving challenging. The grandparents described how their lives were impacted by a number of physical ailments, including heart attacks, arthritis, and chronic conditions. Older grandparents frequently reported being tired and worn out from their caregiving responsibilities:

*We're getting older and the stress is giving us heart attacks and strokes and everything else. – Grandparent, Middletown, NY*

The physical and emotional challenges these grandparents experience were worsened by financial struggles. In spite of this, the grandparents described their resilience and commitment to raising the children. They also drew on faith and social support from other grandparents to help them to overcome emotional challenges:

*I was so emotional I thought I was going to have a breakdown with all these kids. I got headaches all the time, I cried all the time. And I ended up stressed out, and with cancer, with my heart...I ended up with so many problems because I was all stressed out raising these kids, and my health was failing and my health is still failing. But I didn't give up, I kept on going, and I keep on going. The thing that keeps me going every day is prayer...grandparents, we go through a lot, not having the finances and the funding to raise these kids. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

For some grandparents, the challenges of caregiving were complicated by the special needs of their grandchildren. For instance, many noted that the children continued to struggle with grief and emotional challenges related to trauma and loss:

*These children come with emotional needs....lot of emotional needs. So you try to find things in the community [positive activities] that fit those needs, and you're spending gas, and it costs money to do all that stuff. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

Most grandparents reported experiencing stress associated with family conflict. Many experienced continued animosity with the children's parents; these conflicts also impacted the children:

*The girls have emotional issues and continue to go through emotional issues with both of their parents. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

The grandparents emphasized the need for social support to manage the emotional and mental health strain associated with caregiving responsibilities. Many specifically described the importance of kinship programs and grandparent support groups in meeting the important need for social support:

*The whole [grandparenting support] group, they cried with me as if they've known me my whole life. – Grandparent, Rochester, NY*

In Plattsburgh, where the kinship program was no longer funded, grandparents described how they continued to call one another for support informally, and expressed hope that funding would be renewed for the program.

### **Perspectives on changing needs as grandchildren reach young adulthood**

As grandparents reflected on changing housing needs as the children reached young adulthood, most indicated that they anticipated the children continuing to live with them into their early 20s. Thus, grandparents view their children living with them as a long-term arrangement. This was especially true for grandparents who were raising grandchildren with special needs.

In fact, several grandparents indicated that the children were currently in their early 20s and continued to reside in the household. These grandparents noted that their young adult grandchildren were not financially prepared to live independently, as they could not afford rental housing and may be struggling to secure employment.

Some grandparents, including those in Harlem, believed that their grandchildren could benefit from educational and skill building programs as they prepared for independent living.

Many grandparents expressed hopes that their grandchildren would attend college, yet reported a lack of funding to support higher education for the children:

*She'll always have a home with me, no matter what she chooses to do. My concern is college- I have not been able to put away for college. – Grandparent, Plattsburgh, NY*

### **Focus Group Findings: Children and Youth Cared For By Grandparents**

The findings presented below represent the perspectives provided by children and youth during focus groups in Rochester, Plattsburgh, Middletown, Bronx, and Yonkers.

Housing-specific findings regarding children and youth living in grandfamily housing in the Bronx are presented separately so as to discern possible differences in perspectives and experiences that may result from living in a new supportive, grandfamily development compared to living in other housing situations.

## Benefits of living with grandparents

Nearly all participants were content to be living with grandparents. They liked having time with their grandparents and having a closer bond with them than they might otherwise experience. They appreciated their grandparents' advice, good food and cooking, helpfulness, and caring:

*You get good food from your grandma, all the time, that's something you can never doubt. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

*We get to appreciate our grandparents while they're still around. –Youth, Rochester, NY*

Some noted that their grandparents' broad life experiences provided them with wisdom about difficult family situations. Some appreciated that their grandparents had more money and gave them more attention than their parents, and some specifically indicated that their grandparents were easier to talk to than their parents:

*They are not on their cell phones 90% of the time they are with you. –Youth, Plattsburgh, NY*

*Grandparents make you feel more at home, like you're more safe. –Youth, Middletown, NY*

Some felt that living with their grandparents gave them more freedom than living with their parents or in foster care; they could “get away with more” or “get to have candy and doughnuts”, though this finding was not universal.

Many youth expressed sincere appreciation to their grandparents for raising them. Some of these youth recognized that their situations could have been dire if not for their grandparents:

*If my grandmother weren't here, we would have had nowhere to go. It makes me emotional. She took us in...if my grandmother hadn't taken us in, we would have been living on the streets for a while. –Youth, Middletown, NY*

*Sometimes I lay there at night and think about, what would I do without my grandmother? -Youth, Middletown, NY*

## Challenges of living with grandparents

Some youth felt that their grandparents restricted their freedom too much. These participants chafed at chores and at rules and consequences that they felt were too strict:

*They don't let me watch scary stuff or bloody stuff on TV. –Youth, Plattsburgh, NY*

Generational differences were described as problematic by a number of youth. They attributed some of their grandparents' forgetfulness, inability to help with homework, or difficulty in keeping up with children's activities to age. Youth were tired of "back in my day..." speeches, forgetfulness, nagging, and inflexibility in how chores were accomplished. Grandparents and the children/youth also had different views on "the value of a dollar". Some also felt that older grandparents could be hard to talk to:

*She's set in her ways and doesn't get it. Like, why are kids doing this, why are kids doing that? She hates it. I get why she doesn't understand. At her age kids wouldn't do what they do now, it wouldn't happen. –Youth, Middletown, NY*

*We're young and they're old and they see things differently. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

Most found their grandparents' lack of understanding of cell phones and other technology frustrating or comical. Some also expressed that their grandparents do not understand the music they listened to.

