

Mayor's Council on African American Elders

c/o Aging and Disability Services, Seattle-King County
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MCAAE Meeting Summary

October 20, 2023

Members Present: Paula Williams, Chair, Omara Abe, Pamela Williams, Claudette Thomas, Paul Mitchell, Rita Howard, Sheila Mary

Members Absent: Charlotte Antoine

ADS Staff: Tiffany Johnson, Michael Adusah, Jessica Gardner, Karen Winston

Guests: LaShawnDa Pittman, Ph.D., Jacqui Hurd, AAEP

I. Welcome and Introductions

Participants introduced themselves at the start of the meeting.

II. Grandmothering While Black: A Twenty-First-Century Story of Love, Coercion and Survival

(LaShawnDa L. Pittman, Ph.D., Author)

- LaShawnDa expressed her happiness to have acknowledged Karen Winston in her book.

Prevalence and Demographic Characteristics:

- US Children living in grandparent-headed households increased 3.2% in 1970 to 8.4% in 2019. The majority (74%) are 3-Generation Households and 26% are in SGH (Skipped Generation Households – meaning the parent is not living in the home.)
- Nearly 30% of US Children live with grandparents at some point in their lives. Approximately 5% live in SGH and 24.6% in 3-Generation Households.
- In 2019, approximately 2.5 million grandparents were responsible for their grandchildren's needs.
- African Americans are only 13% of the US population, yet they are 20.2% of Grandparent-Headed Households (down from 24% in 2010 and 28% in 2000), apart from American Indian and Alaskan Native families. One in 10 black children ends up in SGH in his/her lifetime (10% double the rate of the next highest group – Latino's at 5%.)

Social and Economic Vulnerabilities Among Black Grandmothers:

- Black grandmothers experience vulnerabilities other grandmothers don't. They are younger (the exception is Native American and Alaska Native grandparents), and more likely to live at or below the Federal Poverty Line; reside in inner-city neighborhoods, rear more grandchildren than others, care for grandchildren for considerably longer periods of time, provide primary care alone (without a parent or partner), and provide primary care with impaired physical health.

Contributing Factors:

- Reasons for increased in Grandparent Headed Households (and rise in SGH in particular) are attributed to 3 leading factors:
 1. Support needs of the Parent Generation.
 2. Changes in Social Welfare policies.
 3. Changes in Child Welfare System policies and practices.

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Contributions to the field:

1. Kinship Care Arrangements

The book argues that Kinship Care Arrangements have implications for grandparent's caregiving, including their legal rights and responsibilities, access to resources and services, and degree of privacy and autonomy.

- When you get your grandchild through the Welfare System, they tell you what kind of arrangement you can have and what kinds of legal rights go along with that arrangement.
- Sometimes legal guardianship is driven by the need to get a child in school, get medical care or social security, and sometimes is driven by the parent not coming to take the child away if they have no willingness or ability to care for the child.
- Legal guardianship is not the same as fostering. The Foster Care System is different – when a child comes through the system, you become a Kinship Foster Care Provider, and the state has legal authority.
- Guardian Ad-Idem without the state is preferred for many and most grandmothers go with that over risking a grandchild going into the system not wanting their grandbaby to spend one day in somebody else's house because they worry about their safety and non-relative foster care.
- Some grandparents worry that if they let a child go into state custody just to get the Kinship Foster Care payments (which are better than TANIF payments) that they may not qualify.

2. My Conceptualization of Coerced Mothering

My conceptualization of "coerced mothering" Encompasses not just being compelled to provide care, but also to perform the social and legal functions of motherhood. I argue that coerced mothering compels grandmothers, who lack legal rights to their grandchildren, to legalize their relationship with their grandchildren or to devise strategies in lieu of legalization – even if they do not want to.

- Coerced Care happens under 4-characteristics:
 1. There's no other non-negative option.
 2. Once you assume responsibility, it's hard to opt out.
 3. Their identity and person-hood get co-opted.
 4. They're being asked to fulfill the social and legal functions of motherhood without the legal rights.
- 3.** Most grandmothers in my research did not anticipate raising their grandchildren and if given a choice, many would prefer not to raise their grandchildren. Grandmothers unanimously anticipated playing an active role in the lives of their grandchildren. While the nature of that active role varied among women, many adhered to what I refer to as a sense of "anticipatory responsibility", the expectation held by grandmothers and the black community of duty to or accountability for a grandchild's well-being.
- I wanted to look at what does grand-motherhood mean to you, and I found 4 things that I thought were really beautiful:
 1. It meant leaving a legacy through their grandchildren.
 2. It meant preparing them for the future.
 3. It means prioritizing them in a way their parents may not be able.
 4. It meant taking care of their lineage.

Q&A Session:

Comment: When parents are battling for their kids and even the rights they don't have as grandparents in terms of visitation, that's been a mind blower for me.

Response: The only way the grandmother can get some of those resources is to get legal guardianship. Some of them just do without what little bit of resource are there because the parent has them and they don't want legal guardianship because they don't want the parent to come and take that child. This experience is not what it used to be.

Question: Kinship Caregivers have such limited access to support, and what can be done to advocate for parody so that these grandmothers will get the same kind of support and access to programs that can help them?

Response: One of the things in my conclusion is policy recommendation #1 - Create Parody; I think the United States has no will to do so. I also think pushing issues back onto families is one part of it but look at who's impacted: people of color and Native Americans.

Comment: The crux of your presentation is both culturally deep and socially part of our nature; traditionally, we were African tribes, and grandparents played such a key role in child development.

