

12 March 2014

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600
By email: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee,

**RE: SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO GRANDPARENTS WHO TAKE PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY FOR
RAISING THEIR GRANDCHILDREN**

Family & Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) welcomes the opportunity to inform the Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry into grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren. The purpose of this letter is to comment on the policy principles and issues relevant to the inquiry, drawing on our member's experience.

FRSA is a national peak body providing leadership and representation for service providers working to strengthen the wellbeing, safety and resilience of families, children and communities. This FRSA submission will focus its response on the following references:

- a) the practical challenges facing grandparents raising their grandchildren, and their support needs;
- b) the role and contribution of grandparents raising their grandchildren, and how this should be recognised;
- c) other challenges that grandparents raising their grandchildren face in undertaking their role, including in circumstances complicated by family conflict, mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, child abuse or neglect, or family violence; and
- e) the practical measures that can be implemented by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments and the community sector to better support grandparents raising their grandchildren, including key priorities for action.

The contribution of grandparents

FRSA member organisations are family support services who work on a daily basis with families and children across Australia. Their experiences support the research suggesting that grandparents are playing an increasingly active and significant role in the lives of their grandchildren. Grandparents are also Australia's largest providers of informal child care. In many traditional societies, including Australian Indigenous communities, multi-generational households are common. In such environments, the extended family plays an important role in rearing children. Grandparents are often at the centre of the family's economic and social life. They may care for children, manage the household, grow and cook food, thereby freeing parents and other family members to undertake paid work and other activities.

When parents are unable to care for their children the extended family, often grandparents, may take over the care of one or more children in kinship care arrangements. Kinship care may be a voluntary and short-term solution to meet a particular family need. It can also be more complex, for example a 'last resort' that is either a long term arrangement or for an uncertain period of time. Illness, injury, disability, death, imprisonment, family violence, mental health problems or drug and alcohol abuse are some of the circumstances that lead grandparents to enter a kinship care arrangement.

Many grandparents act as a strong, protective caregiver for their grandchildren. In working towards the best outcomes for children, FRSA believe that this role could be much better recognised. The cost of raising children is high and the money grandparent carers save state and territory governments by providing alternatives to state funded out-of-home care (OOHC) is substantial. In the broadest sense, appropriate recognition of the contribution made by grandparent carers would be a starting point to alleviate some of the challenges described in this submission.

More appropriate recognition of the role of grandparents has the potential to generate imaginative shared care arrangements. For example, in the Northern Territory, Kinship Carer assessments made by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) take into account the health of the carer and the ability of the carer to provide support to children in the long term. FRSA member agencies report experiences where the DCF has refused grandparents the role of carer for their grandchildren on the basis of their health status. In some cases this is an unfortunate decision and results in the child being removed from family and placed in foster care. Shared care arrangements could, on the other hand, seek to balance the physical health demands of the carer role while still recognising the strengths of grandparents.

Challenges faced by grandparent carers

While some grandparents willingly choose to take on a role caring for children, for some the role can become a burden with negative impacts on the individuals' health, choices and finances. Family relationships take a lot of work at the best of times. Yet grandparents performing parental duties are often doing so on limited incomes and facing the physical limitations of ageing. They may struggle with managing the practical and emotional demands of meeting the needs of both their children and their grandchildren.

These daily practical challenges, as experienced by grandparent carers, can be significant. Examples reported by FRSA member organisations include enrolments at school where grandparents cannot access copies of their child/ren's birth certificate; the cost of school items, particularly when the children are at secondary school; a lack of practical and available respite; and logistical difficulties with legal permissions. Communication from schools and other agencies associated with children are often directed to parents rather than to the grandparents who are actively supporting the children. This can lead to confusion and practical inconvenience for schools and children as well as carers.

In Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, grandparents often take on significant roles caring for their grandchildren. In fact there is often an expectation amongst the community that grandparents will support their children by caring for their grandchildren. However, parents sometimes leave their children with grandparents for an extended period without any financial support. This is because parents often retain the Centrelink benefits linked to the children. In such cases caring for their grandchildren can become financially burdensome and can significantly impact grandparents' social and emotional wellbeing.

Complications associated with the recognition of a child's legal guardian can entrench difficulties. For example, an FRSA member in the Northern Territory has reported that the Department of Children and Families (DCF) recognises parents as the legal guardians of children even when grandparents are recognised by Centrelink and the community as the children's guardian. This means that the grandparents have little input into decisions made during DCF investigations. Another example is the policy of DCF to provide access visits primarily to parents. It takes significant advocacy for grandparents to be included in access visits. In Katherine NT, for example, children are often taken to foster carers in Darwin and so access visits requires travel for family members. Yet DCF policy has been to pay only for parents to travel for these visits. Clearly, greater recognition of grandparent carers needs to be consistent across Commonwealth and state/territory jurisdictions.

Recommended measures to be implemented by Australian governments

The financial support of grandparent carers needs to be better facilitated. Where a legitimate arrangement has been established for the care of a child, payments of a parenting allowance should follow the child rather than the parents. Important considerations that have been noted by FRSA member organisations include; a parents' reluctance to facilitate a payment transfer because the child-related payments are sustaining some lifestyle choice that has led to their inability to provide care for their children in the first place, or circumstances in which the grandparent carers are the same individuals who have not always provided the level of care to their son or daughter (the parent) who is now treating the child unsatisfactorily. Although rare, there are also occasions where grandparent care is more driven by practicality within statutory bodies than necessarily addressing the safety of the children.

While FRSA's submission argues for better recognition and support of grandparent carers, ultimately of course, providing vulnerable children with a safe place to live should drive best practice in all decision making.

Where parenting payments can be transferred, there are particular challenges that can prevent this process from being effective:

- The complexity of family situations means the very reason that children need to be cared for by a person other than their parents may make the process for determining,

- who the carer is or needs to be, quite difficult. This difficulty is magnified within kinship arrangements,
- The burden of 'proving' that the person caring for the child is eligible for payments often results in people (especially grandparents) giving up the process because it is too difficult to navigate. Further, they are often already struggling to adjust to taking on the role of carer for the child/ren,
- Determining what constitutes 'arrangements in place' – that is, the level of formality which needs to exist around the person responsible for the care of a child (parenting plan, court order, statutory declaration from parent etc),
- There can be unintended consequences when the parenting payment goes to a party other than the parent. For example, there is often shame associated with 'signing the kids away' and with the associated reduction in income which can induce fear that they are more at risk of 'losing' the child/ren permanently.

FRSA recommends that the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs incorporates the following considerations in their Inquiry into Grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren:

- Except in an emergency situation there is an appropriate assessment of a child's situation, wellbeing and needs, including the suitability of grandparent carers,
- Reconsideration of assessment/determination of the nature of care needed – for example, a 'once off' situation of care compared with longer term arrangement could mean different or parallel payments are offered,
- Clarification as to the type of 'proof', 'evidence' or substantiation is required to demonstrate that the person requesting the payment is the appropriate person to be receiving it,
- Practical ways of supporting grandparent carers to navigate a complex and daunting system with which they may be very unfamiliar. This includes gaining information regarding the benefits to which they may be entitled; respite care; and assistance with practical matters such as support or legal information.

FRSA supports this inquiry and thanks the Committee for the opportunity to add our views. For more information on any of the matters described above, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Steve Hackett
Executive Director