

# Transcript:

## Black Kinship Families

### Identifying Needs and Challenges

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**Announcer:**

Black Kinship Families: Identifying Needs and Challenges. A conversation between Karyne Jones, President and CEO of NCBA, the National Caucus and Center on Black Aging, Incorporated—a proud partner of the Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network—and Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman, associate professor of American Ethnic Studies and the Joff Hanauer honors professor in Western Civilization at the University of Washington.

**Karyne Jones:**

We're pleased to welcome our continuing conversation with educator, researcher, and author Dr. LaShawnDa Pittman, who has researched and published extensively nearly all aspects of American life, including her 2017 study, "Safety Net Politics: Economic Survival Among Grandmother Caregivers in Severe Deprivation." In fact, she has just published a new book that addresses the issues central to this conversation, aptly and provocatively titled *Grandmothering While Black*. Dr. Pittman, thank you so much for being with us.

**Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman:**

Thank you. I am so excited to be here. It is such an important conversation to be in right now.

**Karyne Jones:**

It is an important conversation, and that's why we are doing these conversations so that we can get these out to our communities, whether it be a church, or a sorority, or fraternity, or any and all of the groups and organizations, barbershop, wherever we can get the information out so that people understand what might be available to help them, and to help those who are responsible for making sure that these special families get the kind of assistance and benefits that they deserve.

So let me just ask you, because we know that the terminology may be new, but the concept of grandfamilies and kinship families are very familiar to African Americans.

Grandmothers and grandfathers, great aunts and uncles rearing relatives' children, is an old tradition in the African American community and still very much a common practice in the United States. But for many Black families who are doing it without any legal or financial or emotional support for these programs which are designed to help them, can you just maybe discuss with us why they don't trust the system—you know, these third parties that are designed to help them? Why do you think that is?

**Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman:**

Yeah, that is such a great question. And I think I'll step back and say that you're absolutely right, this is a historical tradition that dates back to not just slavery, but pre-colonial Africa. And I've written and do a lot of research on the historical context for this tradition. And yet, there are, I say, three things that have really changed about what grandmothers, grandfathers, and aunts and uncles did back in the day versus what they're doing now. And one is the circumstances that their grandchildren are experiencing have changed. We now are dealing with the drug epidemics and so on, mass incarceration, and as you sort of alluded to the child welfare system, where once we were historically excluded from this system, now we're overrepresented in this system.

The increased demand now to legalize this relationship. Now, you know, you need paper for things, you need paper to get children enrolled in school, you need paper for medical care and all those kinds of things, so there's an increased demand to legalize the relationship. And then lastly, and back to a point that I was making the sort of actual and symbolic threat of the child welfare system. The community knows the system, and so the need to keep our children out of that system and I think is really important. And so, I think in terms of the trust issue and that issue, I'll speak to each one of those separately. So, you talked about, in your question, legal support and legal status as an issue, economic support as an issue, and emotional support, to get the support they need from third parties. So one is that the legal status of these families is very precarious. So, there's only two entities that have legal rights to a child, the parent, and the state. Grandparents don't really have a lot of rights. And I've followed the changes in grandparents' rights over time. And so, I think that that's one thing that's really important.

And most of the care, to your point, Karyne, happens outside of the child welfare system. Very few families are providing care in a formal way in terms of just the child welfare system. And so, they're often working these relationships out with parents. And what that looks like, what I found is that it might be that the grandparent or the aunt is providing the care, and the parent takes the child to get it enrolled in school or take it to the doctor and so on. They often don't want to legalize these relationships. 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.

So, a lot of these women are going straight from raising their own children to, in some cases, raising grandchildren, without that break in caregiving, which is, I think, is really important to talk about. And just this ability to tend to themselves. We don't tend to think about particularly older Black women as wanting something for themselves, and so I think that's really important. And in some cases, they aren't given permission to get legal guardianship by parents. And so, they then have to sort of devise a plan to do that sometimes with parents knowing, sometimes with parents not knowing. And so, so much of it is how do I protect my grandchild and keep my grandchild from being harmed? How do I maybe keep the relationship informal if I can, or if I can't for whatever reason, either because the parent won't relinquish the child, even though they can't adequately parent that child, or for other reasons that they need to legalize the relationship, again, to get the child enrolled in school or whatever. How do I make that happen without losing custody of this child?

And then secondly, if things get really bad, and we know that sometimes they do, how do I deal with the child welfare system and keep my grandbaby out of that system? How do I tell them enough to get the help that I need in order to keep that child in my care, but not lose that child at the same time? And so that legal marginality is something that we don't talk about nearly enough, and it really matters now. And so, I think that that's one thing around trust.

And I think in terms of just financial support, when I think about something in your question about financial support, it's the same sort of like navigating what I call risk negotiation. So how do I circumvent or lessen loss and harm, both loss and harm to my grandchild, but also loss and harm to my financial status? We know that Black women are significantly underpaid for the same work that White women, Black men, White men do. We are marginalized in terms of income; we're marginalized in terms of wealth. And that gets worse, sadly, with age.

