

PROACTIVE

KIDS AGENDA

HOW TO CREATE LASTING, POSITIVE CHANGE
IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
DURING THE 116TH CONGRESS



FIRST FOCUS
CAMPAIGN FOR CHILDREN

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Foreword

The future of our nation depends upon the well-being and success of our children.

They are one-quarter of our population but all of our future. Yet the past two years have been some of the worst for children in decades. Incidents of child abuse and neglect are, once again, on the rise. Hundreds of migrant and refugee children remain separated from their parents at the border and thousands of children are still living in intolerable conditions in warehouses and cages. Too many children continue to be poisoned by lead in their drinking water or through lead paint in their homes. Children's access to health care and coverage dropped for the first time in years. And despite low unemployment, our child poverty rate remains stubbornly high (62 percent higher than for adults) while simultaneously investments in children as a share of the federal budget tragically shrinks.

The American people support making children a priority, and the 2018 midterms proved that making children a legislative and campaign priority is a clear winning formula. Candidates and incumbents that championed children were big winners on Election Day.¹ Therefore, prioritizing children in federal policy and budget decisions not only stands out as the right thing to do, but makes smart political and economic sense.

First Focus Campaign for Children has put together this Proactive Kids Agenda as a guide for lawmakers on how to prioritize children in the 116th Congress. In addition to our recommendations, we urge lawmakers to analyze all policies before them as to whether it is in the best interest of our nation's children.

Our children are the best investment we can make in our country's future. When all children succeed, we all benefit.

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1

CUT THE CHILD POVERTY RATE IN HALF WITHIN 10 YEARS

Despite recent economic gains and low unemployment, child poverty remains high and children continue to disproportionately experience poverty. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 17.5 percent of children (12.8 million) in the U.S. were living in poverty in 2017, a rate that is 62 percent higher than that of adults.¹

These numbers get even more alarming when considering families living on the brink of poverty. Nearly 40 percent of children (28.4 million) are living in low-income households with an annual income of less than \$50,000 a year for a family of four with two children.² These children are in households that are just a paycheck away from falling below the poverty line, and may experience bouts of poverty throughout the year.

Due to our country's long history of structural racism and discrimination, children of color continue to experience poverty at nearly three times the rate of white children,³ and historical trauma and exclusionary U.S. government policies contribute to the tragically high rate of poverty for Native American children.

Even though families in Puerto Rico contribute payroll taxes, households with children are not eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit and only families with three children or more can access the refundable portion of the Child Tax Credit. Many other anti-poverty programs are capped, and as a result, 58 percent of children in Puerto Rico live in poverty, the highest rate in our nation by far.⁴

The 18 million children who live in a family with at least one immigrant parent face unique cultural and systemic barriers to obtaining economic security. This includes a recent proposed rule from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that would now allow government officials to consider the use of a family's broad range of services such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and housing assistance when determining eligibility for green cards and/or lawful admission to the United States.⁵ If implemented, this change to longstanding, bipartisan immigration policy will further limit access to critical assistance for immigrant families with children and lead to even higher rates of child poverty.

In most low-income households with children, there is at least one family member who is working. Yet due to low wages, skyrocketing rents and the high cost of everyday goods, parents still struggle to make ends meet and turn to key assistance programs to supplement resources for their families. Each year these programs lift millions of children out of poverty⁶ because they give parents the power to boost family income and provide children with access to nutritious food, stable housing, quality child care, and affordable health care. These federal anti-poverty programs also have long-term benefits; children in families who accessed these benefits are healthier⁷ and are likelier to earn more as adults.⁸

Despite the effectiveness of these programs, the persistently high level of child poverty in the United States indicates that we are not doing enough to ensure that every child has a fair shot at succeeding. We have no long-term national child poverty strategy, or even a national dialogue to address it, and the United States continues to spend a much smaller percentage than other industrialized countries of gross domestic product (GDP) on cash and in-kind expenditures for families with children.⁹

In 2016, First Focus established the U.S. Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG),¹⁰ a partnership of non-profit, child-focused organizations dedicated to setting the goal of cutting the child poverty rate in half within 10 years. For the past two years, CPAG has been working to elevate the issue of child poverty in the United States through information sharing, policy education, and direct advocacy. In April 2018 CPAG released *Our Kids, Our Future*, a compendium over 20 policy solutions that can significantly reduce child poverty and support a better quality of life for all children.¹¹

The creation of the U.S. Child Poverty Action Group was inspired by successful efforts in the United Kingdom to reduce child poverty. The UK used to have one of the highest poverty rates in Europe, but due to the effective advocacy from child-focused organizations such as the UK Child Poverty Action Group and strong government leadership, the government was able to cut their child poverty rate in half between 2000 and 2010. In 1999, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair declared a national target to cut child poverty in half within a decade and eliminate it within 20 years. Measured in U.S. terms, the UK's child poverty target and resulting policy changes successfully cut the UK's absolute child poverty rate by 50 percent during the effort's first decade.¹² The UK successfully raised incomes, promoted work, and improved child well-being while U.S. progress in these areas stagnated.