### **Perspectives on custodial arrangements**

Across the focus group sites, a strong emergent finding is that all youth preferred living with their grandparents to living in foster care. The youth liked being able to stay with family. Many felt that foster homes did not provide the same kind of love, caring, and support that they received with their grandparents. One youth mentioned previously experiencing a group foster home where adults were rarely present:

*You are around family instead of strangers. –Youth, Yonkers, NY*

*[Foster homes are] not the same amount of love. [Children] don't feel right being there because they're not with their family. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

However, unsurprisingly, some wished that their family situations were less complicated. They described the difficulties that resulted from going back and forth for visitation, living far from their friends, or having different rules in different households (for those still in contact with their parents). Many discussed missing their parents:

*Sometimes my grandparents don't get me like my mom gets me. My mom knows me better. -Youth, Plattsburgh, NY*

*I live in New York and my mom lives in Florida; that's jacked up. -Youth, Yonkers, NY*

*Sometimes not having a bond with your parent bugs you because you have friends, you see them with their parents and you wonder why you couldn't have more. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

Some expressed that they didn't think of their parents as caregivers, and their grandparent was their "parent." Several referred to their grandmothers as "Mom":

*I just don't look at my parents as a parent. I look at my grandma as a parent. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

## **Benefits and challenges of current housing situations**

In Middletown, about half of the youth lived in houses and half in apartments. Youth participants in Plattsburgh all lived in houses; ninety percent of the youth in Yonkers and Rochester participants lived in apartments. Across the focus group sites, the youth had a strong preference for houses, because they provided more space and more privacy from neighbors. Some also wanted to have pets that were not allowed in their apartments:

*You can be louder [in a house]. –Youth, Rochester, NY*

*Forget a bigger apartment, I want my own house. -Youth, Yonkers, NY*

Most participants had their own bedrooms. A few shared rooms and wished they didn't have to.

Some participants, particularly in Rochester, reported liking their neighborhoods. They appreciated having a good sense of community, visiting friends nearby, and knowing their neighbors. Some were happy to have family nearby:

*I know a lot of people on my street. –Youth, Rochester, NY*

*The bus stop is right down the hill. –Youth, Rochester, NY*

Others would prefer to live in other neighborhoods. They cited safety issues, disrespectful or nosy neighbors, and distance from public transportation as problems. In particular, Yonkers participants disliked their neighborhoods, largely because they felt they were unsafe. Parks were nearby, but grandparents often wouldn't let the youth use them for safety reasons:

*They shoot up in my neighborhood, right in the park. –Youth, Yonkers, NY*

*I've gotta walk a mile just to get to the bus stop. -Youth, Rochester, NY*

*It's always that one neighbor who's annoying. -Youth, Yonkers, NY*

*I don't like the neighborhood I am in because there are bad people around in the nighttime. –Youth, Plattsburgh, NY*

Amenities that participants were grateful for in their homes included large rooms, their own space, a common area where music could be played, nearby public transportation, WiFi, outdoor play equipment, and backyards. Some wished they had bigger bedrooms and more bathrooms:

*My room is really big. –Youth, Plattsburgh, NY*



*I want a bathroom in my room. –Youth, Yonkers, NY*

Housing quality was a concern for some participants. Leaking ceilings, cockroaches, small rooms, and locks and doors needing repairs were mentioned, particularly by youth living in rental housing.

Many participants had moved while living with their grandparents, which often required them to switch schools:

*My grandma is just never satisfied [with her apartment]. -Youth, Rochester, NY*

The youth reported mixed views about the idea of grandfamily housing. Many did not want to have to move somewhere new and did not perceive significant benefits to grandfamily-specific housing. They were more interested in whether the apartments would be nicer than where they currently lived. However, some did believe it might be nice for their grandparent to get support from other families like theirs.

Similarly, a majority of participants were not especially interested in programs or groups specifically for children being raised by grandparents. While some youth felt like they had more in common with others in similar situations, they did not feel the need to connect in that manner.

### **Financial challenges**

A few youth recognized that their grandparent had given up a lot to raise and care for them. They saw their grandparents' financial and personal strains and knew that they were sacrificing time they might otherwise spend with their spouses or on their own interests:

*Since we've moved there, there are more mouths to feed. She needs more money for food, new clothes for us too, and it's also hard for her to take us places, like to the doctor or to buy things. She can't be walking around that much due to her condition. And she's the only one there who's the guardian of us. I can see how that would get tiring. –Youth, Middletown, NY*

### **Physical, emotional and mental health challenges**

The youth also recognized that acting as caregivers was at times straining to their grandparents. Physically, it was difficult for grandparents to keep up with and run after the children. A few youth indicated that they worry about their grandparents' health, and were frustrated when their grandparents would not accept the youth's offers to help them. Other youth didn't like watching their grandparents getting older or seeing them in pain when their loved ones passed away:

*They're old- they're not young any more, they can't handle so much being put on top of them. Youth, Middletown, NY*

*Sometimes you do more worryin' about them than they do about you. –Youth, Bronx, NY*

*You don't know with their condition if they're going to pass away. That's something that worries me everyday. –Youth, Middletown, NY*

The youth also felt that caring for children could be emotionally difficult at times for their grandparents. The youth knew that at times they caused their grandparents to worry:

*[Grandparents' worries] also have to do with what they went through prior in their lives, they worry about you because they don't want you to do those things. –Youth, Middletown, NY*

### **Perspectives on changing needs as children reach young adulthood**

Youth in their late teens and early twenties were asked about their plans for moving out. Nearly all were excited by the idea and said they would appreciate having more freedom, but few had concrete plans. Their ideas included moving out after completing college, getting apartments with friends after finishing high school, and getting married and having children. One mentioned staying close to help her grandmother:

*I just need to start my life, because I've been through so much. –Youth, Middletown, NY*

### **Focus Group Findings: Bronx Grandfamily Housing Development - Grandparents**

In this section, findings are summarized from the grandparent focus group conducted at the grandfamily housing facility in the Bronx.

