Local organizations honor S.C. Kinship Caregivers

By Lydia Royals, Digital Media Specialist, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina

On March 20th, 2018 the Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina hosted the state’s first Kinship Care Day at the Capitol. This day, which honored and uplifted kinship caregivers across our state, brought together government officials, organizations, and kinship caregivers themselves to show the importance of a collective voice.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, kinship care “refers to the care of children by relatives or, in some jurisdictions, close family friends (often referred to as fictive kin). Relatives are the preferred resource for children who must be removed from their birth parents because it maintains the children’s connections with their families. Kinship care is often considered a type of family preservation service.”

The Foundation was inspired to host Kinship Care Day at the Capitol after attending a National GrandRally in Washington, D.C. In 2017, the Foundation and Helping and Lending Outreach Support (HALOS) assisted and prepared 19 Charleston, S.C. caregivers as they met with lawmakers to discuss kinship care and attended the GrandRally.

“The Foundation’s choice to host this event was in direct response to the desires of the caregivers themselves. While traveling to DC was an amazing opportunity, we knew that many caregivers could not afford to be away from their families and other life obligations,” Chynna Phillips, Research and Policy Associate, said. “Hosting an event in S.C. allowed us to give more caregivers the opportunity to become civically engaged around a topic that they already fell so passionate about.”

It is important to the Foundation to continue to champion kinship care families because they are a significant makeup of the fabric of our state.

“The fact that over 50,000 children in South Carolina are being raised by a grandparent or other relative is proof enough that kinship care is an important issue. Our Foundation strives to help these families receive the support they need so they can live normal and productive lives,” Tom Keith, Foundation President, said.

The goal for Kinship Care Day at the Capitol was to uplift the voices of kinship families who are often left out of the conversations and decisions that directly impact them. The day brought together over 100 people who care deeply about kinship care families. Caregivers from HALOS shared their experiences from the event with Executive Director, Kim Clifton.

“It sounds cliché, but what was most striking in talking to the caregivers who participated in the event is how they felt that they were heard. For so long, relatives have just been expected to take children in without recognition that they are struggling and have assumed
an enormous responsibility,” Clifton said. “The fact that their sacrifices were acknowledged was very meaningful. For them I think it is also recognition that this is a community problem, not just a family problem.”

At the Kinship Care Day at the Capitol, keynote speaker Susan Alford, Director of the South Carolina Department of Social Services, spoke about the significance of kinship families and how vital they are to the success of S.C. children.

“Children often blame themselves for being removed from their homes. They think ‘If I was just smarter or brighter or helpful I could’ve fixed it.’ Then, in the process of being removed they don’t feel truly owned by their family. When they get to stay within their family they get to stay within their tribe. Feeling loved and nurtured by their own gives them a trajectory to do better in their lives,” Alford said.

Government officials also spoke to the crowd, sharing their stories of learning about kinship care and stating their strong support of kinship families.

“Kinship care might be a new term for most people, but kinship care has been around since the beginning of time,” Sen. Brad Hutto, said. “These are families who are doing what is best for our children and will continue to support them.”

Reps. Joshua Putnam and Neal Collins both shared the sentiment that S.C. can do more for kinship care families, and mentioned House bill 3701, which ensures kinship caregivers will now be eligible for a assistance, much like foster care parents.

In addition to government officials, numerous local organizations helped with the planning and execution of the day. AARP South Carolina, the S.C. statewide kinship care advisory council, students from the University of South Carolina School of Social Work, Columbia College, Benedict College, and Marion County School District were all vital to the realization of Kinship Care Day at the Capitol.

Kinship Care Day at the Capitol would not have been possible without kinship care families taking the time to attend. Caregivers taking a day off from work or finding child care is not an easy ask, but each of those caregivers who participated made it clear that this was an important event that they needed to attend.

“What we have heard from caregivers in support groups about meeting with each other is the ability to talk about their family problems knowing that everyone else is going through similar situations. Once said, ‘My child is no better or worse than your child.’ It eases the shame that they often feel when their own children are using drugs/alcohol/incarcerated and not taking care of their own children,” Clifton said.

Although the Foundation launched its Kinship Care Initiative in 2014, it is important for the Foundation to find new and innovative ways to reach this population that often feels unheard.
“Kinship Care Day at the Capitol served the Foundation’s way of addressing kinship caregivers. These families need to be heard by legislators and the larger community. We wanted to honor their courageous stories by offering them a platform to share, and hopefully evoke change,” Phillips said.