The UK example teaches us that child poverty is a solvable problem when there is political will to address it. With this philosophy in mind, the U.S. Child Poverty Action Group will be launching a national campaign during winter 2019 to elevate the issue of child poverty and build political will to address it.

This campaign is timed around the planned release of a National Academy of Sciences study on child poverty.¹³ This report will lend credibility to the idea that child poverty is a solvable problem through, including a set of nonpartisan evidence-based recommendations to cut the child poverty rate in half within a decade.

Child poverty costs the U.S. over \$1 trillion a year, representing 5.4 percent of our GDP.¹⁴ Therefore everyone—regardless of socioeconomic status—benefits from strategies that lift children out of poverty.

Recommendations

1.1 Pass the Child Poverty Reduction Act (S. 1630/H.R. 3381)

The Child Poverty Reduction Act, led by Sens. Bob Casey (D-PA), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), and Sherrod Brown (D-OH) and Reps. Danny Davis (D-IL), Barbara Lee (D-CA), Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA), and Gerry Connolly (D-VA) would create a mechanism for holding the government accountable to reducing child poverty through the creation of a national goal of cutting child poverty in half within a decade and eliminating it within twenty years.

There is already nationwide momentum towards the creation of a national target. Vermont¹⁵ and Connecticut¹⁶ have histories of state child poverty reduction targets and child poverty councils, Wisconsin has a grassroots campaign to create a state target,¹⁷ and California has a state task force to address child poverty.¹⁸ In addition, the city of Cincinnati has a goal to lift 10,000 children and 5,000 families out of poverty within five years, and the city of Dallas just established a Child Poverty Action Lab to cut child poverty in half within a generation.¹⁹

1.2 Implement Tax Solutions that Lift Children out of Poverty & Boost Family Financial Security

Research shows that money matters for reducing child poverty through supporting healthy child development and improving educational achievement and attainment,²⁰ yet the United States spends very little compared

with other countries on cash transfers for low-income families with children.²¹ The creation of a national child allowance in the United States would have a significant impact on reducing child poverty in the United States.²² All other Anglo-American countries (Canada, UK, Ireland, Australia) provide some form of national child or family benefit, and all have lower child poverty rates than the U.S.²³

In order to have a significant effect at reducing child poverty, a cash allowance must include these elements: a) universal b) delivered monthly c) large enough to end deep child poverty d) not subject to parental wages e) increased for younger children. Research shows that a benefit of \$250 a month per child (regardless of age) would reduce child poverty by over 40 percent, and cut deep poverty (children living at 50 percent of the poverty line) in half.²⁴ Achieving economic security is a long road for many families, and establishing a national child allowance is a significant step to ensuring that every household with children has a dependable and fungible income floor to meet basic needs.

The tax code is an important tool for combatting child poverty, increasing a family's cash income, and providing more affordable housing for America's renters. Nearly 4.5 million children were lifted out of poverty by refundable tax credits alone in 2017²⁵ – the child poverty rate would be 39 percent higher without the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC). In fact, four federal tax policies account for nearly 40 percent of federal investments in children – the CTC, the EITC, the dependent exemption (CDCTC), and children's share of the tax exclusion for employer-sponsored health insurance.²⁶

As Congress proposes new tax bills and continues to review existing programs, it should prioritize needed improvements to the tax code to better serve poor and low-and moderate-income children and families. Parents and caregivers need cash income to provide resources for their children to improve their children's development and educational success and pay for basic needs such as safe housing and transportation to work. The tax code should lessen the tax liability for families with children, ease the burden of the high cost of child care, reduce poverty for our foster youth, increase options for low-and-moderate-income residential home renters, and build working families financial stability.

- » Further improve the CTC to reach lower-income family and children. This can be done through legislative proposals modeled after S. 2018/H.R. 821, led by Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO) and Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH), and Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) to make the credit fully refundable (eliminate the refundability threshold of \$2500), increase the amount of the credit, allow for an additional credit for children who are under six years of age, and adjust annually for inflation. These improvements to the CTC align closely with the elements of a child allowance and would cut child poverty nearly in half.²⁷
- » Another legislative approach (H.R. 1466) offered by Rep. Katherine Clark (D-MA) would establish a refundable tax credit that would be paid directly to child care providers on a monthly basis. This annual credit could be worth as much as \$14,000 per child under the age of 3 and \$5,000 for each qualifying child who has attained the age of 3, but limited to families based on their adjusted gross income for the year. Included under this program are considerations for standards of high quality care, including strong child care worker salaries.
- » Pass the bipartisan H.R. 798, led by Rep. Jenniffer Gonzalez-Colon (R-PR), which would allow families in Puerto Rico with less than three children to claim the refundable portion of the CTC on the same basis as U.S. taxpayers. Households in Puerto Rico pay federal payroll taxes, but many families are not eligible for the CTC. Extending the CTC to families in Puerto Rico with less than three children would help 355,000 families in Puerto Rico and result in \$273 million going directly to families with children.²⁸
- » Build on the successes of the EITC to bring recipients into the labor market and reduce poverty by pursuing changes to the tax code modeled after S. 2327, the Foster EITC Act, led by Sen. Bob Casey, and H.R. 2681, led by Rep. Danny Davis (D-IL). This bill would expand the EITC to qualified foster youth at age 18 rather than 25 under current law. Across the United States, approximately 20,000 youth between ages 18 and 21 age out of foster care each year.²⁹ Young adults under the age of 25 do not qualify for the EITC unless they are parents.