#### **Reasons why grandparents are raising children**

Similar to the other focus groups, the most frequently cited reason for grandparents caring for their grandchildren was parental drug use. Other reasons included parent incarceration, neglect, a deceased parent, and domestic violence. However, more often than not, these other causes occurred in conjunction with drug use. Most grandparents in this group described caring for the children from a very early age or from birth.

#### **Perspectives on custodial arrangements**

About half of the grandparents completed a formal adoption process with their grandchildren. Most of these grandparents began caring for the children as kinship

foster parents. Then after a period of time (many years) the “system” or the courts urged them towards adoption. The children were more likely to be adopted in the Bronx group compared to the other focus groups. Grandparents tended to prefer the services and financial assistance associated with foster and kinship care. Still, most grandparents did not have issues or concerns with the adoption designation.

Grandparents expressed that it was challenging to care for the children, especially when they grew older. However, the grandparents felt it was better for them to care for their grandchildren than have them in foster care. The grandparents felt the children benefited from the care situation because as caregivers, they were able to instill a strong work and school ethic. In addition, they noted that the “system” only cares for children until they are 18, and then they are on their own, whether they are prepared or not. Grandparents preferred that the children were able to live with them until they were prepared to move out.

### **Benefits and challenges of grandfamily housing**

One of the primary benefits of grandfamily housing described by all the grandparents was the strong sense of community within the facility:

*It's like a big family. –Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

*We look out for each other. – Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

*Everybody is welcome to knock on my door. – Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

*I have 97 grandchildren in this building; all of them are like mine. – Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

Grandparents described the solidarity that had developed, as they are all in grandfamily housing for similar reasons. Grandparents described being respectful towards each other and helped each other in times of need.

It is important to note that compared to other focus groups, the Bronx group reported very few issues with the actual apartments (e.g. quality, maintenance, etc.). There was a strong sense that the apartments at the Bronx facility are much higher quality compared to other area affordable housing. The grandparents noted being dissatisfied with other rental options in the community, including options they may need to consider after their grandchildren age out of grandfamily housing:

*[In terms of other affordable, non-grandfamily housing options in the area] How do you take a size 10 shoe and put it in a size 5? – Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

The grandparents reported that another key benefit of the facility is the convenience features, such as having laundry facilities in the building. The grandparents were also

pleased that the building is safe, particularly compared to the surrounding environment. Safety is maintained due to having security at the front entrance and having to “buzz” into the building:

*We knew the kids were right here, in our building, safe. – Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

Although the grandparents were pleased with the facility overall, they also described some minor grievances. Some expressed interest in changing certain rules, such as more leniency with supervision of younger children, parking for visitors, and personal keys to the front entrance. The major recommendation by the grandparents was the need for a play area. The grandparents noted that there is no place for the kids to hang out and expressed interest in safe recreation spaces, such as a play area and/or basketball courts. This was described as particularly important, as the basketball courts and parks in the surrounding neighborhood are not perceived as safe:

*It's good for them if you are planning on putting another building in some other place, it's good for the kids to have a place too. The kids from here they go to another park, but what they do, they get them in trouble because the kids from that park don't want the kids from here. – Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

## **Services Provided**

Grandfamily housing is unique in that it provides a variety of services to grandparents, along with housing. At this facility, social services are available on site at no cost, which the grandparents found helpful:

*When we first came into this building one of the advantages was we had the social service downstairs, we had counseling down there for our young kids at that time... they had a computer room; and they had someone working down there with the kids when they were young. Those were a lot of good advantages. – Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

Most of the services and activities that the grandparents use are located at a nearby senior center. Although these services are not on site, they are still convenient to the grandparents. Residents would like some more entertainment available on grounds, such as a TV and bingo in the common areas. The one service that the grandparents specifically requested was a food pantry, either on site or at the nearby senior center.

## **Experiences with rent subsidies and other forms of housing and social services**

Rent at this grandfamily housing site is set along a sliding scale, based on 30% of income. Thus, the grandparents did not discuss experiences with additional rent subsidies. The grandparents did not particularly like that if their income went up, from either a grandchild working or Social Security, their rent would also increase.

## Financial, employment, and legal challenges

Consistent with the grandparents involved in the other focus groups, grandparents in the Bronx development articulated that finances were a challenge in raising the children. Some grandparents seemed to easily access kinship related income, through KinGAP and the non-parent caregiver grant, while others either declined because they wanted to use their own resources or felt it was too much of a hassle or that there were too many barriers to accessing social services. Several grandparents did not receive any money for caring for their grandchildren:

*They told me to get kinship [money] I had to put them in foster care for a night. I would not put my kids in foster care. – Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

*I didn't take nothing [money]- too many hassles, all this back and forth and we didn't want to do that... - Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

Most grandparents in the Bronx expressed very few or no legal challenges. One great grandparent faced legal challenges because of her age. The court felt that she was too old to care for her great grandchildren, and she had to secure a lawyer and fight to become their caregiver.

## Emotional and mental health challenges

Most grandparents described giving up a portion of their personal or dating life when caring for the children. Many also gave up romantic interests because of their new responsibilities. One grandparent expressed that she wasn't comfortable bringing her long-term boyfriend to live with her because she had granddaughters in her care. After taking in their grandchildren, the grandparents had little time for activities they previously enjoyed, such as dancing, vacations, and bowling. Consistent with the grandparents in the other focus group sites, some grandparents in the Bronx noted that caring for grandchildren also took an emotional toll, mostly in times of conflict and when caring for children with special needs.

## Perspectives on changing needs as grandchildren reach young adulthood

Grandparents in the Bronx reported feeling very stressed about the “aging out process” with their children. They were worried not only for their children, but also for themselves. The anxiety associated with moving on from grandfamily housing was brought up at several different times during the focus group. Most of the grandparents had been at this facility since its inception, and were not eager to leave their homes of over 10 years.

