

# “Black Kinship Families – Identifying Needs and Challenges”: Key Takeaways

This document presents key takeaways from a conversation between **Karyne Jones** and **Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman**. Karyne Jones is President and CEO of the National Caucus & Center on Black Aging, Inc. (NCBA), the country’s preeminent national organization on issues impacting minority citizens aged 55 and over. Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman is an Associate Professor of American Ethnic Studies and the Joff Hanauer Honors Professor in Western Civilization at the University of Washington.

The terms “grandfamilies” and “kinship families,” used throughout this document, refer to all families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. The terms can be used interchangeably to refer to these families.

[Click here](#) to watch the full conversation between Ms. Jones and Dr. Pittman.

**Although grandfamilies are a timeless tradition among African Americans, the circumstances that necessitate that arrangement have changed.**

Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman:

- ▶ “We now are dealing with the drug epidemics... mass incarceration, and... the child welfare system. Where once we were historically excluded from this system, now we’re overrepresented in this system.”
- ▶ “Now you need paper for things; you need paper to get children enrolled in school, you need paper for medical care. ...[S]o there’s an increased demand to legalize the relationship.”

**Black families tend to avoid legalizing custody arrangements for an array of reasons.**

Dr. Pittman:

- ▶ “One is because they hope that whatever intervention they’re providing by raising their grandchildren will help the parent better themselves and be able to take care of their own child; or also because of something we don’t talk enough about, which is that they want to tend to their own lives.”

- ▶ “Some don’t want legal guardianship, so help them figure out how to get the resources without it. Some want it. Help them figure out how to overcome the family dynamics that may be getting in the way of them having it.”

### **Policymakers do not adequately address kinship families.**

Dr. Pittman:

- ▶ “Family-related policies and aging-related policies... don’t think about grandfamilies nearly enough. They are parent-child focused. That is what’s privileged. Aging policies don’t think about older people or middle-aged people even who are raising children. Those kinds of different policy buckets... are not as nuanced as families actually operate.”

### **Black grandfamilies need clear and accurate information about their options and the processes involved in acquiring benefits.**

Dr. Pittman:

- ▶ “[A] lot of the grandmothers that I talked to were told they needed legal guardianship in order to keep or get subsidized housing. It’s just not true. And so having physical custody in many cases is enough. And the same with TANF child-only grants. In most states, you don’t need legal guardianship to get a TANF child-only grant.

### **Policymakers and service providers must address implicit and explicit bias, resist stereotyping, and avoid making assumptions.**

Dr. Pittman:

- ▶ “I had grandmothers talk about how they went to court, and they would ask, ‘Are there any resources?’ And a judge would say, ‘Hey, if you need resources, are you able to take care of this child?’ like children don’t require anything. Or there’s often this thing about the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree so if you’re raising your grandchildren, what did you do with your own children? Which negates the huge structural realities or inequalities that Black families in America face.”
- ▶ “I think this sort of non-tangible stuff that I would say gets in the way are things like making assumptions about what this experience involves and what [the families] are experiencing. And those assumptions can range from everything to why they are raising their grandchildren to begin with. ...In some cases, it’s drugs, in some cases the parent’s in school, the parent’s working, the parent has mental/physical health challenges, the parent is dealing with domestic violence; they may be incarcerated. There are lots of reasons and so I think not making assumptions about what those reasons are is really important.”

**Regardless of their good intentions are gratification from helping their families, kin caregivers make significant sacrifices that should not be taken for granted.**

Dr. Pittman:

- ▶ “This is a time where these women are being forced to pour into their grandchildren, not as grandparents, but as parents, at a time where they should often be pouring into themselves, and the health consequences are real, the financial consequences are real. And so, I think when we romanticize that experience, we don’t give them the help that they need. ...It’s not either/or. These women can both be loving their grandbabies and doing what they need to do to keep them safe and to ensure their wellbeing, and at the same time, want that for themselves.”

**More inter-organizational and inter-agency collaboration would be of great service to kinship families.**

Dr. Pittman:

- ▶ “If you can hit a grandparent at one level of intervention, if there are enough agencies who are present at that level, then it spans out to all these other places. Then does the grandchild need an IEP [Individualized Education Plan]? Does the grandmother need support in getting Social Security Disability? Are they receiving what SNAP [Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program] benefits they can be receiving? And so, I just think that that interconnectedness and inter-organization collaboration is also really key.”

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The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit [www.GKSNetwork.org](http://www.GKSNetwork.org).

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