



# VOICES

Speaking out  
to keep all families  
strong and supported.

## for Relative Caregivers

SEPTEMBER 18, 2019 | STATE CAPITOL, DOWNTOWN LANSING, MI

Michigan's  
Children



### **A Day at the Capitol with Relative Caregivers**

*Two Women, Two Different Life Experiences, and the Power of Ordinary People  
with Important Stories to Tell*

LANSING, MI — Christina Wasilewski's day started at the bleary-eyed hour of 3 a.m. Rising to orchestrate a tag team of rotating family members enlisted for child care that day, she prepared to set off for Lansing from her downriver Detroit home. By mid-morning, the 48-year-old Metro Detroit Airport Homeland Security agent had made the 100-mile trip to the state Capitol, took part in an advocacy refresher session with dozens of other relative caregivers like herself, made one successful lawmaker visit, and was huddled on a street corner with her familiar posse of "grandparents raising grandchildren," searching for the next of targeted visit inside the Anderson Building near the Capitol.



A resolute grandparents-rights advocate, Wasilewski's unlikely career as a caregiver advocate launched unexpectedly a few years ago when she was shocked to discover that five of the eight parents in her child's Head Start classroom were actually grandparents raising grandchildren with experiences similar to her own. Inspired, she started a grandparents' support group, and the outspoken Wasilewski quickly

began a sought-after Detroit area media spokesperson on the subject of grandparents ensnarled in an Opioid Crisis that was claiming their adult children with children of their own.

**On this particular** September morning, she joked that at a time in life when she and her husband might otherwise be planning romantic vacations, she was arranging school drop-offs and pick-ups, and attending public meetings fueled by a passion to do right by her grandkids and help others in her circumstance. Life had thrown them a curve ball the day she and her husband learned two of their grandchildren were not only abandoned by their mother (the Wasilewskis' older daughter lives transiently and struggles with a substance use disorder), but one of them was showing signs of physical abuse after being left in the care of relatives of their father, who was in jail. Traveling to Ohio, the Wasilewskis brought the children, Skyler and Shane (5 and 4 respectively) home, and started their new life. It took four years for them to gain custody.

While Wasilewski was making rounds with lawmakers, so was Aquinas College junior Jasmine Stroh. At 21, the Grand Rapids woman also made special arrangements around her college studies and work schedule in order to take part in the [first annual Relative Care Day at the Capitol](#), sponsored by [Michigan's Children](#) and the Relative Care Resource Center. A mentor, social worker and Jasmine's Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI) Coordinator, Tara Johnson, had urged Stroh to get involved and accompanied her on a trip to the Capitol. Unlike Wasilewski, Stroh was a reticent newbie to legislative visits. But as the day unfolded, the soft-spoken Stroh's confidence noticeably grew with the knowledge that she brought a unique perspective. Stroh, like Wasilewski, said she never saw herself as an advocate or one who could track down lawmakers and ask for their attention until she did it. Having a strong message to share makes that possible, she added.

**Stroh stressed** it's critical for policymakers to understand that in the child welfare system, sometimes the best people to raise you aren't the system's registered foster parents but the adults that children already know, trust, and have a relationship with, regardless of a biological bond. That was true in her upbringing. Stroh was raised by the parents of her former stepfather; though not biologically related, "Judy and Greg" were part of an extended family and friends circle she knew and felt secure with. She was 12 when she came to live with them after she and her mother became homeless. Her mother's disease resulting from methamphetamines left her unable to care for her daughter. Stroh's biological father, a teenager when Stroh was born, hadn't been connected with her since he left when she was 4 years old.

Two different woman with a shared vision, they joined a group of 70 others from around the state last month to put a human face on a struggle that's at the heart of a growing opioid crisis leaving many biological parents unable to care for their children. The group included guardians, foster parents, adoptive parents and their allies all poised to discuss complex legal, social and medical systems that often come with difficult barriers to moving ahead. A developing package of bills designed to assist relative caregivers and sponsored by state Reps. Kathy Crawford, R-Novi, and Frank Liberati, D-Allen Park was finally emerging to address needed legal protections and service supports.

Liberati's legislative director, Trent Wolf, said the package started coming together after a series of town hall meetings in his district held to discover problems primary caregivers were having getting services for children and themselves. "There's been a lack of resources, a lack of basic information, and a lack of a statewide institution even focused on the issue. Yet, this affects every community across the state and every income group," he said. "Many people really don't have any idea what the issue entails," he said. Slowly, they developed a framework for how the state could assist caregivers across the state, and the

legislative offices began drafting legislation. That framework creates a task force to study the extent to which relatives are caring for children and youth and the struggles they face; outlines greater supports for a statewide Kinship Navigator Program; and offers assistance to relative caregivers with legal complications.