The grandparents described the aging out process: once the youngest child turns 22 (some also said 21), there is a meeting where grandparents are given a list of housing

options. These options are typically senior housing or public housing (“the projects”). Most grandparents felt that senior housing was a much better option than the projects, but because they still wanted to live with their adult grandchildren, senior housing was not a viable option:

*Why do they want to stick us back in the projects when we got out of the projects? – Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

*[Regarding senior housing] I wouldn't mind that, but where is the child going to go if they aren't ready to move out or can't afford to move out? – Grandparent, Bronx, NY*

Overall, there was a sense that the grandfamily housing was safer and of much higher quality than the other options available to the grandparents. Grandparents expressed a desire to stay in the same area as the Grand Parent Family Apartments when they are no longer eligible to live. However, they were concerned about finding new affordable housing.

## **Focus Group Findings: Bronx Grandfamily Housing Development-Children And Youth**

This section details housing-specific findings provided by youth focus group participants in the grandfamily housing facility in the Bronx.

### **Benefits and challenges of living in Grandfamily Housing**

Most youth liked living in grandfamily housing. They noted that they had their own community and more freedom than they had in prior living situations, given safety concerns. The youth also believed that their building was the safest one in the area:

*When I was living in the projects, I couldn't go outside, in my whole life. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

*Compared to other communities, this is safer. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

*I think it's safe, because people don't want to harm the “innocent grandmothers.” - Youth, Bronx, NY*

Moving into grandfamily housing did not generate social problems for the youth. Friendships from prior to the move were often sustained. Many youth noted that their friends loved visiting grandfamily housing:

*My friends love the building. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

*If any of these kids come to the building, they be eatin' all day. -Youth, Bronx, NY*



Youth valued the bonds they had with their friends living in the building because they felt that the other youth knew what they were going through, having the shared experience of being raised by grandparents:

*I feel that the most important thing about living here is keeping the bond with your friends. Basically we're all going through the same thing, so if anyone gonna understand you, it's gonna be someone in this room. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

Youth had suggestions for improving the apartments: larger bedrooms, updated appliances, and thicker walls and doors. Some mentioned maintenance issues, and some wished they had the freedom to paint the apartments different colors.

### **Services Provided**

Youth liked the activities that were offered, specifically mentioning trips at the end of the school year and laser tag. They appreciated having staff present and wished that the after-school program met more than twice per week. The youth also indicated a desire for more outdoor activities and spaces to play/hang out outside:

*I don't know what I'd do if I came down here one day and [certain staff members] were gone. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

*They still come up with a lot of stuff to do. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

A number of activities that existed in the past, including Christmas parties, gingerbread houses, foosball, billiards, and the "Carnegie Hall" music and acting program, were missed by many. They also missed having benches and toys in the common areas and being allowed to use the yard unsupervised. Youth did acknowledge that some rule changes were the result of misuse of privileges. Overall, the youth felt more activities were available when they were younger:

*When we first moved here we had couches, toys, games, everything we needed as little kids. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

*As you got older people started getting a little more rowdy, breaking things. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

Some youth felt that over time, programming had become more academically oriented than "fun", and described an increase in rules in the facility. They perceived a reduction in staff and interns over time, and also lamented staff turnover:

*When we first moved here there weren't so many rules but as we lived here more rules started popping up. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

*As soon as a new worker comes here and the kids get attached to them, then they leave. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

*I have mixed emotions about this building now. Sometimes it feels like a place I can call home and sometimes it doesn't feel like a place I can call home anymore. -Youth, Bronx, NY*

Several suggested additional activities they would enjoy. Many wished for more outdoor games and activities, such as dodge ball and sports. Zumba, karate, boxing, self-defense classes, driving instruction, and field days (visits to parks for a cookout and games) were also proposed. YSP (Young Adult Success Program) currently provides career preparation workshops for ages 16-24; one youth wanted career-oriented activities for younger ages. Access to the rooftop garden and improvements to the library were also desired.

### **Perspectives on changing needs as children reach young adulthood**

The apartment rules require youth to move out once the youngest child in the family turns 22, but there seemed to be some flexibility in the process that allowed people to stay longer. Most of the people the youth knew moved out not because they aged out, but because their grandparent died. The youth noted that transition services are available and that they are eligible for transfer to public housing.

## **Key Informant Interview Findings**

This section provides key informant perspectives on the housing and support needs of grandparent<sup>29</sup> caregivers. The key informants interviewed for this section of the study included state professionals and kinship leaders (kinship care coalition members, county-based kinship directors, and grandfamily housing representatives). The findings are organized into themes, which represent the central messages that emerged from this component of the analysis.

### **Theme 1: Grandparents Receive Insufficient Information Regarding Custody Options, Rent Subsidies, and Housing Assistance**

The key informants indicated that grandparents are receiving insufficient and sometimes conflicting information about custody options and eligibility for assistance.

Grandparents may not receive accurate information about their options, or the manner in which these options influence the amount and type of financial assistance they can receive. For example, grandparents who obtain foster parent status or who pursue KinGAP are eligible for much greater monetary assistance compared with other custody

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<sup>29</sup> The key informants provided input on needs of both grandparent and other relative caregivers. Consistent with the rest of this section of the report, the term “grandparent” is used to describe both groups.

options<sup>30</sup>. Grandparents caring for children with special needs may also qualify to receive more financial support. As several kinship leaders explained:

*People don't know enough about KinGAP to bring it up in conversation. - Kinship Care Coalition Member*

*For example...a grandparent who is caring for a child for whom they may or may not have custody could get assistance from DSS of approximately \$407 a month. If they have the same child in foster care, the reimbursement rate could be anywhere from \$800-1200 or more, depending on the special needs of the child. – County-Based Kinship Director*

State professionals concurred that grandparents receive insufficient information, and emphasized the importance of training caseworkers in this area. Both state professionals and kinship directors described the importance of continuing to provide and improve education and training for caseworkers about kinship issues, with the goal of providing clearer information to grandparents. Caseworkers' caseloads must also be manageable, so they have sufficient time to fully explain these options to grandfamilies.