- » Strengthen and modernize the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC) to increase the credit, make it refundable and adjust it annually for inflation, modeled after bipartisan legislative proposals such as the bipartisan PACE Act (S. 208), led by Sens. Angus King (I-ME) and Richard Burr (R-NC), and the bipartisan House companion bill, H.R. 3632, led by Reps. Kevin Yoder (R-KS) and Representative Stephanie Murphy (D-FL). This program allows families to claim a credit if they paid expenses for the care of a qualifying individual that enabled parents to work, go to school or actively look for work.
- » Modify the Internal Revenue Code to allow a refundable tax credit for individuals who pay rent for a principal residence that exceeds 30% of the individual's gross income for the taxable year, modeled after H.R. 3670, led by Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-NY) and S.3250, led by Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA). The tax code should ensure that communities' residential renters – including those with incomes below the poverty line – do not miss out on housing tax benefits because they cannot afford or opt not to become homeowners.³⁰
- » Seek congressional hearings with tax policy expert witness to illuminate on the most efficient and impactful ways to elevate children and low-and moderate-income families out of poverty through improvements to the tax code.

1.3 Reform the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is the only federal program that provides cash assistance to families with very low incomes. Yet just under 25 percent of all poor families that are eligible for cash assistance receive it.³¹ In fact, states overwhelmingly use TANF funds for other important priorities other than its original intent of reducing child poverty and getting families back to work. In addition, due to its nature as a fixed block grant, TANF is not able to effectively respond during times of increased need and the block grant has fallen in value by over 30 percent due to inflation since 1996. As a result, the effectiveness of TANF in reducing child poverty continues to diminish.

TANF needs significant reformed to increase its effectiveness at reducing child poverty by:

- » Adding child poverty reduction as an explicit goal of TANF and measuring state performance by how many children are lifted out of poverty in all TANF caseloads
- » Increasing funding for the block grant and improving upon the ability of TANF to respond during times of increased need
- » Holding states accountable for helping parents exit TANF with quality employment that provides their family with a wage sufficient for long-term household economic security
- » Allowing parents to meet work requirements through pursuing higher education, skills training or vocational education while guaranteeing child care assistance, transportation assistance, and other supports.

1.4 Establish a Universal Paid Family and Medical Leave Program

The lack of earned family leave for millions of workers in the United States leaves parents with the impossible choice between staying home to care for and bond with their newborn or losing necessary income. The United States is the only OECD (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development) country that does not provide paid maternity leave nationwide. More than half of the nations in the OECD provide paternity leave to fathers, and paid leave is given to both parents in 23 OECD countries.

Paid family leave promotes healthy child development and promotes family economic security. It gives parents a chance to adequately care for their newborns or children with special health care needs. This care entails

everything from flexibility with breastfeeding to the ability to take time off to bring children to medical appointments without increasing financial strain.

Congress should pass the Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act (S. 947/H.R. 337), led by Sen. Gillibrand (D-NY) and Rep. DeLauro (D-CT),³² which would make workers in all companies, regardless of size, eligible for up to 12 weeks of partial income for family and medical leave, including pregnancy, childbirth recovery, serious health condition of a child, parent, spouse or domestic partner, birth or adoption of a child and/or military caregiving and leave. Workers could earn 66 percent of their monthly wages, up to a capped amount. The cost of providing this leave would be covered by small employee and employer payroll contributions of two cents per \$10 in wages or about \$1.50 a week for the average worker. There is momentum growing towards a national paid family and medical leave program. Currently, 4 states (CA, NJ, RI and NY) have state-wide leave programs, which are funded through employee payroll taxes.³³

1.5 Address Inequalities in Public Education

In order to make any real headway in reducing child poverty we need to address the large disparities in poverty rates for children of color. Compounding high rates of poverty among black children is the growing trend in communities of concentrated poverty.³⁴ Black children tend to live in communities of concentrated poverty, defined as neighborhoods or tracts where 40 percent or more of its residents fall below the federal poverty level. Being poor and living among other poor residents in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage compounds the problems of poverty and often resulting in high levels of stress, low academic achievement from school systems lacking resources and qualified educators and administrators, significantly higher rates of crime and violence and fewer employment and economic opportunities handed down to future generations.³⁵

Therefore, we need community-based policies to address concentrated poverty, such as increases and greater equity to per-pupil education spending investments. Research shows that increases in per-pupil spending, including increases mandated by school finance reforms, lead to significant increases in the likelihood of high school graduation and educational attainment for poor children, which in turn leads to reductions in the achievement and wealth gap between affluent and poor families. Moreover, the educational gains resulting from increased per-pupil go above and beyond benefits of other social programs aimed at reducing poverty.³⁶ Quality public education has long served as a pathway for millions of children of color to achieve economic and social mobility. However, educational funding for schools with large populations of students of color is often significantly less than more affluent communities, resulting in large differences in per-pupil spending across wealthy and poorer school districts and white and minority students.

