

TESTIMONY OF JANE WATKINS
SUBMITTED TO THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON LABOR, HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, EDUCATION
AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SUBJECT: FISCAL YEAR 2008 APPROPRIATIONS FOR
THE FOSTER GRANDPARENT PROGRAM
A Program of the Corporation for National and Community Service

March 29, 2007
2:00 PM

STATEMENT OF:

Jane Watkins, President
National Association of Foster Grandparent Program Directors
7400 Laurel Hill Oaks Circle
Orlando, FL 32818

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of FY 2008 funding for the Foster Grandparent Program (FGP), the oldest and largest of the three programs known collectively as the National Senior Volunteer Corps, which are authorized by Title II of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act (DVSA) of 1973, as amended and administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNS). NAFGPD is a membership-supported professional organization whose roster includes the majority of more than 350 directors, who administer Foster Grandparent Programs nationwide, as well as local sponsoring agencies and others who value and support the work of FGP.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to begin by thanking you and the distinguished members of the Subcommittee for your steadfast support of the Foster Grandparent Program. No matter what the circumstances, this Subcommittee has always been there to protect the integrity and mission of our programs. Our volunteers and the children they serve across the country are the beneficiaries of your commitment to FGP, and for that we thank you. I also want to acknowledge your outstanding staff for their tireless work and very difficult job they have to “make the numbers fit.” – an increasingly difficult task in this budget environment.

ADMINISTRATION’S REQUEST FOR FGP

Although the number of older people in America eligible to serve as Foster Grandparent volunteers is increasing by leaps and bounds as the “Baby Boomer” cohort ages, we were extremely disappointed to learn that – instead of seeking an increase for FGP to enable FGP to engage more low-income seniors in service – the Administration has proposed slashing funding for FGP by \$13.387 million – a 12.1% cut.

IMPACT OF THE ADMINISTRATION’S PROPOSED FUNDING CUT

FGP is the **only** program in existence today that actively seeks out, trains, enables, places and supports the elderly poor in contributing to their communities by changing the lives of children who desperately need one-on-one attention. If enacted, this request will have a devastating effect on FGP programs nationwide:

- 3,150 low-income Foster Grandparent volunteers – over 10% of the current volunteer complement – will be cut permanently, slashing the total number of Foster Grandparent volunteers from 30,550 to 27,400. This will happen at a time when the number of FGP volunteers has not increased appreciably in 10 years!
- Local communities will lose over 3.3 million hours of volunteer service annually.
- Approximately 35,000 fewer children with special needs will receive the critical services provided by Foster Grandparents.
- FGP will permanently lose 3,000 Volunteer Service Years (VSYs, or volunteer “slots”). For each volunteer “slot” that is cut from a Foster Grandparent Program, that program will lose approximately \$4,500 from its federal grant. In addition, at least \$500 in valuable non-federal resources contributed by communities will also be lost for every volunteer position that is eliminated.
- Low-income Baby Boomers will be excluded from serving as Foster Grandparents, because there will be no funds available to hire and place new volunteers as they reach the age of 60. According to the Administration on

Aging, there are currently 6,000,000 low-income seniors eligible for FGP; in 20 years, there will be 13,000,000!

This cut will take FGP **back 7 years**, to a funding level that is **more than \$1 million less than its funding level in FY 2001**. In addition, the cut will take effect at a time when the average federal grant for FGP has increased a miniscule \$2,898 – or .875% (7/8 of one percent!) – since FY 2003. After four years of flat funding, this 12.1% cut will not only cut volunteer numbers, it will also dig deeply into funds needed to sustain quality staff and quality programs. As a result, some FGPs may actually close, and local sponsoring agencies – short of funds themselves and unable to contribute the funds needed to make up the cut – may simply relinquish their sponsorship.

The Corporation for National and Community Service's Budget Justification states that this cut can be absorbed merely through volunteer attrition. The reality is that the **majority of FGPs nationwide will be forced to cut** precious volunteers from their volunteer rosters. Whether a volunteer leaves through attrition or because there is no funding for his/her position, the fact is that this budget proposal will result in 3,150 fewer low income elders serving as Foster Grandparents.