Some of the State professionals interviewed noted that specific training initiatives are underway in the State, and that user-friendly, informational cards and handouts are being developed for caseworkers to share with grandparents. As the State professionals explained:

*If we can get our workers trained [to better inform grandparent caregivers about their options], and we are doing that, that some of the financial and housing issues may be alleviated. –State Professional*

*We've been working hard to train the local district caseworkers where they can help that potential caregiver to make a decision that's going to be long term. Because most of these kids are staying. – State Professional*

The key informants also reported that grandparents may not be receiving information about the non-parent caregiver grant. Grandparents are eligible for this grant regardless of their income, as the grant is based on the child's income only. This grant is sometimes referred to as the "child only grant", which causes confusion:

*There's really no such thing as a "child only grant" with kinship, and that's what it was being called for years. What we've been trying to do is [provide training and education for caseworkers] in the last two years...that's why people aren't getting their benefits. Because they're walking in and saying, 'somebody told me I could apply for a child only*

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<sup>30</sup> The key informants noted that not all grandparents are eligible for these arrangements. Additionally, some reported that grandparents are hesitant about these options due to home visitation requirements that cause concern about the possibility of removal of the children.

*grant, I've got my grandson' and these caseworkers have no clue what they're talking about. –State Professional*

The key informants also indicated that grandparents often receive insufficient information or no information at all about rent subsidies and housing assistance. They noted that grandparents with previous DSS experience may be more familiar with the types of social services available than those who have not previously applied for or used services. As two State professionals explained:

*Most grandparents don't know what types of assistance and supports are available to them, and if they do know, they only know part of it. –State Professional*

*There's a lack of awareness, and it's typical of a system that has a lot of challenges. The family is under great stress and this is the type of information that could make the process go so much more easily for all involved. –State Professional*

Several kinship directors explained that the grandparents often learn about housing and other forms of social services from one another informally.

## **Theme 2: Grandparents Face Challenges Navigating Housing and Social Services**

Even when grandparents are aware of the services and supports available to them, it may be difficult for them to obtain these services/supports. Kinship directors especially highlighted how the process of applying for housing and social services is burdensome for grandparents. In order to obtain the required documents for applications, grandparents can spend all day driving back and forth around town. They noted that kinship programs ease this burden by providing transportation, information, and advocacy as the grandparents navigate the process. Several informants suggested having designated advocates to guide grandparents through applying for and obtaining supports.

## **Theme 3: Informal Caregivers are Under-served and Difficult to Reach**

Many grandfamilies are impacted by informal custodial situations. Several kinship leaders noted that it is difficult to locate these families because many actively avoid social services due to a fear that they will be investigated, or that the children will be taken away. Because of this, these grandfamilies are likely to have unmet needs in the area of support services. According to the key informants, it is difficult to even assess the number of informal caregivers to understand the magnitude of the issue:

*We don't really know how many kinship caregivers are in this state. –Kinship Care Coalition Member*

Since informal caregivers are less likely to be connected with kinship programs and other services, they are especially likely to be unaware of their custodial options as

caregivers. This includes awareness of how different options shape eligibility for assistance.

Both state professionals and kinship directors noted that it is difficult for grandparents with informal custody arrangements to navigate educational and other issues for their grandchildren, consistent with what the grandparents shared during the focus groups. In addition, some kinship directors argued that grandparents with informal custody should be eligible to receive the assistance and services available to those with formal custody. Given some of the special issues faced by grandparents with informal custody arrangements, many key informants noted the importance of providing outreach to this population.

#### **Theme 4: Housing Issues are one Aspect of the Complex Issue of Poverty**

The lack of quality, affordable housing was viewed by key informants as being inextricably linked with the issue of poverty. Poverty and financial struggles were often listed as the most significant challenge faced by grandfamilies. Many kinship families are on fixed incomes and are not receiving the full array of social services for which they are eligible. Another challenge is that some grandparent caregivers make too much money to be eligible for social services or housing assistance (e.g. rental assistance, SNAP), but still are struggling financially. Financial difficulties sometimes lead to difficult decisions, such as to pay rent or a mortgage, or to buy food. As one state professional explained:

*The predominance of poverty leads to their number one problem being finances. It's overarching; it's completely the number one issue. There are subsets of that that could relate to housing, but let's just say, first off, it's finances. - Kinship Care Coalition Member*

#### **Theme 5: Grandparents Struggle to Secure Quality Affordable Housing**

Many key informants saw the issue of housing as critical to alleviating the complex challenges faced by grandparent caregivers:

*If there's a grandparent who can't afford their housing and it is inappropriate for kids, nothing will help them more than getting the stable, quality, affordable housing. –State Professional*

The key informants described a number of issues that contribute to the scarcity of quality, affordable housing. Affordability was often discussed in the context of rising rents and increases in the cost of living; many kinship caregivers are coping with this while on fixed incomes. For instance, some key informants highlighted the issue of gentrification:

*There are students...who pay \$ 600-700 for a bedroom in an apartment. As a result, the affordable housing is definitely diminishing. Three students in an apartment have landlords charging amounts that you can never get in this area. - Kinship Care Coalition Member*

Given the scarcity of affordable housing, several state professionals suggested that housing eligibility restrictions around raising children should be eased, particularly when grandparents first take in their grandchildren. They argued that grandparents should be allowed to stay in their current housing whenever possible, until more suitable housing can be secured:

*If eligibility [regarding number of occupants] around some of these housing units could be lifted, that would be so beneficial. –State Professional*

*When you talk about housing, it's about the eligibility criteria for getting into an apartment, staying in an apartment, if change does occur [within the family] the ability for the system to triage and adapt so if a grandparent is taking on responsibilities of a grandchild that there is the ability to accommodate, so the changes in the family structure don't impact families by making them ineligible to stay in the current apartment. –State Professional*

When relocation is necessary, the key informants advocated for grandfamilies to receive emergency financial aid for the up-front costs such as security deposits and moving expenses.