That must change, as all children deserve an equal opportunity to a full potential. We need to target funds to public schools in areas of concentrated poverty through Title I, Part A program grants to ensure that struggling schools and schools serving students who need more support receive the resources necessary to help students succeed.

In addition, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) recognized the need for educational spaces where children's academic, health, and mentoring needs are met by including the Community Support for Schools Success Program, which provides grants to community schools that offer more holistic approaches to children's education by pairing classroom curriculum with social services.³⁷ Full-Service Community Schools provide students in-house services such as primary health and dental care, mental health and counseling, nutrition services, mentoring, and adult education and job training for parents. This program should be fully funded to at least \$30 million a year so more students can access wraparound services through school that support their healthy development and educational achievement.

Contact Information

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2

MAKE GOVERNMENT WORK BETTER FOR KIDS

Children make up the largest population of citizens that have no say in the government, which leaves them prone to being shortchanged in the federal budget, not being considered in policy initiatives, and being subject to under-investigated abuse. Meeting the needs of children in the United States cannot come through any one-time policy or initiative; it requires a permanent recognition that the need to ensure the well-being of our children is an important one. However, the federal government currently lacks any form of entity dedicated strictly to children.

We urge Congress to address the underrepresentation of the country's children within the government by making structural changes that ensure children receive the attention they deserve both now and into the future.

Recommendations

2.1 Develop a National Commission on Children

A National Commission on Children would focus the attention of federal policymakers and national news media on children's issues, generate new ideas for policy reforms that meet the challenges children face today, and create momentum for change. The primary goals of a commission would be to identify and consistently measure indicators of child well-being, to help maintain support for long-term investments in our children, and to set forth new public policy ideas aimed at improving our performance and making America first among nations on child well-being over the next decade. There is a precedent for how effective a National Commission on Children can be. In 1987, Congress formed a National Commission on Children that ended up serving as a catalyst for groundbreaking policies such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the Child Tax Credit, and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP).

Duties of the commission would include:

- » Conducting a comprehensive study to examine and assess the needs of children
- » Submitting a report to the President and Congress on specific findings, conclusions, and recommendations to address the needs of children transitioning to an annual assessment of the performance of the United States in ensuring the well-being of children, and make recommendations to improve children's well-being by carrying out the following:

- » Establishing national goals for improving child well-being and developing year-by-year targets for improvement to determine how the United States fares with respect to achieving the national goals
- » Identifying and selecting the national indicators of child well-being to measure child development, and assessing how the United States fares with respect to national goals
- » Making legislative and budgetary recommendations to Congress and the president to achieve the national goals for improving children's well-being

2.2 Establish an Independent Children's Commissioner

When a child cries out for help, whether it is a sick child, an abused child, a hungry child, a homeless child, or a victim of gun violence, adults should listen and protect children. It is shocking how often we fail to do so and how we often treat children as merely an afterthought.

Whether it is child sexual and physical abuse or neglect, child poverty, homelessness, or juvenile justice, our nation's leaders have turned a blind eye to the plight of our youngest, poorest, and most vulnerable citizens, who through no fault of their own, are faced with enormous challenges that threaten their ability to ever fulfill their potential.

In other countries, an independent Children's Commissioner serves to ensure that the voices and best interest of children are raised. The fact is that violence, abuse, injustice, and discrimination against children in families, schools, prisons, and institutions can best be eliminated if children are enabled and encouraged to tell their stories and be heard by people with the authority to take action. In fact, the consequence of the silencing or dismissal of the voices of children and the harm they experience has the effect of protecting the abusers rather than the children.

The creation of an independent Children's Commissioner has a proven track record in nations all across the world, as the role of children's commissioner has been established in more than 40 countries, among them the UK, Sweden, and New Zealand.

The core responsibilities of such an office would include promoting a coherent, effective, and efficient federal approach to children that includes research, legislative and regulatory child impact analysis, awareness raising, the promotion of the best interest of children, complaint review that would fulfill an obligation to listen to and help raise the voice of children to policymakers in Congress and the executive branch, particularly with respect to protecting children from harm and to further their growth and development. As an example, a Children's Commissioner could examine policy choices, issue reports, and make recommendations to Congress and federal agencies on ways to coordinate their efforts and build on best practices, research, and lessons learned with respect to the impact of proposed policies on children. This is in the best interest of our nation, as the cost of failing children is enormous in both human and socio-economic terms.

2.3 Ensure Children are No Longer Undercounted in 2020 Census

The U.S. Constitution requires an accurate count of the nation's population every 10 years, which is critical to establishing equal government representation and identifying where to allocate federal spending and resources for millions of children and families in our society, yet children continue to be undercounted in the census. Young children (under age five), are the most likely to be undercounted, and more than one million young children were missed in the 2010 decennial census.¹ And this problem is only continuing to grow. The count of young kids is becoming less accurate at the same time that the count of adults and older kids continues to improve.²

We know children of color are more likely to be overlooked. We also know that over 1.3 million children and youth experience homelessness each year,³ with many more living in unstable housing situations. These children are living in highly mobile households that are likely to be missed entirely by the census. Young children in

households that are splitting time between parents, living with grandparents, or residing in multigenerational households are also often not fully accounted for.