**Individuals like Wasilewski and Stroh** are exactly who lawmakers need to listen to – real people with experiences that draw out the inequities of the system so changes can be made, said Michigan’s Children Vice President for Programs, Michele Corey, an organizer of this Capitol Day and dozens of others through Michigan’s Children in the past 20 years. “We need to pull out the lived experiences of all of you and shift to how the system deals with relative caregivers. Your voice is necessary to figuring this out,” she told the full group in a morning prep session. “This is the power of the conversations you have today with your Legislators. It’s really fantastic and exciting!”

There is ample evidence that shows that children in many circumstances thrive in the stable environments created through kinship care, lending support for child welfare policies that prioritize placing children with suitable relatives when possible, Corey later said. “We need to better support relative caregivers to create more good homes for children. This will help solve problems in our child welfare system that has seen more children enter foster care with fewer families there to care for them.” Children and youth are entering the foster care system with higher physical and mental health needs to counter traumatic experiences they are facing, making it more difficult to provide the level of services needed for them to stay with their parents, and to maintain consistent placements once removed from their parents.

Less than a quarter of all kids under the state’s care live with relatives. The number of young people in these formal arrangements are dwarfed by estimates of 10 times as many living with relatives without coming into contact with the child welfare system. The need for more information about families in all of these situations led to Liberati and Crawford’s efforts to push for a landscape report of formal and informal relative caregiving, to better understand what families are facing and where policy changes inside and outside the child welfare system could make a difference.

**Wasilewski** today is president of the Downriver Detroit chapter of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. The recent Capitol Day was her third trip to Lansing with the group. Wasilewski said her passion for help senior citizens and children motivated her work in the field. She and her like-minded colleagues didn’t have formal advocacy training, but what they lacked in book training, they made up by being intrepid, knocking on doors and making phone calls with representatives and senators from Downriver Detroit.

Next they hosted public forums. Two years ago, they reached Rep. Liberati’s office and made a connection with a Legislative insider willing to help draft legislation. “Trent is a real champion. I can’t say enough great things about him,” she said. Her ability to make allies extends now the state Senate. When Senators Stephanie Change, D-Detroit, and Erika Geiss, D-Taylor, previously served in the House, Wasilewski knocked on their doors too. At the recent Capitol Day, now Sen. Chang sent Wasilewski a text moments after seeing her on a live Michigan House webcast.



**1,500** children are living with relatives who are licensed as foster parents.

Over **3,200** more are unlicensed but still connected to the system.

At least **10 times** as many are cared for by relatives informally.

Source: [gu.org/grandfamilies-statistics/](http://gu.org/grandfamilies-statistics/)

 [michiganschildren.org/policy-playbook/strong-families](http://michiganschildren.org/policy-playbook/strong-families)

The infographic features a photograph of a woman smiling with two young boys. The text is overlaid on a dark blue background.

“This was my third time to Lansing. One of the lobbyists laughed and said, ‘Well, you’re kind of good at this,’” Wasilewski said. “I have a passion for what I believe in. I can talk to any representative or senator and let them know these are important issues. I tell them, I might not be in your district, but I can guarantee you someone in your district is going through something similar.”

For **Stroh**, finding her voice came more easily with help and coaxing from her friend, Tara Johnson. Johnson said she was impressed with Stroh’s maturity and passion for the subject of unrelated caregivers creating a loving home for her at a pivotal time in her life. Stroh has emerged from a difficult childhood becoming a mentor and role model for other children in the child welfare system. For the past two summers, she’s worked with Johnson at a summer camp for at-risk children in Newaygo County.

**Becoming a Capitol Day advocate** felt intimidating at first, Stroh admitted. But once she met with the first of four Lawmakers that day, she caught onto the process of telling her story with a purpose. “People who are not blood-related, not licensed foster parents, should have a chance to raise a child when that’s the best place for that child to be,” she said. “Sharing our personal stories with the people who actually make the laws can make them more passionate about it, and can shed a light on the whole issue. Without hearing the personal experiences, it is hard to shape laws correctly.”

The sociology major, who plans to work in child protective services one day, said she’d like to serve in this advocacy role again, just not right away. Right now she is focusing on school.

Contacted a few weeks after the Capitol Day, Wasilewski had just finished writing her thank you letters to the lawmakers she met with. “I have a soft spot for senior citizens and children. I want to be their voice and bring about change so these relatives don’t have to go to the food bank to feed their children,” she said. “I want to leave the world a better place.”

*To learn more about relative caregiving, policies to assist and more ways that you can help, contact Michele Corey, [michele@michiganschildren.org](mailto:michele@michiganschildren.org). To learn more about telling your story, contact Teri Banas, [teri@michiganschildren.org](mailto:teri@michiganschildren.org).*