### **Theme 6: Affordable Housing for Grandparents is not 'One-Size-Fits-All'**

In the context of affordable housing, the key informants described how grandparents have diverse needs given their ages and circumstances. Thus, solutions must be tailored accordingly. Younger caregivers may experience housing difficulties shared by other low-income households, while older caregivers may have additional needs that arise from aging:

*The issue of grandparent housing I would divide up into a few categories- I think grandparents who are 55 raising grandchildren are very different from grandparents who are 75 and raising grandchildren...older grandparents also need support because of their age- they're no longer in the workforce, they have health issues, and other issues like that. –State Professional*

In regard to older grandparents, the key informants highlighted special issues of concern, such as the need for handicap accessibility:

*There is need for appropriate housing. Not only something with an elevator but at a lower level because if elevator breaks a lot of folks have trouble going up and down stairs. - Kinship Care Coalition Member*



A few key informants suggested the need for senior housing options with more than one bedroom, so children can be accommodated. However, this issue is complex, as others noted that raising children in senior housing may not be optimal for the children or for the other seniors who prefer to live in housing accommodations without children present (due to noise and other concerns). A state professional highlighted some of these tensions:

*Senior housing tends to almost always be nothing but one bedroom or studio apartments. So if they have grandchildren and they also need supportive help for seniors, we have to think about, should we be building senior housing with more than one bedroom? But there are all sorts of market and management issues relating to that. Senior housing tends to not have a substantial presence of children, so how does that impact the financing and management of senior housing? And if you have an elderly person who needs services as somebody who's older, as opposed to somebody who's younger, can that be incorporated into family housing when it's just a small piece of family housing? –State Professional*

Some key informants indicated that younger grandparents have a need for affordable housing that is suitable for families, and they are generally less likely to require accommodations for physical disabilities.

### **Theme 7: Grandfamily Housing May Meet Caregivers' Needs in Some Locations**

Some key informants advocated for the need to develop more grandfamily housing options for grandfamilies, primarily citing the benefits of having services co-located with housing (i.e. “a one stop shop”). Most of those who supported development of grandfamily housing facilities were located in and around New York City:

*Presbyterian Senior Services has housing for grandparents. There needs to be 10, 20, 30 more houses, supportive ones, because grandparents and grandchildren need services –County-Based Kinship Director*

Grandfamily housing options were viewed as a way to provide both housing and support services to grandfamilies. Many key informants noted that the quality and safety of grandfamily housing options are an important benefit compared to other affordable housing options. Others advocated for the importance of grandfamilies living in a supportive community with similar families.

While some key informants supported grandfamily housing options, others highlighted the challenges of this solution. First, given the cost associated with developing grandfamily housing developments, it may be difficult to bring this to scale as a solution. Availability of funding for housing is generally challenging. Additionally, some communities and school districts oppose affordable housing developments. Grandfamily housing presents different challenges based on the area and market (e.g.

rural vs. urban areas, high vs. low cost areas). Similar to the challenge of Section 8, one state professional explained:

*Multifamily affordable housing often has an extremely long list with an extremely long wait. –State Professional*

Key informants pointed out that in some areas, grandparents must have formal custody to be eligible for grandfamily housing options. They noted that if the child's parent is living in the home or moves back into the home, the grandparent may lose eligibility for grandfamily housing.

### **Theme 8: Section 8 is Scarce, and Quality of Section 8 Housing is Problematic**

Overall, the key informants noted that there is insufficient funding and resources for housing. They confirmed that Section 8 housing has extremely long wait lists, making this a difficult option for grandparents.

Some key informants (particularly kinship directors) advocated for grandfamilies to receive priority on Section 8 waiting lists. This perspective was not unanimous, as others acknowledged the role of Section 8 in meeting the affordable housing needs of other special populations as well, who are also high need (e.g. homeless individuals, individuals with disabilities, domestic violence survivors):

*We don't have a lot of housing services. We have section 8 but it is limited, rather, the ability to sign up for section 8 is limited. The waiting list is open for 2-3 months and then it will be shut for 2 -3 years. –Kinship Care Coalition Member*

When discussing Section 8, the key informants stressed that this assures lower rent for the families, but that the quality of Section 8 housing may still be problematic. Kinship directors described how grandparents are often faced with maintenance issues and unresponsive landlords, confirming what the grandparents reported during the focus groups. The kinship directors also explained that some grandparents are hesitant to stand up to unresponsive landlords, as they fear their family will be evicted.

### **Theme 9: Grandparent Keep Youth Out of 'the System' and Should Receive More Financial and Social Support Services**

The key informants described that grandparents often do not expect to become caregivers at this point in life. The caregiving role creates legal, financial, and emotional challenges. The key informants widely acknowledged the strong commitment most grandparents have to ensuring that the children are in a safe and loving environment:

*The grandparents are taking the children at great sacrifice because they don't want them to go into foster care. It's often detrimental to them, to their financial situation, their*

*health, their housing... They take custody of these children not really knowing what they're up against. – State Professional*

With the widespread recognition that grandparents are committed to keeping children out of the child welfare system, the key informants argued that grandparents should receive greater assistance and support for doing so. Notably, many of the key informants advocated for these grandparents to receive the amount and types of assistance for which non-kinship foster parents qualify. One state professional explained that the system is not designed to support grandparent caregivers, as funding for child welfare providers is prioritized:

*If a family member is stepping up, we should do everything that we can to support them. If it's in the best interest of the child, we should do everything we can to support them. – State Professional*

*We're spending a lot of time recruiting foster parents. It would be beneficial to everyone if we spent the same amount of time recruiting families. –State Professional*

Several key informants described how non-kinship foster parents receive support for family activities for the children, noting that grandparents should also receive this assistance. Key informants also noted that children of grandparent caregivers should receive the same activity options and support as children in non-kinship foster care, such as sports, ballet, etc. It was also mentioned that making these activities more available may offset some of the risks children in kinship care face due to poverty and neighborhood challenges, as they would have constructive activities in which to participate.