Response: A lot of these women were learning on the ground. These women have so much to teach the world and other grandparents are starting to go where black grandmothers have already been. They've been at forefront of the Child Welfare System taking our kids into state custody and having to figure out how to manage in that way. They're at the forefront of legalizing these relationships in ways that other groups are not so I think there's so much innovativeness.

Comment: I grew up in an environment where I knew more of my grandmother than my mother because she spent so much time with us and taking care of us and this is what you're trying to emphasize, but here it's different. Here, you have a divided society where you literally separated from the reality of upbringing. For your parents it's different because that's where they came from, but for the Africans, it's the way we were brought up.

Response: My next book project is titled *I'm Not Always Going to Be Here*, and the subtitle is, *Black Grandmotherhood from Slavery to The Great Migration*, so I've done this deep dive into looking at black grandmother hood including Pre-Colonial Africa and West Africa. We loved to think grandmothers were raising their grandchildren then, and many didn't even get access to their grandchildren because of the conditions of slavery, but it's a different time. I can say that Black folks, historically, have been in multi-generational households more than most families so we have this history, but you have changes that started taking place in the 70's where mass incarceration, inner city poverty, drug epidemics; all of that is game changing.

Question: Do you see two or three policy issues imbedded in this that we could be pushing and advocating for as an organization?

Response: Finances are the number one stressor. I think about what hits them first is housing because when that grandbaby comes, it's got to go somewhere. Another thing is childcare; when you need childcare for that grandchild who are you turning to? Everybody turns to you and there's often no grace periods for grandparents to go find a job or afford childcare so give these folks subsidized childcare so they can keep the jobs they've got instead of having to also pay for childcare. I think looking at the childcare policy in Washington state is one, the housing piece has to be dealt with and increasing resources for TANF. I can write that out and send it to Karen.

Question: When I can, I'm going to get the book; where can I get it signed?

Response: I'm having a book launch party in February, and you're absolutely welcome.

Question How did you come to address this particular topic and issue?

Response: I wanted to look at resilience among black women dealing with all this poverty, raising babies all over again, second and third generation. I had written my master thesis on black women and psychological wellbeing and was about to go give a talk at a conference and this group of older black women stopped me and I told them what I was about to go do and they came to my talk and were like consider how this would look with older women and I was doing my comprehensive exam in grad school on the social capital of poor black youth, and grandparents were the number-one source of support and it sort of came together.

Comment: If by accident, you discover that by being a caregiving grandparent, it impacts the care that your grandchildren provide for you as an elder.

Response: I talk about how the longer those kids stay in their care and the more they have to fight to keep them safe and cared for, that they become their kids in a sense. Some of those kids once parents got it together, they were like, I'm not leaving my grand momma. There's a relationship there that they don't want to disrupt, and these grandkids start taking care of grand momma because they need grand momma to be around.

Comment: I don't know whether you've been to Africa or not, but you find one of the strongest bonds between the child and the grandparents or the grandmother; the grandfathers are there but in our cultural tradition as Africans, that's one part which is so highly emphasized.

Response: One of my favorite writers is Malidoma Patrice Some (Of Water and the Spirit), and one of the things he writes in that book is that bond is so important because grandparents are where grandchildren have come from. I got that information from my own grandmother because there are things that developmentally you have to go through as you age, you have to make peace with leaving here, you have to transmit that to your grandchildren so they know that death and dying is part of life and if you too worried about living, because you're worried about who's going to raise your grandbaby, there's things you might be missing, right in that developmental stage.

Comment: I just wanted to point out the group that there is in our area, a Foster Grandparent program.

Question: I'm leading the investment process again for Kinship Caregiving and the RFP is scheduled to be released in February 2024 and the data that I'm finding locally that most Kinship Caregivers served by ADS fall between ages of 70-74 and I'm just wondering if that's consistent with the age.

Response: The average age for grandparents raising grandchildren is 54 or 58, and both are in the labor market still so the childcare piece, they are 38 to 83; many of the younger ones are still raising their own teenagers and the elder ones are doing it with grace.

Question: Are there many grandfathers that have the same problem, are they involved in the process too?

Response: Black grandmothers are more likely than all other grandparents to be doing this without partners and that has to do with life expectancy and mass incarceration. The majority of them have partners and that's their primary support. The women still do the majority of women's work, but grandfathers are absolutely involved. Whether they were married or not, they had their old men, they had their children and the child they were raising; nieces, nephews, and their own parent, so they had a circle of support but felt like at the end of the day, the buck stopped with them. They don't have somebody that also had to sacrifice what they had to sacrifice, and that's real.

Question: Will you be letting Karen know where your book launch is going to be?

Response: Yes, and I would love to have you there.

Question: Where can we find you on social media or how can we keep up with you?

Response: Website: <https://www.drlashawndapittman.com/> Email: lpittmann@uw.edu

- The African American Caregiver Forum is on Saturday, November 4th from 10:00am-2:00pm, at NAAM. The event is free, lunch will be served, and the restaurant Island Soul is providing the meal but please register so we have an accurate headcount.
- The Crisis Care Center Initiative approved by King County Voters in April 2023, will begin implementation in 2024 to create a county wide network of 5 Crisis Centers to restore and expand mental health residential treatment beds and grow the community behavioral health workforce. Please join us in a focus group to provide feedback on the implementation of planning on how the initiative can address the needs of older adults.

III. Age Friendly Updates - No updates.

IV. Aging and Disability Updates

- We're in the midst of hiring a number of people; we're looking for a Grants and Contracts Specialist, we're looking for an Admin and we're going to be looking for an Out of Class Manager for our Contracts Unit.
- This coming week we're doing a Staff Appreciation for all of our team in the ADS Division at Rainier Community Center.
- I just want to say thank you and I appreciate each of you. I look forward to meeting you all in person someday. Thank you for your work.