This problem will only be exacerbated if a question on citizenship is included in the 2020 census. Given the aggressive and cruel immigration enforcement tactics currently being undertaken by this Administration, the expectation of adding a citizenship question becomes a dramatically reduced participation rate from immigrant and mixed status families who fear the negative repercussions of revealing their immigration status.

In order to ensure a fair, equitable and successful decennial census, we urge Congress to prevent the inclusion of a citizenship question and provide full funding for implementation of the 2020 census. Without adequate funding and a process that encourages responses from immigrant households, the 2020 decennial census will fall far short of the comprehensive, accurate count that is foundational to our democracy and paramount for our children and economic future.

2.4 Reform Our Electoral System

A major barrier to improving child well-being in the U.S. is that children are limited in advocating for themselves – they can't vote or donate to political action committees (PACs) so there is no powerful political constituency to represent their interests. This means that lawmakers are not held accountable to doing right by children, and children's issues often don't rise to the top as priorities in Congress. In addition, young adults face some of the toughest barriers to voting and have lower voter participation rates as a result. Reforms to our electoral system such as lowering the voting age, improving access to voter registration, reforming our campaign finance system and ending partisan gerrymandering are critical to engaging young people and elevating the voices of those who vote on behalf of children's interests.

- » **Lower our voting age to 16:** Our youth and adolescents are more civically engaged now more than ever, yet they lack the ability to make their voice heard in the most significant way – voting. Many of the issues that affect eligible voters – gun control, climate change, student loans, health care – have an even bigger impact for our adolescents and their future, yet they cannot directly weigh-in on these issues without voting. Science shows that adolescents have the cognitive skills necessary at age 16 to vote and can make well-informed decisions through logical reasoning.⁴ In addition, they are more likely to vote. In places that allow already allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, this age group had much higher voter turnout than 18 to 24-year-olds. Studies show that people who don't vote the first time they are eligible are less likely to vote later in life, so capturing people at 16 may lead to higher voter turnout over time.⁵
- » **Implement same day and automatic registration:** The majority of Americans support making voting easier through same-day and automatic voter registration,⁶ yet most states maintain restrictive voter registration laws. While voters in a few states approved ballot measures for same-day (Maryland) and automatic voter registration (Michigan, Nevada) in the 2018 midterms,⁷ still less than 20 states and DC allow for same day voter registration on election day or during an early voting session⁸ or automatic voter registration through DMVs and other government agencies.⁹ The For the People Act (H.R. 1), introduced in the 116th Congress, would create automatic voter registration across the country, as well as expand early voting, simplify absentee voting, and make Election Day a federal holiday.¹⁰

Restrictive voting registration laws particularly disadvantage young adults, who tend to be highly transitional and therefore face higher barriers to registering far ahead of elections. Young adults also are more likely to lack the proper identification for voting – for example, student IDs are still not sufficient for voting in many states, so students who attend college far from home must plan far in advance to obtain proper identification or vote absentee.

- » **Pass Campaign Finance Reform:** Our current campaign finance system puts children at a disadvantage. Children can't vote and don't typically donate to PACs, so they depend on eligible voters and lawmakers to act on their behalf. Politicians that prioritize children are more likely to get both elected and re-elected,¹¹ yet they are not held accountable to doing so because our current campaign finance laws give a louder voice to

large corporations and other well-funded industries rather than parents and other stakeholders who vote and advocate for kids. The For the People Act would take critical steps towards regulating money in politics such as tightening rules on super PACs, mandating disclosure of big donors, and create a new matching-fund program for House candidates raising money only through small-dollar contributions.¹²

» **End Partisan Gerrymandering:** When voting maps are drawn along partisan lines, children lose. Gerrymandering weakens the ability of some voters to affect election outcomes, such as low-income families in densely populated areas. The majority of Americans oppose partisan gerrymandering,¹³ but despite some recent victories, it remains a major barrier to full representation for many in our society. One way to combat skewed district lines is through a successful 2020 Census that accurately counts all individuals and ensures that children are no longer undercounted. The For the People Act would address partisan gerrymandering by stripping power from state legislatures to draw congressional districts, instead creating independent commissions to handle redistricting.¹⁴

2.5 Eliminate Budget Barriers and Harm to Children

The federal government only invests 8 percent of its entire budget on children's programs. The Urban Institute only estimates 1 percent of all new federal spending on children over the course of the next decade. Even if Congress were to decide affirmatively to invest in children, there are numerous barriers in current law that make doing so quite difficult. Spending on children is disproportionately discretionary, subject to annual debate, cuts and other legislative restrictions. Funding for children is often temporary, capped, and lacks both built-in growth and dedicated revenue. As explained with more detail in the budget section of this document (#9), addressing these barriers, as identified by First Focus and our partners at the Center for a Responsible Federal Budget and the Urban Institute, could help to achieve a bigger piece of the pie for our kids, reverse the harmful spending trends, meet the increasing needs of our children, and help to eliminate child poverty.