### **Theme 10: Grandparents Experience Emotional and Mental Health Challenges that Require Support Services**

The kinship directors often described how grandparents experience great stress associated with family dynamics, in addition to caregiving responsibilities. They may be coping with a rift in the family due to custody issues, confusion on the part of the children, and trauma and loss associated with death, addiction, and incarceration in the family. Both kinship directors and state professionals explained that children in the care of their grandparents often experience mental health and emotional challenges due to trauma and loss, leading to additional challenges to grandparent caregivers.

To mitigate the many challenges faced by grandfamilies, several key informants advocated for more kinship programs, grandparent support groups, and counseling for grandparents and children. These programs were viewed as a means to educate grandparents about their options, to provide assistance in navigating complex

systems<sup>31</sup>, to strengthen parenting skills, and to provide regular social support to kinship families as they cope with challenges. The key informants also articulated the importance of counseling for both grandparents and children to ease the trauma that may accompany their complex situations. Respite services were also mentioned as a benefit for grandparents to prevent caregiver burnout.

### **Theme 11: Children in Care of Grandparents have Specific Needs as they Reach Young Adulthood**

Consistent with the feedback provided by the grandparents, the key informants explained that children often do not move out of the grandparent's home until well into their early or even mid-twenties. Once they do move out, they often face similar challenges as other low income individuals, such as difficulties securing suitable employment, the scarcity of affordable housing, and difficulties managing finances.

Some of the key informants explained that the non-parent caregiver grant is only available until the child is 18. If the child is unable to secure consistent employment and does not move out until their mid-twenties, this may be a period of time when the grandfamily faces additional financial strain. As children reach adulthood, the family may become ineligible for assistance for these children. If applying for individual assistance, the children may need to provide information about their parents that they may or may not have. The key informants noted a need for information and support to grandfamilies as they prepare for children to reach this age. A child aging out may also increase the financial challenges for the grandparent:

*Because a grandparent raising a grandchild can expect their income to change when the grandchild returns to a parent or ages out, most helpful are programs where your rent is tied to your income such as Section 8 or NYCHA, something like rent stabilized apartment.-  
County-Based Kinship Director*

### **Theme 12: Grandparents Require Legal Support and Advocacy**

A few key informants highlighted the need for legal support and advocacy as grandparents navigate the custody process. The key informants noted that legal challenges create significant stress and take an emotional toll on grandparents. In terms of support services, one state professional explained:

*[Support services that grandparents need] include respite support, legal support; they need guidance to help them process dealing with the educational system, making sure they know the other details of life that might have changed since the last time they were raising a kid. – State Professional*

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<sup>31</sup> Key informants noted that some grandparents may have literacy challenges, which present an additional obstacle when navigating services.

Securing legal rights of grandchildren can be a struggle for many grandparents. Whereas parents are provided with legal counsel, in many cases, grandparents are not. Grandparents may need to cover the cost of the lawyer themselves, which is extremely difficult on a fixed income.

## Conclusion/Discussion

This qualitative study elucidated the housing and service needs of grandparent caregivers in New York State. Affordable housing needs emerged as one component of the larger issue of poverty and significant financial struggle among grandparent caregivers. This finding is consistent with the literature, which notes that kinship caregivers are disproportionately impacted by poverty (Berrick et al., 1994; Ehrle & Geen, 2002). Grandparents who are receiving housing or social services continue to struggle to pay for rent, food, and necessities for their families. Some grandparents, particularly those who own homes, earn slightly too much income to be eligible for housing and social services. While these grandparents are ineligible for services, they are still faced with significant financial difficulties. The experience of poverty and financial insecurity adds to the stress and challenges grandparents face as they assume care of their grandchildren, typically due to challenging or traumatic family circumstances (see Kelley, 1993; Ross & Aday, 2006; Pecora, Kessler, O'Brien, et al., 2006).

Grandparents in New York State experience multiple obstacles as they attempt to secure and maintain quality affordable housing. Insufficient information is provided regarding rent subsidies and other forms of housing and social services, consistent with previous research (Burnette, 1999; Silverstein & Vehvilainen, 2000; Baird, 2003). Grandparents tend to learn about social services informally from their peers. Grandparents are often uninformed about the ways in which custody arrangements impact eligibility for assistance. Cumbersome applications further complicate this process.

Grandparents are faced with significant housing affordability challenges due to high rental costs, fixed incomes, lengthy Section 8 waitlists, and the scarcity of affordable housing options in general. Rental housing is often inadequate for children and in general disrepair, with mold, infestations, and leaks commonly described. This issue is compounded by unresponsive landlords, which is documented elsewhere (Kolomer, & Lynch, 2008). Also consistent with previous research, particularly in urban areas of New York State, grandfamilies often live in neighborhoods with crime, violence, and drug activity, with few safe spaces for children to play (Berrick, 1997; Fox, Frasc, & Berrick, 2000).

Grandparents who own homes are challenged by mortgage and utility payments. They are often unable to improve their homes (e.g. to enhance energy efficiency, perform general repairs, and improve air quality), due to a lack of financial resources. Some grandparents are maintaining a house due to the presence of the children when they would prefer to downsize, with many reporting that they are draining financial resources and spending retirement savings.