NAFGPD respectfully requests three things of the subcommittee:

- 1) **to provide \$115.937 million for the Foster Grandparent Program in FY 2008**, an increase of \$5.000 million over the FY 2006 and FY 2007 levels of funding for the program and an \$18.387 million increase over the Administration's FY 2008 Budget Request for FGP. This critical funding will ensure the continued viability of the Foster Grandparent Program, and allow for important expansion of this unique program. Specifically, this proposal would fund a 3% cost of living increase for every Foster Grandparent Program as well as expansion grants to existing programs that would add 370 new low-income senior volunteers to serve 3000 additional children;
- 2) **to maintain current appropriations statutory language that prohibits CNCS from using funds in the bill to pay non-taxable stipend to volunteers whose incomes exceed 125% of the national poverty level**. Congress has repeatedly over the last seven years re-affirmed that the non-taxable stipend must be reserved for low-income volunteers. We ask that you again protect the mission of the Foster Grandparent and Senior Companion Programs – to enable low-income older people to serve their communities – by maintaining this important statutory language.
- 3) **to oppose administration proposals that would consolidate National and Community Service Act and DVSA accounts and set aside provisions of Section 412 of the DVSA as they apply to the RSVP program (Title II, Part A), and, instead**, direct that the changes proposed shall not be implemented prior to passage of a bill by the authorizing committees of jurisdiction specifying such changes.

FGP: AN OVERVIEW

Established in 1965, the Foster Grandparent Program was the first federally funded, organized program to engage older volunteers in significant service to others. It remains today the only volunteer program in existence that enables seniors living on very low incomes to serve as community volunteers by providing a small non-taxable stipend that allows volunteers to serve at little or no cost to themselves. From the 20 original programs based totally in institutions for children with severe mental and physical disabilities, FGP now comprises nearly 350 programs in every state and the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. These programs are now primarily in community-based child caring agencies or organizations -- where most special needs children can be found today -- and are administered locally through a non-profit organization or agency and Advisory Council comprised of community citizens dedicated to FGP and its mission. FGP represents the best in federal partnerships with local communities, with federal dollars flowing directly to local sponsoring agencies, which in turn determine how the funds are used. Through this partnership and the flexibility of the program, FGP is able to meet the immediate needs of the local communities. This was demonstrated by Foster Grandparent Programs in communities that were impacted by the influx of Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Foster Grandparents rallied to provide services to children in shelters, child care centers, and schools.

FGP: THE VOLUNTEERS

There are currently 30,500 Foster Grandparent volunteers who give 31 million hours annually to more than 264,000 children, including 6,300 children of prisoners through 10,200 local agencies. FGP is a versatile, dynamic, and uniquely multi-purpose program. The program gives Americans 60 years of age or older who are living on incomes at or less than 125% of the poverty level the opportunity to serve 15 to 40 hours every week and use the talents, skills and wisdom they have accumulated over a lifetime to give back to the communities which nurtured them throughout their lives. FGP provides intensive pre-service orientation and at least 48 hours of ongoing training every year to keep volunteers current and informed on how to work with children who have special needs.

FGP engages older people who are not usually asked to serve, those usually considered as needing services rather than being able to serve: 50% are between the ages of 61 and 74, 47% are 75+, and 50% are from various ethnic groups. FGP actively seeks out these low-income seniors. We dare to ask them to serve, and we help them to develop the additional skills they may need to function effectively in settings unfamiliar to them, like public schools, hospitals, childcare centers, and juvenile detention facilities. Through their service, our older volunteers say they feel and stay healthier, that they feel needed and productive. Most importantly, they leave to the next generation a legacy of skills, perspective and knowledge that has been learned the hard way—through experience.

FGP: THE CHILDREN

Through our volunteers, FGP also provides person-to-person service to children and youth under the age of 21 who have special or exceptional needs, many of whom face serious, often life-threatening challenges. With the changing dynamics in family life today, many children with disabilities and special needs lack a consistent, stable adult

role model in their lives. The Foster Grandparent is very often the only person in a child's life who is there every day, who accepts the child, encourages him no matter how many mistakes the child makes, and focuses on the child's successes.

Special needs of children served by Foster Grandparents include AIDS or addiction to crack or other drugs; abuse or neglect; physical, mental, or learning disabilities; speech, or other sensory disabilities; incarceration and terminal illness. Of the children served, 7% are abused or neglected, 25% have learning disabilities, and 10% have developmental delays. FGP focuses its resources in areas where they will have the most impact: early intervention services and literacy activities. Nationally, 90% of the children served by Foster Grandparents are under the age of 12, with 39% of these children age 5 or under. Foster Grandparents work intensively with these very young children to address their problems at as early an age as possible, before they enter school. Nearly one-half of FGP volunteers serve nearly 12 million hours annually addressing literacy and emergent-literacy problems with special needs children.