And so how do you, one, keep the job that you may already have, and bring your grandbaby into your life in that way? If it's a grandchild that needs childcare, you are making the same kinds of decisions that parents make. So how do I pay for childcare? Or is it cheaper for me to just stay home and not work? Which again, is hitting these women financially at a time in their lives where they need to be earning. And so, you're circumventing this loss and weighing this stuff all the time.

If it's that you've got to then increase your work because to raise this grandchild, you need income, then what does it mean to come out of retirement and do that work? Or what does it mean to give up a job or alter your schedule? So, it's all those kinds of things. And then, if you need to then forget just keeping the income you already have, if you need more income, then you're also going to have to deal with institutions, systems.

And so how do you get TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families]? How do you get social security? To get the child's social security, you have to be legal guardian. So, it takes you back to those family dynamics. Can I get legal guardianship? How do I go about that without losing this grandchild that's in my care?

A lot of these families are in the workforce, and so it's like how do you add this child to your health insurance? Which is also something that is often needed. Or FMLA [Family & Medical Leave Act]. Grand families are not included in FMLA and explicitly included in only in a few states that they take advantage of that. So again, they don't trust because they're in the system, they're seeing what the system is and they're having to negotiate and navigate these losses and harms, both to themselves and to their grandchildren, quite a bit. Let's see if there was anything else I wanted to say about that.

**Karyne Jones:**

Well, let me just say, because you've just hit upon a lot of all of the barriers and challenges that come along with even trying to negotiate this process. And you haven't even touched on the emotional support, not only for the children, who their lives have been disruptive, but also for that older adult that has to assume that... That's also a disruption. And so, the emotional issue of that. So, all of those things that you just talked about in terms of the challenges and the barriers, you can understand why then that would disadvantage a person from even trying to move into the system just for those very things that you talked about.

So let me just ask you really quick, we know these things and we know what the challenges and barriers are. What recommendations would you have for social service professionals? What do they need to know or better understand about Black family culture and how better to serve them?

**Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman:**

I think that's a really, really important question. I think that based on some of what I just outlined, these families are really at risk for slipping through the cracks. So, what often is

the case is that family-related policies and aging-related policies, family 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. And so those kinds of different policy buckets, if you will, are not as nuanced as families actually operate. And so, I think that street-level bureaucrats, social service providers are the front line in terms of conveying what the policies are of whatever program they're associated with.

And so, I think there are several things that get in the way of that happening, and that could be done to better facilitate that. We know that these families have a really low... They under-utilize what services are there because of some of what I just talked about. So, some of it has to do with family dynamics. So having a sense of what family dynamics look like. Some of it is difficulty, just satisfying eligibility criteria. So, helping them overcome some of those challenges and satisfying and understanding what those eligibility criteria are. TANF may be one thing, public housing may be something else, and so having them understanding that is important.

And then other things that I found to be challenging are not getting the information correct about what the eligibility criteria are, and then stigma and discrimination. And so, I would say one of the first things that can be done is to convey the correct requirements for these families to gain access to specific programs. And I know that sounds really basic, but instead of giving a knee-jerk response, if you're unclear about what the requirements are, actually find out what these particular requirements are for these specific and unique families. And so, for instance, 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. And yet, women were routinely told that this nominal amount of money, which could make a difference in terms of buying diapers, buying food, whatever, putting gas in the car, they needed legal guardianship, which could impact all these other things. And so, making it explicit verbally what the requirements are. And also doing a better job on our websites, in our brochures, in our targeting this particular audience I think is really important.

I think another one is to consider these non-parent child families in how we develop programs. There are few programs that include these families for subsidized housing. Again, making sure that housing requirements are on point. And I think another thing that is really important, Karyne, is to deal with their own implicit and explicit bias because...

**Karyne Jones:**

Absolutely.

**Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman:**

Yeah, it lands for these women as stigma and discrimination. 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 really 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. We are more likely than all other groups to be residentially isolated and segregated, more likely to be unemployed, all these kinds of things, incarcerated .... So, to act like none of that is creating a context for family outcomes is just not okay. And social workers, street-level bureaucrats will often bring that to the fore.

And then lastly, I would say understanding that just like they're managing the goals of whatever program it is that they work for, these women are also managing a lot, right? They're managing their own needs; they're managing their grandchild's needs and other family members' needs. And that includes the needs of that parent and that includes part, particularly sometimes their partners or spouses, and in some cases their own children who they're still raising. And so, they know that how do you protect this kid? Again, maybe protect a little bit about what you want, think about what your partner wants, what's good for the parent. They will often feel like, "If I pull a string in this area, everything in this area is going to unravel."

