

Opinion

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren is on the Rise

But who knows where the resources are to support them?

by **Denise Rolark Barnes**

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Photograph courtesy of Unsplash

By Denise Rolark Barnes, Publisher, *The Washington Informer*

Vanessa Simmons is the grandmother of three, all girls. The two youngest girls live with their biological mother in D.C., not far from where Simmons lives. Anaiyah, the oldest girl, lives with her.

Fourteen years ago, when Simmons, 57, lost her only child, her 32-year-old son, to gun violence on the streets of D.C., she brought Anaiyah into her home. She agreed to raise her son's young daughter because he was gone, and at the time, Anaiyah's mother could not.

Simmons did what many grandparents do. She is among approximately [**2.7 million grandparents in the U.S. raising their grandchildren**](#). Most of them do so without a parent living in the home. In essence, the grandparent has become the custodial parent for many reasons, and statistics indicate that these households are increasing throughout the U.S.

In the late 1980s, when [**D.C. was labeled the Murder Capital**](#), the crack-cocaine epidemic caused unprecedented violence throughout the city. Murders, deadly drug overdoses, and mass incarceration caused many children to end up in the child welfare system. Newborns, some also crack-addicted, were abandoned in local hospital nurseries. Increasingly, grandparents stepped in to keep their youngest family members from going into foster care.

These grandparents had the best intentions, but financially the burden was overwhelming. Most of them were older and living on a fixed income. It became evident that foster parents were given a stipend for each child in their care, but grandparents were not.

In 2005, the D.C. City Council and Mayor Anthony Williams signed into law a bill proposed by AARP-DC establishing the [**Grandparent Caregiver Program**](#), which offers a monthly subsidy for each child in a grandparent's care. Legislators recognized that "compared to children in non-relative foster care, children in the care of their adult relative have more stability. They also

maintain connections with siblings, preserve their cultural heritage and maintain community bonds,” according to the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA).

Every state in the U.S. now offers some version of a kinship care program. **The National Foster Parent Association** is advocating for a National Kinship Care Month. While extended families historically helped with the care of children, “there was no nationally recognized, consistent name for the policies, programs, and practices connected with relatives raising children.” Kinship care is the newly adopted moniker for family members raising children without a parent present.

AARP-DC State Director Louis Davis believes the District’s program is a success story. It is the “darling” of the council and the mayor, said the spokesperson of the CFSA, and each year the program is consistently and fully funded. But some believe the program is not perfect.

Public awareness is greatly needed, and while “word of mouth” has been effective, parents like Simmons were not aware of the program. I would go so far as to say that a significant number of grandparents across the country don’t know about the support available to them to assist with the care of their grandchildren.

Marla Spindel, executive director of **D.C. KinCare Alliance**, said, in D.C., the average ages of the grandparents entering the program today are in their late 30s or early 40s. Grandparents are getting younger and juggling so many more responsibilities than those in their 60s and above. Just think, a 60-year-old today is quite possibly a great grandparent who may be raising the third generation in their household and still holding down a full-time job.

As a result, access to quality affordable childcare is also needed. And Spindel says that parents are now losing their children due to mental illness coupled with substance abuse.

“It’s like an epidemic,” Spindel added. “We’ve got to look at this more carefully.” Children coming from those environments are often abused and in need of mental health services, too. When they are removed from their home, they are dropped off on a relative’s doorsteps without determining the relative’s ability or the grandparent to provide what’s needed or best for the child.

In addition to keeping her granddaughter, a ninth-grader focused on her education, Simmons works a full-time job. At 57, she is among the older set of grandparent caregivers in her community, which is why she said she maintains some good old-fashioned values. “I’m overly protective,” she said, “and I tell her that you have to be careful. These streets are different.” For Simmons, raising a girl is different, too.

Not long after Simmons got custody of her granddaughter, a DNA test showed Anaiyah is not her son’s biological daughter. “But I kept her anyway. I’m still her grandmother, but I am also like her mother.”

“She wants to be a trauma surgeon. We watch Grey’s Anatomy together, and after seeing her brother get shot in the mouth, she saw the effects. I’m trying to put her on the right path.



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“She’s a good girl,” Simmons added. And, it seems like Simmons is a good grandparent, as well.

Denise Rolark Barnes is the publisher of The Washington Informer.