Grandparents living in grandfamily housing in the Bronx, New York experience the benefit of numerous support services on and near the premises, a sense of support and community, and affordable housing in a neighborhood that is perceived as safer than the surrounding community. However, these grandparents still experience financial issues and describe emotional stress associated with caregiving, consistent with the experiences of grandparents living in other housing arrangements (non-grandfamily housing). In addition, these families face anxiety over the prospect of moving on from grandfamily housing.

The housing needs of grandparent caregivers differ based on the grandparent's age, physical health, and specific circumstances. Younger grandparents have a need for safe, quality, affordable housing options suitable for children, while older grandparents and those with physical limitations require additional accommodations as they age, such as having amenities on one floor and other features for handicap accessibility. The housing needs of older grandparents have been similarly documented in existing studies of kinship caregiver housing needs (Kolomer & Lynch, 2008; Generations United, 2005).

In New York State, grandparents raising grandchildren experience emotional and mental health challenges due to the stress associated with financial strain and caregiving responsibilities. This finding underscores the importance of support services for kinship caregivers (see Ross & Aday, 2006). Some grandparents, particular those who are older, described physical ailments and disabilities that present additional challenges to them as caregivers. Additionally, grandparents in New York State described how the children in their care experience emotional and mental health challenges, which are often associated with or exacerbated by experiences of trauma and loss. This finding is also substantiated by previous research, which notes that children in kinship care experience higher levels of emotional and behavioral difficulties compared with other children in the U.S., presenting an added challenge to kinship caregivers (Burnette, 2000; Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000, Smith & Palmieri, 2007).



## Potential Items to Address Findings

The following items that might be explored for policy and practice were guided by the findings of the grandparent and youth focus groups, State professional and kinship leader key informant interviews, and the literature review. The term “grandparent” is used inclusively, to describe both grandparent caregivers and other relative caregivers.

- 1. Create and preserve affordable housing options, particularly accommodations suitable for grandfamilies.** Section 8 and affordable housing options are generally scarce. To meet the needs of grandfamilies, it is important to create new affordable housing when possible, and to preserve units conducive for grandfamilies (e.g. units with a sufficient number of bedrooms). There is a need to expand affordable housing options that can also meet the needs of older grandparents, such as buildings with amenities on the same floor. Grandparents may also benefit from housing on lower floors of apartment buildings and housing that is handicap accessible. Accommodative housing for older caregivers must still be conducive to children, with safe spaces for play and socialization.
- 2. Ease housing eligibility restrictions when grandparents first take in their grandchildren, so they can stay in their current housing accommodations when appropriate.** Grandparents may experience significant upheaval and challenges when first taking in their grandchildren. To ease this transition, more leniency in housing eligibility restrictions (e.g. Section 8 rules regarding housing size/the number of bedrooms; senior housing rules disallowing children) at an early stage may prove helpful. In addition to temporarily easing eligibility restrictions, it is important to facilitate access to temporary assistance for grandfamilies.
- 3. Consider expanding grandfamily housing options in high need communities, when viable and cost effective.** In some communities, the expansion of grandfamily housing options may be a key component of addressing grandparent housing needs. To maximize the benefits to grandfamilies, grandfamily housing options should include co-located social support services. When grandfamily housing developments are implemented, there is a need for evaluation research to determine the effectiveness of this option, as well as the social support services that are most helpful and cost effective.
- 4. In areas where grandfamily housing is not viable and cost effective, create grandparent support centers with co-located services, including housing assistance.** Given restricted resources in the area of affordable housing, grandfamily housing is difficult to bring to scale across New York State. In areas where grandfamily housing is less viable, kinship support programs may consider co-locating services, including services to facilitate housing assistance.

**5. Continue to increase caseworker awareness of kinship issues, including custody arrangements and eligibility for housing and social services.**

Further caseworker training and education is needed to ensure that grandparents have access to complete and accurate information. Caseworker training should include information about the implications of custody arrangements on eligibility for services, as well as eligibility for the non-parent caregiver grant. The NYS KinCare 2014 Summit Recommendations suggest that local Departments of Social Services (DSSs) consider designating particular staff for kinship issues to ensure the accuracy of information during in-person meetings with kinship caregivers. Designated staff at local DSSs can also refer grandparent caregivers to kinship care programs that can facilitate access to advocacy and social support services.

**6. Facilitate advocacy and support services for grandparent caregivers.**

There is a need for resources to maintain current kinship programs, and to expand new programs across the State. Kinship programs can meet the needs of grandfamilies by providing access to information and advocacy, linkages to services in the community, transportation assistance, and peer support. Evaluation research is needed in this area to effectively target financial resources for services that most benefit grandparent caregivers.

**7. Facilitate outreach to informal grandparent caregivers.** The study findings indicate that informal grandparent caregivers are difficult to identify and less likely to be receiving support and advocacy. New York State counties may consider ways to facilitate outreach to these informal caregivers by disseminating information through school districts, local mental health associations, local Offices for the Aging, and other provider agencies that may come in contact with informal caregivers.

**8. Extend the same benefits to grandparent that non-kinship foster parents receive.** Grandparent caregivers divert children from the non-kinship foster care and other out-of-home placements. There is a need for greater parity between grandparent caregivers and non-kinship foster parents regarding financial support and access to activities to support healthy development of children (e.g. recreational and family activities).

**9. Expand access to mental health and support services (e.g. respite, peer support) to grandparent and their children.** Both grandparents and the children in their care may benefit from mental health and other support services. Grandparents may benefit from mental health services, access to respite to ease the burden of caregiving, and kinship caregiver support groups. Children in the care of their grandparents can also benefit from improved access to quality mental health services. In the area of mental health and support services for children, the New York State Kin Care 2014 Summit Recommendations call for better service coordination and planning.