

- **FRIDAY, MARCH 25, 2022**

# The DC Line

News, Views & Events

• [Donate](#)

News  
Match

Nonprofit News Matters

[Support Us Now»](#)



DC moves to ease access to caregiver subsidies for grandparents, others amid calls for operational improvements

By Annemarie Cuccia on Mar 22, 2022 Last updated Mar 22, 2022

When her 5-year-old niece showed up at her door four years ago, Kymberly Holmes had to make a choice.

“It was either my rent or this little girl,” said Holmes, who didn’t feel confident she’d have enough money for both. “So of course, I chose this little girl.”

Holmes started receiving a caregiving subsidy from the DC government in 2019. It helped her pay for the rent she missed when she first took in her niece. The money she receives every month isn’t enough to take care of all of her niece’s needs, but it helps, she said. She can get her niece toiletries, wash her clothes, and get her hair done. She enrolled her niece in dance school.

Holmes is one of an estimated 16,000 people in the District caring for a grandchild or young relative, according to the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#). The Grandparent Caregivers Program (GCP) and Close Relatives Caregivers Program (CRCP) both provide money to extremely low-income caregivers to help cover the associated costs, with the goal of keeping children with their families and out of the District’s [often-criticized](#) foster care system.

The GCP began providing monthly subsidies to low-income grandparent caregivers in 2006, and the CRCP was added in 2019 to offer similar assistance to caregivers who are close relatives. Both programs are administered by DC’s Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), which provides the funds to families on a first-come, first-served basis until the budget is exhausted. In 2021, the GCP served 755 families with an average monthly subsidy of \$594, and the CRCP assisted 42, with an average subsidy of \$505, according to Richard Howard, supervisory specialist at CFSA.

The [Grandparent and Close Relative Caregivers Program Amendment Act of 2021](#), passed by the DC Council on March 1, will quicken the process for caregivers like Holmes to obtain subsidies. The bill, originally introduced by the mayor, also expands access to the subsidy to include more people, including non-blood relatives. But even as the program is poised to grow, people currently enrolled in the program are asking for more money and support.

Caring for a new child can impose a financial strain, especially for families who had not planned for it. Receiving a GCP or CRCP subsidy can be the difference between a child being raised by their family or being placed into DC’s foster care system, according to Tami Weerasingha-Cote, a supervising attorney at Children’s Law Center.

“We know that our kids have the best outcome when they can stay with their own family,” she said.

Programs like GCP are essential in making this happen, according to Stephanie McClellan, deputy director at DC KinCare Alliance, an organization that supports relative caregivers. But that doesn’t mean it’s perfect.

“My experience? I’m lost,” Holmes said of the program. She says \$400 a month doesn’t go far enough, but that’s not her main complaint. When Holmes began participating, she had a care navigator she could talk to when she had questions. Now, no one has reached out for months nor responded to her inquiries, Holmes said. She doesn’t even know if her former contact works at CFSA anymore.

“You have nobody calling, checking on the child, making sure the child is OK,” Holmes said. “It makes it seem like we don’t need it, but that’s not true.”

---

## **Expanding subsidy eligibility**

The new bill makes four critical rule changes that DC KinCare Alliance and other organizations have long called for: eliminating the waiting period to apply, allowing disabled parents to live with the child and caregiver, and expanding eligibility to godparents and caregivers living outside DC.

Previously, program participants had to be the child’s primary caregiver and have lived with them for six months before becoming eligible for a subsidy. This requirement, McClellan argues, delays money just when new caregivers face additional costs. Often, caregivers move to larger and more expensive apartments to accommodate the expanded size of their household. They also buy new furniture, clothes and school supplies for children they have suddenly begun looking after — expenses that can place them in debt. Since the application process itself can take two or three months, according to McClellan, this means families often wait nine months for financial assistance.

While CFSA has been able to reduce the six-month eligibility requirement in practice already, McClellan said, the bill solidifies the change and will allow caregivers to apply as soon as a child is in their care.

Once implemented, the bill will make three major expansions in who can receive the subsidy.

People caring for children and their medically disabled parents were previously eligible to receive the subsidy only if the people they were caring for were all under 18. Since disabilities aren't related to age, McClellan said, the old rule doesn't make much sense. The new legislation allows a household to receive the subsidy even when the parents with disabilities are older than 18.

The bill also expands the CRCP to include subsidies for godparents — defined as people who are not related to the child but had a relationship with them before the child came to live with them. Some DC KinCare caregivers were raised with one of the child's parents or are their close friends, but aren't blood relatives, McClellan said. Some are even a relative, but unable to prove it because of lost or incorrect birth certificates.

This provision was not in the original bill but was added after McClellan recommended it at the Dec. 9 public hearing held by the Committee on Human Services.