Activities of the FGP volunteers with their assigned children include teaching parenting skills to teen parents; providing physical and emotional support to babies abandoned in hospitals; helping children with developmental, speech, or physical disabilities develop self-help skills; reinforcing reading and mathematics skills; and giving guidance and serving as mentors to incarcerated or other youth.

FGP: THE VOLUNTEER SITES

The Foster Grandparent Program provides child-caring agencies and organizations offering services to special-needs children with a consistent, reliable, invaluable extra pair of hands **15 to 40 hours every week** to assist in providing these services. Seventy-one percent of FGP volunteers serve in public and private schools as well as sites that provide early childhood pre-literacy services to very young children, including Head Start.

FGP: COST-EFFECTIVE SERVICE

The Foster Grandparent Program serves local communities in a high quality, efficient and cost-effective manner, saving local communities money by helping our older volunteers stay independent and healthy and out of expensive in-home or institutional care. Using the Independent Sector's 2005 valuation for one hour of volunteer service (\$18.03/hour), the value of the service given by Foster Grandparents annually is **over \$503 million**, and represents a 4-fold return on the federal dollars invested in FGP. The annual federal cost for one Foster Grandparent is \$3,960 -- less than \$4.00 per hour.

The value local communities place on FGP and its multifaceted services is evidenced by the large amount of cash and in-kind donations contributed by communities to support FGP. For example, FGP's FY 2006 federal allocation was matched with \$37.4 million in non-federal donations from states and local communities in which Foster Grandparents volunteer. **This represents a non-federal match of 34%, or \$.34 for every \$1.00 in federal funds invested -- well over the 10% local match required by law.**

NAFGPD'S FY 2008 BUDGET REQUEST

Given the dramatically expanding number of low-income seniors eligible to serve and the staggering number of troubled and challenged children in America today, we respectfully request that the Subcommittee provide \$115.937 million for the Foster Grandparent Program in FY 2008, an increase of \$5.000 million over FY 2006 and FY 2007 funding levels. This critical funding will ensure the continued viability of the Foster Grandparent program, and allow for an expansion of this important program. It will generate opportunities for approximately 370 new low-income senior volunteers to contribute 390,000 hours of service annually to nearly 3,000 additional children with special needs through Program of National Significance (PNS) grants to existing FGPs.

The requested increase would be allocated for the following purposes, in order of priority:

1st: in accordance with the Domestic Volunteer Service Act (DVSA), **designate 1/3 of the increase over the FY2006 and FY 2007 level to fund Program of National Significance (PNS) expansion grants** to allow existing FGP programs to expand the number of volunteers serving in areas of critical need as identified by Congress in the DVSA.

2nd: use all remaining funds to **award an administrative cost increase of at least 3% to each existing Foster Grandparent Program** in order to maintain quality, enable recruitment and sustain the work already being done by programs. The last time FGPs in the field realized any increases at all to cover the increased costs of doing business – especially in the area of transportation costs – was in FY 2005; that increase amounted to a very small .84%, when inflationary price increases have been averaging 2-3% annually.

We request that no funds be provided for Senior Demonstration, and that language that expressly prohibits the payment of a non-taxable stipend to individuals whose incomes exceed 125% of the national poverty level continue to be included in the appropriations statute as it has been since FY 2000. This important language protects the purpose of FGP: to enable low-income elders to serve their communities at little or no cost to themselves.

The message is clear: 1) the population of low-income seniors available to volunteer 15 to 40 hours every week is increasing; 2) communities need and want more Foster Grandparent volunteers and more Foster Grandparent Programs. The Subcommittee's continued investment in FGP now will pay off in savings realized later, as more seniors stay healthy and independent through volunteer service, as communities save tax dollars, and as children with special needs are helped to become contributing members of society.

Mr. Chairman, in closing I would like to again thank you for the subcommittee's support and leadership for FGP over the years. NAFGPD believes that you and your colleagues in Congress appreciate what our low-income senior volunteers accomplish every day in communities across the country.