We urge Congress, particularly major committees like Budget, Appropriations, Senate Finance, House Energy and Commerce, and House Ways and Means to pay particular attention to these disparities for children and to address them in all future budget and policy processes.

2.6 Prioritize Children in Disaster Relief Efforts

An estimated 14 percent of the nation's children are exposed to natural disasters in their lifetime¹⁵, with unique risks and needs that public officials do not always acknowledge and address. Disasters pose a higher risk for children because of their developmental, physical, safety, and medical vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, over 90 percent of children in the U.S. live in an area at risk of natural disasters, yet less than 1 cent in every \$10 of all federal preparedness funding is used for programs for children.¹⁶

After Hurricane Katrina, a National Commission on Children and Disasters assessed the gaps in federal planning that put children at risk, and formulated recommendations for states to help better protect our children. The commission's comprehensive assessment found that "children were more often an afterthought than a priority" across 11 functional areas of U.S. disaster planning.¹⁷ However, as of 2015, the US had met only 21 percent of the 81 recommendations from that report, with significant gaps in the areas of child physical health and trauma.¹⁸ There is still no presidential strategy on children and disasters, and children's needs are rarely a distinct priority area in disaster planning, particularly at the state and local level.

The bipartisan Homeland Security for Children Act (S. 1847/H.R. 1372) led by Sen. Steve Daines (R- MT) and Rep. Donald Payne (D-NJ) takes a step toward addressing the neglect of children in disaster preparedness and response by authorizing the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to hire a technical expert to serve as a Children's Needs Advisor. His or her role would be to incorporate children's needs into all preparation, mitigation, response and recovery activities of the agency. This legislation would also authorize the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Under Secretary for Strategy, Policy, and Plans to review and incorporate feedback from organizations representing the needs of children into Department-wide policies and require the Under Secretary to report back to Congress on its progress.

Contact Information

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3 INCREASE INVESTMENT IN CHILDREN SO THEY RECEIVE THEIR FAIR SHARE OF THE FEDERAL BUDGET

In September 2018, First Focus released the 11th Children's Budget Book, offering a comprehensive analysis of how kids and families have been faring in the federal budget since 2014.¹ Children comprise nearly a quarter of the U.S. population and the entirety of our nation's future. Yet, 17.5 percent of our kids currently live in poverty, and federal investment decisions fail to value all of our children. In fact, the share of total federal spending on children has declined since 2014 from 8.20 percent to 8.06 percent, hovering inadequately around 8 percent.

Unfortunately, that means federal investments in children often fall far short of their needs in areas such as education, housing, nutrition, health care, and more. The federal government only funds Head Start to reach 31 percent of eligible children, and funds just 16 percent of the additional cost associated with educating students with disabilities through the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act—far short of its commitment to meet 40 percent of those costs. For all of our nation's children to enjoy an equal opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential, we must reverse this trend.

Compounding this trend, the Urban Institute projects that the share of federal spending on children will continue to decline over the next 10 years and estimates federal spending on interest on the debt will surpass all federal investments on children in FY 2020. These funding challenges will only intensify as our deficit balloons and revenues decrease significantly due to 2017's \$2 trillion tax bill, which largely benefited wealthy individuals and corporations over children in poverty.

The existing budget process unfortunately sets up structural disadvantages for programs benefitting our children. These disadvantages inherently lead to regular debates about funding cuts and constant reauthorization fights over spending authority for important children's programs like the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Furthermore, programs for children do not enjoy dedicated funding streams. Seeking budget process solutions modeled after successful adult programs that we know help to lift them out of poverty, would help to create inter-generational equity so that both our seniors and kids win.

The structural disadvantages facing children's programs, as identified by the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, the Urban Institute, and First Focus include:

- » Spending on children is disproportionately discretionary and thus must be reviewed and renewed with annual appropriations, while much of the federal spending on adults is mandatory.

- » Spending on children is disproportionately allotted for a specific time period, and requires far more regular reauthorization and appropriation than programs for adults where funding is permanent.
- » Spending on adults rarely includes spending authority limits, while spending on children is often capped, constraining what can be spent for most major children’s programs.
- » Most programs for children lack built-in growth, leading spending on children to erode relative to spending on adults and relative to the economy where adult programs grow with eligibility and increased costs for services.
- » Programs for children lack dedicated revenue and thus lack the political advantage and protection of programs for seniors that enjoy this benefit.

Because so many children’s programs rely on discretionary funding streams, spending limits under the Budget Control Act (BCA: PL 112-25) are also a major threat to their viability. The \$55 billion drop in allowable non-defense discretionary (NDD) spending slated to occur between FY 2019 and FY 2020 will be devastating to the wellbeing of our nation’s children, especially in light of critical funding increases that are necessary to ensure an accurate decennial Census count, comply with the VA Mission Act (PL 115-182), and address the ongoing opioid abuse epidemic. The stricter BCA caps on NDD spending likely would shortchange the 302(b) allocations for those appropriations subcommittees funding the greatest number of programs serving children and families—especially Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, Transportation-Housing and Urban Development, Agriculture-FDA, and Commerce, Justice, and Science.