The final expansion allows caregivers who live just outside the District to still get the subsidy as long as the child's parents still live in DC or the child still goes to school in the District. Subsidies for caregivers who live outside DC will be limited to one year.

"That was a hole that needed filling," McClellan said, though she'd like to see the one-year limitation removed. "That DC child has the same needs whether that aunt lives a couple of blocks into DC or a couple of blocks over the border."

Taken together, these changes will have an outsize impact on DC residents of color, according to an [assessment](#) of the bill by the Council Office on Racial Equity (CORE). In DC, Black grandmothers are the most common caretakers besides parents. And, in 2020, 98% of participants in the GCP and all of the participants in the CRCP were Black.

Though the bill expands the program, it does not increase funding. Kera Tyler, CFSA's director of communications, wrote in a statement to Street Sense and The DC Line that the program is adequately funded, and if the bill leads to more families asking for the subsidy, the agency will ask for a larger budget.

"The more families that can access the subsidies that need it, you know, the more kids that can stay with their grandparents and close relatives," Weerasingha-Cote said.

---

## Can it be more than just money?

While the changes approved by the council will allow more families like Holmes' to receive the subsidy, they don't address what Holmes sees as the main problem: As currently administered, the program offers money but not the necessary support.

When Holmes' niece came to live with her, she'd already been traumatized and separated from her family. But Holmes hasn't received any help from CFSA in getting her therapy or setting up a controlled visit with her mom.

"That child should receive therapeutical services. That child should have a case manager. That child should have the same services they receive in foster care," she said. But she doesn't.

Children in the foster care system have access to case managers and mental health professionals, even if those services [fall short](#) in some instances. Programs also support children's education and careers. Holmes doesn't want to put her niece in foster care, but she does want her to have the same supports available to other "displaced children," as Holmes calls them.

In an email, Tyler said that CFSA works to help connect families in all of its programs to any services they are eligible for, such as Medicaid or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Many of the support services provided to children committed to the care of CFSA are funded via Medicaid, she added.

In her search for a community of caregivers and other displaced children, Holmes found the DC KinCare Alliance. She sits on the community board, where she's heard some of the same complaints from fellow caregivers, who often don't know what services are available to them.

That's been Constance Jones' experience, too. Jones raised three of her grandchildren and is still a caregiver at the age of 70, but it wasn't until fairly recently that she found out about DC services for caregivers. When she first applied for the GCP subsidy, it was only because a man told her about it while she was shopping for her grandson's elementary school graduation outfit.

"Everything I learned from any of the agencies, it wasn't because they were advertising it, that's for sure," Jones said. She's since moved into the "grandfamilies" community at [Plaza West](#), which she heard about through a friend in a senior program.

This patchwork system is not an ideal model, according to Weerasingha-Cote. The subsidy is supposed to be just one piece of a broader support network, aimed at keeping kids engaged in school and accessing mental health services. While other support programs [exist](#), none of them are specifically linked to the subsidy.

One place that's hoping to fill those gaps is Plaza West, an apartment complex in Mount Vernon Triangle with 50 units set aside for grandfamilies. Its community life program connects grandparent caregivers and helps them apply for other benefits, according to Jason Ellis, who manages the efforts. From what he's seen, the DC government hasn't coordinated on any non-monetary programs for kinship caregivers, meaning entities like DC KinCare Alliance and Plaza West have to provide wraparound services.

At Plaza West, proximity means the families are able to form support systems and build community. Grandparent caregivers can attend programming, and children can make friends with peers in similar situations — an opportunity they don't always have in school.

Jones has lived at Plaza West since June. She joined for the convenient location and to be around other grandfamilies. Her grandchildren participated in a summer youth program to continue what they were learning in school. They regularly

attend game and movie nights. The families help each other out with child care, bringing their children to activities.

Since joining the community, Jones has become a floor captain. She checks on other residents. When free COVID-19 testing kits came out, she went around and encouraged people to sign up.

The most important thing to Jones? “Knowing that I’m not by myself – I’m not out here trying to do this all on my own. I have a support mechanism.”

But similar services aren’t available to Holmes, or the hundreds of other low-income DC caregivers who receive the subsidy. She’s still hoping DC will provide more help to its caregivers.

“CFSA has to do better by our children,” she said.

*Anyone interested in applying to the subsidy program can do so [here](#) for grandparents and [here](#) for close relatives. Applicants do not have to have legal custody of the child, as long as you can prove your relationship and that you are their primary caregiver.*

---

*This article was co-published with [Street Sense Media](#).*

*Annemarie Cuccia covers DC government and public affairs through a partnership between Street Sense Media and The DC Line. This joint position was made possible by The Nash Foundation and individual contributors.*

[featured](#)