

## **Written Testimony of Yvette McKinnie**

### **Leveling the Playing Field for Working Families: Challenges and Opportunities**

#### **United States House Ways and Means Committee Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support**

**Thursday, March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, 2:00 p.m.**

Good afternoon. My name is Yvette McKinnie. I want to thank Chairman Danny K. Davis, Ranking Member Jackie Warloski, and the committee, for this opportunity to share my experience as a mother and grandmother raising young children.

I am a grandmother raising my 11-year-old grandson, Matthew, and my 3-year-old son, Elijah. I have cared for Matthew for two years because my daughter had to relocate to Indianapolis for her job, and she did not have any child care or family there to help and her salary would not allow her to afford daycare. I have guardianship of my grandson.

I have had Elijah since day one. I brought him home 6 days after he was born. We thought he was my grandson – my son's son, but DNA tests showed he was not. At that point, they said that since his mother tested positive for opioids, he would have to go into the foster care system if I didn't take him. I didn't want him to go into the system so now I plan on adopting him as my son. The mother's rights have been terminated, I now have legal custody and the adoption is being finalized soon. When Elijah was 3 years old, we found out that he had medical issues. He has autism and sensory issues. Because of this, he sometimes hides unexpectedly to avoid noises or other stimulation. So, I can't just leave him with anybody. My mother tries to help me, but it is difficult for her because she is 76 years old and cannot keep up with Elijah. I also cannot easily take him out with me. For example, I need to bring him with me to watch Matthew's basketball games, but Elijah has a short attention span, so I have to leave the game sometimes to care for him. It's hard because Matthew looks up and I'm not in the stands. I just tell him that I'll be right back.

I used to work full-time, but it wasn't flexible enough for me to meet the boys' needs, and I needed help with child care. I was paying \$600 a month for full-time care for Elijah at Ms. McKinney's Early Learning Center Head Start program, where he was getting speech and occupational therapy. I applied for assistance with Illinois Action for Children, my community's local public assistance agency, to help with child care costs, but I was told that I was ineligible because I made too much money. Illinois Action for Children also informed me that they only provide services for parents, not grandparents. I told them I have guardianship of Elijah, and showed them the letter I have for proof of guardianship that I use with school, the doctor and

other services for him, but they said it didn't matter. I wasn't the parent. I could not afford to pay for Elijah's child care without help. I had to find another job.

I am now employed by Life Changing Community Outreach at a much-lowered salary. I am very grateful for the opportunity as it grants me flexibility and support to care for my boys. It is difficult every day, but for the love of my boys, I do what I have to do. My day starts at 5 a.m. Between 5 a.m. and the time we leave, I get the boys school clothing, breakfast and myself ready for the day. Matthew has to be at school at 8 a.m. Since I couldn't afford to keep Elijah in full-time child care, he now goes to Chicago public school where they provide only three hours of care a day from 11:15-2:15. He does not get all the services he needs there, so I need to take him to speech therapy some days 9:00 a.m. and juggle his doctor and other appointments. Before and after school, he comes to work with me where they let him participate in some of the youth programs. My oldest gets out of school at 3:30 p.m. and comes to the center with Elijah and me. I work at the center until 8. Then we go home to have dinner and do homework with them. I usually get into bed at around 11p.m. and my day starts again at 5 a.m.

I love my boys and would do anything for them. I stepped in to care for Matthew when he needed me. I stepped up for Elijah and kept him out of foster care. I am thankful to have found a job that offers flexibility and we are making it work. Matthew is doing well with socializing and education. He has joined the basketball team and increased his reading and math scores. Elijah is now able to tell me when he has to use the bathroom due to occupational therapy. But it has been and continues to be a struggle. Although Elijah has slightly improved, his speech is still not what it should be at his age. He does not have the therapy as extensively anymore because of his school schedule. It went from an hour and a half per week, to 30 minutes per week. I have just begun working with Sankofa Safe Child Initiative, a local organization, to find some respite care.

I also think about others like me. I am not alone. More than 2.6 million children across the U.S. are being raised by grandparents, other relatives or close family friends because their parents cannot care for them. Not all of them are fortunate enough to have a job that offers the flexibility and youth programs that mine does. Like me, many grandparents raising grandchildren are providing full time care for children but are not able to access child care or other help for the children because we are not recognized as their parents.

What would have helped me? If I could have received assistance with the \$600 per month to pay for childcare, I could have kept Elijah at Ms. McKinney's child care program where he could have continued speech and occupational therapy. I also could have kept my job to help provide for our family's needs.

Policies should not force us to leave good jobs because we can't get help with critical child care. Child care policies should provide assistance to families in need regardless of whether the full-time caregiver of the children is their parent. Without me, Elijah would have no parent.

I urge congress to support policies that ensure grandparents raising grandchildren like mine get the child care help they need to help children thrive.