Recommendations

3.1 Provide Policymakers with Independent, Comprehensive, and Accurate Data and Tracking of Federal Spending on Children so that They Can Make Informed Decisions

The wide array of issues specific or unique to children span many policy areas, covering dozens of agencies and bureaus. As a result, there is no simple method or widely agreed upon method by which we can accurately evaluate the overall level of federal investment in children. Tracking the trend of spending on children relative to other federal programs over time can be equally challenging. The Focus on Children Act of 2018 (S. 3074), led by Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) would direct the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) to submit annual, separate studies and reports to Congress that would provide detailed analysis of the diverse funding streams for children’s programs across the federal government. The Focus on Children Act also would ensure that the data and spending trends identified by CBO would be available to the public and communicate a clear and comprehensive picture of the share of federal dollars benefitting America’s young people. This legislation is one easy, efficient step to help policymakers evaluate where children truly stand in our national priorities.

A similar measure, The Children’s Budget Act of 2018 (S.3075), led by Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) would complement this analysis within the Office of the Management and Budget so that the administration makes budget recommendations with the full set of data it needs surrounding the impact on children.

3.2 Raise the Budget Control Act (PL 112-25) Caps and Build Off the Progress Reflected in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018

In the context of the long-term decrease in the share of the federal budget supporting kids and families, there was a modest improvement in that percentage between FY 2017 and FY 2018. This growth stems from the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 (BBA; P.L. 115-123), which allowed Congress to make much-needed investments in a host of discretionary programs dedicated to feeding, housing, educating, and protecting the nation’s children. Congress must negotiate another budget deal that builds off the priorities reflected in the BBA, to allow for

greater investment in the many NDD programs that serve children and families, especially within the Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, Transportation and Housing and Urban Development, Commerce, Justice and Science, and Agriculture spending bills.

3.3 Pursue Structural Budget Changes to Protect Children’s Programs

Congress should pursue structural budget changes to convert programs such as the Children’s Health Insurance Program to a permanent, mandatory program. CHIP is the only federal health coverage program that is subjected to arbitrary caps, temporary authorization, and out-year funding cliffs, which create uncertainty and difficult reauthorizations that adult health coverage programs do not experience. In addition, Congress should oppose Medicaid block grants and caps that threaten the health and well-being of some of our nation’s most vulnerable children.

Encourage major committees like Budget, Appropriations, Senate Finance, House Energy and Commerce, and House Ways and Means to pay particular attention to these disparities for children and to address them in all future budget and policy processes.

3.4 Protect Complementary Mandatory Programs That Serve Children and Families, Rejecting Cuts or Harmful Eligibility Changes

Protect mandatory programs that help vulnerable children and families afford basic needs including food, housing, health care and income security. These vital programs work in complement with discretionary funding streams to assist vulnerable children, reduce poverty in the short-run and improve their longer-term outcomes. Cuts to such programs—whether by reduced funding or harmful changes to work and other eligibility requirements—are thus an inappropriate offset for increased discretionary investment in children.

Contact Information

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4 ENSURE ALL CHILDREN HAVE HEALTH COVERAGE THAT MEETS THEIR PHYSICAL, ORAL, AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CARE NEEDS

With 95% of children in the United States with health insurance, now is not the time to go backwards.¹ Health coverage for children and youth pays dividends to the nation and taxpayers for years to come. Besides helping to maintain a child's good health and prevent illness, health coverage provides needed care when a child is sick with cancer or who is born with congenital abnormalities. Coverage allows for well-baby and well-child exams that include screenings, referrals, and assessments for social, emotional, and developmental concerns.

Children who are uninsured miss more school, while their parents may miss more work. These kids may have lower educational outcomes and earn less money as young adults. When children are covered through Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), their parents can spend the limited money they have on other needs for their family, like food and housing, while cutting their risk of facing medical bankruptcy.

Health coverage from birth throughout childhood promotes a good start in life, assures that children's growth and development will be monitored and assessed at regular intervals, and they will be more likely to complete school.

Recommendations

4.1 Make CHIP Permanent and Eliminate the CHIP Funding Cliff

The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) is the only federal insurance program that is temporary and constantly needs to be extended and is threatened by potential shortfalls, such as the "funding cliff" that has been built into the funding mechanism.

Although the 115th Congress extended CHIP for a total of 10 years, the extension remains temporary and includes the imposition of a "CHIP funding cliff" that has the impact of dropped funding from \$26 billion or more in FY 2026 but that drops to just \$15.3 billion in FY 2027, which threatens the ability of CHIP to survive an extension in the future. This threat to the program's future existence is something that no other federal health insurance program faces.

The amount of money budgeted for FY 2027 reflects an estimate CHIP eligibility level capped at just 200 percent of the poverty level, which is well below the level that most states currently cover children to. This potentially creates an enormous funding gap when CHIP comes up for an extension in the future.

Fortunately, there may be an opportunity that allows CHIP to be made permanent now and still save money because the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that continuing CHIP is less expensive than the alternatives, which includes moving children into the health insurance marketplaces. This provides a potential win-win opportunity, as converting CHIP to a permanent program would put the program on the same footing as all other federal health coverage programs, as none of them are subjected to repeated short-term extensions and funding cliffs, while also saving money.

