Honorable Lance Robertson Presentation

October 30, 2021 NFPA Fall Board Meeting

Introduction: President Karen Poteet

Our next presenter is a recorded presentation. This is someone I know, someone who has served as one of my mentors, who much like Dr. Milner, agreed to donate his time to make a recording. Lance Robertson was named to be the presidential appointment in the summer of 2017, was confirmed by the US Senate into his position. I must say, you'll find this hard to believe, but it was a unanimous decision by the US Senate, a bipartisan voice vote on the floor of the Senate, that he became Assistant Secretary for HHS, and served until January of this year as the Secretary on Aging for HHS as well as the administrator for the Administration for Community Living. If you've ever dealt with any children in your care who had intellectual and developmental disabilities or physical disabilities, this is where a lot of the funding is designated for those programs nationwide. I really wanted him to share, and you'll see because he's going to talk a lot about kinship care. I'll go ahead and share this presentation.

Karen: Fellow NFPA board members and staff, I'm so excited today to have the Honorable Lance Robertson join with us. Lance currently is a director at Guide House, which is an international consulting firm, so he's doing consultant work all over the nation regarding health and human services. Until mid-January of this year, Lance served as the fifth Assistant Secretary on Aging, and only the second Administrator for the Administration for Community Living within the federal HHS department.

Lance, we're just so glad to have you with us today. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to join us.

Lance: Thank you, Karen. I'm glad to be with you.

Karen: Just a little bit about our organization. The National Foster Parent Association in 2022 will be celebrating our 50th year since incorporation. The whole purpose of the organization has been throughout this last half century to support, educate, and advocate for foster, kinship, and adoptive families. We have members from all over the nation. One of our key stakeholder groups are those of kinship families, many of whom are grandparents raising grandchildren.

There's a new piece of federal legislation that just became effective on October 1st of this year, which really is impacting child welfare systems across the nation because for the first time it's allowing states to use Title 4E money for prevention activities and, if children can't stay with their birth parents, it encourages placement with kin. I know this is such a passionate issue for you. Do you want to share a little bit about why you're so passionate about kinship care, particularly grandparents raising grandchildren?

Lance: Absolutely. Again, my thanks to all of you who are listening and participating in this event.

I think about how critical foster parents are and kinship caregivers, because they are honestly the glue that keeps our society held together. We have all sorts of data points that tell us how many we think there are but I was raised by grandparents, to really jump out and answer your question, or talk about what you reference relative to my personal experience. I was raised by my grandparents just because of a teen pregnancy. Nothing more complicated than that. My mom and dad are awesome individuals, I love them, I see them most every day still. During that time in that chapter of my life, it just made more sense for my grandparents

to raise me. So, I was raised by my grandparents, heavily influenced though by my biological parents. I just think back during the '70s and '80s when I went through that experience and how limited the resources were for my grandparents. There was really nothing out there to help them navigate those pathways, whether it was with the school system or medical needs, all sorts of obstacles out there that a lot of these individuals whose heart is in the right place just don't have the right resources. I think it's a requirement, an expectation that in the public sector we do all we can to support these individuals.

I'm of course super proud of having been raised by my grandparents. I share that with a lot of people on a lot of occasions because I think there are more of us than people recognize. The impact was just phenomenal, and I think in a large part put me down the career path that I've been down just knowing that I wanted to be able to give back.

Karen: I had the privilege of attending your Senate confirmation hearing. As I recall, a question that you got from US Senator Susan Collins of Maine had to deal with grandparents and kinship issues. I recall the question, going back over four years ago now when that hearing occurred. At ACL, you had the opportunity then to implement some pieces of federal legislation that really focused on caregiver issues. Caregivers in general, but then convening a specific advisory group that was really targeted and focused on grandparents raising grandchildren as well as other kin. Do you want to share a little bit about that?

Lance: Absolutely. We were in pretty close concert with Congress in working out what would we be able to do that could dramatically help family caregivers and also grandparents raising grandchildren. In 2018, Congress passed a couple of pieces of legislation that required our agency to stand up these councils who would then put together strategies, plans if you will, that can then go back to Congress for consideration.

There were two pieces of legislation, both passed at the same time, but Congress said, "Will you work on RAISE first," which focuses on more of a micro-level attempt to support family caregivers. We did that. It took a long time. Those sorts of things take a lot of time, effort, and energy. The RAISE Council now are done. They submitted to Congress their final report, you can find it on the ACL.gov website, 26 recommendations on how our country could even more strongly support family caregivers, and really that need is more paramount now than ever.

