

**Opening Statement
Senator Susan M. Collins
Special Committee on Aging**

“Grandparents to the Rescue: Raising Grandchildren in the Opioid Crisis and Beyond”

March 21, 2017

Good afternoon and welcome. This hearing was originally scheduled for last week, but – as those of us from northern states know all too well – winter does not always cooperate with our Senate schedules. This hearing focuses on an important topic and I’m very pleased we’re able to discuss it today.

Last year, nearly 1,000 babies in Maine – that’s about eight percent of all births – were born to women addicted to opioids and other drugs. This tragedy afflicts many others states as well as mine. In the United States, every twenty five minutes, a baby is born with an opioid addiction. In this crisis, as in past crises, grandparents are coming to the rescue. The Aging Committee is meeting today to recognize the grandparents raising grandkids and to explore what can be done to assist them as they take on this unanticipated challenge motivated by their love of their grandchildren.

One in five grandparents provides childcare regularly to their grandchildren. In fact, grandparents who help raise grandkids together with the child’s parents can support healthy aging and be a positive experience for all concerned. Today, however, we are focusing on grandparents who are raising their grandchildren alone. These “custodial grandparents” are called on to help for a number of reasons, including alcohol and drug addiction, physical abuse, incarceration, divorce, financial difficulties, military deployment, and even death. In Maine, the number of children being raised solely by their grandparents increased by 24 percent between 2010 and 2015.

At a time in life when most seniors are looking forward to enjoying more leisure time, these grandparents have found themselves as parents once again. They are waking up in the middle of the night to feed babies and planning afternoons around soccer practice, rather than playing golf or volunteering. Raising a second family also involves costs that they had never anticipated as they budgeted for what was supposed to be their golden years. They are tapping into retirement savings, going back to work, or staying in the workforce longer just to make ends meet. In addition to the financial toll, raising children later in life presents social, emotional, legal, and other challenges. It can be socially difficult to become a full time caregiver as an older adult, often isolated from friends. It can be emotionally difficult to go from being a grandmother who spoils the kids to becoming the disciplinarian who makes sure homework is finished.

At the same time, it can often be emotionally difficult to navigate the relationship with the children’s birth parents. The legal challenges are tough. The process of attaining custody is complex, lengthy, and costly. Without a proper legal arrangement, routine tasks such as enrolling kids in school or obtaining medical care, can be difficult.

Becoming a full time caregiver can also take a toll on the health of the grandparents. The new caregiver role challenges both the physical and mental health of grandparents resulting in higher rates of diabetes, heart disease, and depression.

Despite all these challenges, when asked if they regret taking on the caregiver role, a vast majority say: no. They know they are making a difference. They are providing love, stability, and a home to children who might otherwise have to live with strangers.

WABI, the CBS television station in Bangor, Maine, recently featured stories of grandparents raising their grandchildren. What struck me the most in those stories was that the grandparents aren't focused on the challenges; instead, they're focused on their love for their grandchild. As one put it, "In the end, it's worth it to know that they are happy and safe."

Throughout history, grandparents have stepped in to provide safe and secure homes to their grandchildren, replacing traumatic pasts with loving and hopeful futures. The opioid crisis has called on grandparents in epic numbers. We are here today to focus on what is being done to help those grandparents who have stepped up to help ensure a better life for their children's children.