And so, I think asking these women what their experiences are in those areas of their lives and what they want for them. 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 The How to overcome the family dynamics that may be getting in the way of them having it. Often with the child welfare system, explain to them what it means to be licensed. Are you getting more funding? What is required? Some believe that if they got licensed, they would have to take other kids. It's not true. You could say no. When they time out of the foster care system, helping them decide between subsidized guardianship and adoption. And so, I think just conveying that information, conveying the correct information, thinking about what those women are dealing with in terms of their goals and their desires and their needs, just like you're having to think about the goals, desires and needs of whatever program you are in.

**Karyne Jones:**

So NCBA, as you well know, our focus has been for over 50 years on older adults, their health, their ability to get jobs, their ability... That's been our service and mission. And so, we are now moving into another... Because we understand how important it is to really reach into the community and to help our older adults that we know have been confronted with emergency situations of taking over the guardianship of their grandchildren or children who are related to them.

What do you recommend or what can you think that organizations like mine and other nonprofits who may be working in this arena, what can we do to better support our Black families and kinship other than making sure they get a brochure, or making sure we give them the website for the technical center, or whatever the case may be?

What more can then we do to support Black grand families and kinship families so that they can take advantage of all these things, and maybe try to reduce some of that hesitancy and distrust that is so ingrained in us?

**Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman:**

Yes, that's a really good question. I love that you all have now developed this resource. It reminds me some of the kinship navigator programs. We know that families who tend to have that navigator support have higher take-up rates of the various resources and services that are out there and available to them. And it's really somebody who's helping them do some of what I've talked about, figure out what the program requirements are, figure out how to overcome some of the barriers to getting those, because I think that these programs are often difficult to understand. They take time, sometimes it's confusing, there's a lot of paperwork, some things you can do online, some things you can, or some things you can do in person and all of that.

And so having someone there to help you and support you through that process, I think is really critically important. That's why I'm really glad that these kinship navigator programs are getting more funding as of the 2018 act that was passed under Trump. So, Families First, I think that's a really, really big one. I think of the 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 they're experiencing. And those assumptions can range from everything to why they are raising their grandchildren to begin with. In some cases, one of the first places people go when I tell them what I do, "Oh, is it because of drugs?" 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.

**Karyne Jones:**

And not any different from any other grandparent or what have you that might be facing these home... It's just that it's a stigma placed on our community that those are the things. But the only other reason why another grandparent of any color is doing it is because their own children can't take care of their kids.

**Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman:**

That's absolutely right. In the conclusion of my book, the way that I talk about it is Black grandmothers being the canaries in the coal mine. And so, they are often at the forefront of where everybody else is headed or is now having to confront. So, we've seen a huge increase in White grandparents raising their grandchildren, Latinx grandparents raising their grandchildren. And so, they have so much to provide in terms of information about how to navigate these systems. And I think, again, to the point that you're making, the stigma and discrimination is real. I also think that there is this tendency to romanticize what these experiences are, which I really push back against. There are lots of things that are different about it, which I started this conversation with, in terms of legal marginality, the child welfare system, and difficult family dynamics.

And I think that people too often assume that these women are raising their grandchildren, it's a historical tradition, big mama's real, and this is all that they want for themselves. And it's just like it isn't. In some cases, it is, but in many cases it's not. 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 off 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. If this is just a labor of love and what you do for family, which it is all of those things, which is another recommendation I have, which is to take a both/and approach. It's not either/or. These women can both be loving their grand babies 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.

And so, I think that tendency to romanticize, to make assumptions, I think is something that's really paramount to working with these families, making those resources more readily available in terms of how we structure them and how we think about them. And I



also think, Karyne, which is something that it pains me not to see nearly enough of this is inter-organization collaborations. 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 Nutrition Assistance Program] benefits they can be receiving? And so, I just think that that interconnectedness and inter-organization collaboration is also really key.

**Karyne Jones:**

Well, hopefully through conversations like this, our work and with our other partners, will be able then to make those kinds of recommendations and that we can see where we can really make a difference, create one-stop shopping, so that they don't have to go different places. And that's just so important. I know you addressed a lot of this in your new book *Grandmothering While Black*. I love that title, by the way.

**Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman:**

Thank you.

**Karyne Jones:**

So, I just want to thank you again for all of your input. It has been invaluable, and it really assists us in moving forward, and will assist all of our partners in making sure that we are reaching our community and giving them as much information and helping those who are supposed to be helping them to do a better job at that. So, thank you so much.

**Dr. LaShawnDa L. Pittman:**

Yeah, thank you. And I'll just say that when I say that Black grandmothers are the canaries in the coal mines, so are you all. We often lay the groundwork for so much work that then influences so many other groups. And so, thank you for the work that you all are doing. It is critical, especially right now. So again, if there's anything I can do to support your efforts, please let me know.

**Karyne Jones:**

We'll be calling you. Thank you.

**Announcer:**

Dr. Pittman's book, *Grandmothering while Black: Love, Coercion, and Survival*, is available at the University of California Press and at most major booksellers.

Additional resources are available at the Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network website. That's [gksnetwork.org](http://gksnetwork.org) and at the website of Generations United, [gu.org](http://gu.org).

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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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