The other companion piece of legislation that focused on supporting grandparents raising grandchildren, I think a lot of that energy now we're going to start to see, and the activity will become a focal point for ACL. The timing for those who are participating in this event couldn't be better, because this would be a great time for you to reach out to your federal partner and say, "We'd like to be part of that conversation. We have some thoughts; we have some ideas." I think as a federal partner, and particularly I can tell you at ACL we very seriously took stakeholder feedback and made sure that it was part of our conversation so that as we developed programs or policies that we knew stakeholders would be supportive and that it made sense.

The Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Council's effort is really now going to be more underway than it's been historically over the last several years. The pandemic messed everything up, as you know. We would have been done a while back, but the pandemic sort of put a hold on a lot of stuff. RAISE is done, Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren effort is underway. We would love to see for anybody that's had a kinship experience to weigh in.

And you can do that on both. If you think about the family caregiving, that wasn't approached just as a traditional family caregiving situation, that was approached to really encompass all types of care situations. If it's foster parenting, if it's kinship care, anything that you want to label under that, I believe fits. Some of the recommendations are very specific to somebody taking care of an older loved one, because that's of course

the more common scenario that we all see and recognize.

I am excited, as you are, I know, to see what comes out of this supporting grandparent raising grandchildren effort. We primed the pump in the last administration, now this administration will have to carry forward that work. Again, there are so many grandparents out there raising grandchildren, far more than we know. Every time somebody would deliver a statistic to me, I'd just shake my head because I knew that was probably a gross underrepresentation simply because a lot of these situations are not reported and people just aren't aware. It's imperative that we create a stronger system to support grandparents so that they can be successful in that effort. It's critical for everybody.

Karen: Absolutely. One of the things in the child welfare system, we kind of have an idea of how many grandparents or other relatives are involved with children, but like you mentioned, we don't know the numbers of children that are out there in what in child welfare we call the informal kinship care settings. Obviously, we don't want those children to ever move into the formal child welfare system, because that's not in anyone's best interest. I think it's more crucial than ever, particularly with this new piece of federal law being implemented on the Family First Prevention Act and being able to use the Title 4E dollars in a new way that's never been used before to really help undergird those kinship caregivers is just crucial.

I also know that our sister organization, Generations United, who we have a long-standing working relationship with, they were just awarded, from ACL, a technical resource center focused on this whole topic of grandparents raising grandchildren. I assume that's kind of an outcome or a recognition of a gap that existed.

Lance: Yes. Absolutely. I know at ACL we funded over two dozen different technical resource centers. I think as we continue to look at that, it was pretty easy to identify we need to stand one up that focuses on supporting grandparents raising grandchildren, not only in line with the 2018 legislation, but just knowing that this is a cohort that we must serve in a better and more meaningful way.

I'm excited. Generations United is the perfect partner to help stand that up, Donna and Jaia and the rest of them. I think what I know your group could do as well, Karen, and that's with all technical resource centers, just make sure that what is being offered and provided is usable and digestible and valuable. One thing we had to do was strip back on some of those technical resource centers because maybe they were too research laden. That's fine for some people, but for most practitioners and for individuals who are facing these situations, they don't need a resource center that just has a whole bunch of links that send them to all of these dense articles. They need a punch list. If you're now, all of a sudden, a grandparent raising grandchildren and you woke up this morning not knowing that was going to be your path, here's what you need to do, here's who you need to reach out to, here's the support system you need to start building now.

I think Generations United is a perfect partner. I think not only would your membership be helpful in constructing the right type of information to go in a technical resource center, but let's also be sure that we're just regularly pulse checking and making sure that we're keeping up with some of the more innovative things that are happening relative to respite care, maybe some of the tax laws that are going to change. There's a lot that's bubbling out there, this huge movement towards home and community-based services.

Everything that we do points toward helping reinforce the importance of taking care of people in the community, keeping them out of systems of care where we can, and making sure that those informal supports are strengthened, like you referenced earlier. That's going to be the secret sauce.

Karen: I know one of the things that the NFPA has been able to develop and launch, and we launched it in

early 2020, having no idea about the pandemic, and it has just turned out to be amazingly successful, and that is we created a Training Institute through funding from the Centene Corporation. It's free. Individuals can access, I don't care if they're birth parents, grandparents, unrelated foster parents, adoptive parents, they can access videos, webinars, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, about all kind of topics, issues about trauma, about just a variety of issues. That's one of the places that I really think that we probably need to reach out to Generations United and make certain that they know we have this wonderful free of cost Training Institute that is available to anyone because we have the wonderful support of Centene behind it.

Lance: That's awesome.

Karen: I just want to thank you so much for taking time out of your very busy schedule. I know you're consulting and traveling all over the US now. Thank you for giving us and sharing with us your experience and your knowledge and your passion regarding grandparents raising grandchildren and kinship care in particular. Thank you so much.

Lance: Thank you, Karen. I appreciate it.

Karen: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I don't get to say that very much. It's an honor to have you join us.

Lance: Thank you