4.2 Create a System so That All Children Eligible for Chip and Medicaid Have Continuous Coverage From Birth Through Age 5

As their brains grow and develop and before they are enrolled in regular, fulltime school, we need to ensure continuous health coverage for all children. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends babies get checkups at birth, three to five days after birth and then at 1, 2, 4, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, and 24 months.² Babies may receive referrals for additional assessment and treatment during or between any of these appointments. It is essential parents and medical providers are aware their child's primary care and any referrals are covered during this significant time in a child's development.

A critical aspect of well-child exams during the first five years include developmental, behavioral, and psychosocial screenings. If these screenings are missed or interrupted due to lack of coverage, that can delay needed assessments and necessary early interventions. If a child with a delay or suspected delay is not identified in an early well-child check-up they will have to wait until someone identifies this in school.³ If a child is not identified until school age they could have significant delays and might have lost many opportunities for early interventions. This could cause undue harm to the child and family and increase costs later. Continuous coverage during the first five years of life would help ensure children see medical providers regularly and receive appropriate care and referrals on time.

4.3 Protect Medicaid and Early Periodic Screening Diagnosis and Treatment (Epsdt) for 38 Million Children by Supporting Medicaid Funding Without Block Grants or per Capita Caps

Under either of those proposals, children would disproportionately suffer and bear the brunt of cuts. Limits such as per-capita-caps and block grants impose arbitrary limits on coverage that will lead to unequal cuts to children's coverage and access to care. Ensure Medicaid funding is whole and funding does not include undue restrictions or requirements for health coverage for children or their parents. Congress should do no harm when it comes to vulnerable children who are covered through the long-standing Medicaid program.

4.4 Permit Families to Buy Coverage Through the Federal Employee Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) or Through Medicaid

For families who are self-employed, work part-time, or work for small businesses that may not offer health benefits, these options give them the chance to provide their children with coverage that will meet their needs and be cost-effective. Allowing families to buy in to coverage through these programs will improve coverage and access to care for families who remain in the coverage gap.

4.5 Support the Health Equity and Accountability Act of 2018

Sen. Mazie Hirono (HI) introduced the Health Equity and Accountability Act of 2018 (HEAA) (S.3660). Rep. Barbara Lee (CA-13) introduced the bill (H.R. 5942) in the House in May, 2018, joined by 67 cosponsors, on behalf of the Congressional Tri-Caucus, made up of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC) with Chairwoman Judy Chu, Congressional Black Caucus with Chairman Cedric Richmond, and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC) with Chairwoman Michelle Lujan Grisham.

The ten titles of HEAA address every feature of health care and its delivery system. HEAA will remove barriers to affordable health insurance coverage, promote investments in new health delivery methods and technologies, and improve research and data collection about the health needs and outcomes of diverse communities. HEAA acts as a legislative outline to reduce racial and ethnic health disparities and establish a health care system that will lead us to true health care equity for children, individuals, and families.

Contact Information

For more on this policy issue, reach out to Carrie Fitzgerald, Vice President, Children's Health Programs, at carrief@firstfocus.org and Bruce Lesley, President, at brucel@firstfocus.org.

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5 REFORM CHILD WELFARE BY STRENGTHENING FAMILIES, REDUCING THE NUMBER OF KIDS IN NEED OF OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENTS AND IMPROVING FOSTER CARE

Nationally, nearly half a million children receive foster care services at an annual cost of over \$25 billion. The opioid crisis has increased the number of children and youth in foster care as a result of substance use by their parents.

Children and youth in foster care have often experienced physical abuse, neglect, homelessness, exposure to drugs and violence and/or a host of other challenges. These adverse experiences can have long-term, negative impacts on a child's health, development, and ability to learn and get along with other children and adults.

As a result, foster children are at risk of chronically-poor health, educational disparities, poverty and being incarcerated. In large part, the opioid crisis is driving the increase in children and youth entering foster care. Therefore, combating the opioid crisis is an integral part of addressing high rates of children and youth entering care.

Recommendations

5.1 Devote More Resources to Address the Opioid Crisis

We commend Congress for enacting the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act (Pub. Law No. 115-271), which devotes resources to address the opioid crisis and its impact on children and youth. The legislation is a badly-needed first-step, but much more can and should be done.

We urge Congress to follow-up by devoting more resources to certain key components of the legislation, including the following:

- » **Plans of Safe Care:** Plans of Safe Care are required for infants identified as being affected by illegal substance abuse to enable appropriate services to be delivered to infants and mothers to ensure their well-being. The opioid legislation provides additional resources for plans of safe care, however, significantly more funding is needed to adequately develop and implement treatment plans. We urge Congress to appropriate much more funding for the creation and operation of plans of safe care.

- » **Recognizing early childhood trauma related to substance abuse:** The SUPPORT Act for Patients and Communities requires the Secretary of Health and Human Services to disseminate information, resources, and if requested, technical assistance to early childhood care and education providers and professionals working with young children on ways to recognize and respond appropriately to early childhood trauma, including trauma related to substance use. Because early childhood providers are on the front-lines of addressing the impact of substance use disorders on children, we recommend that Congress increase funding for this provision to allow more technical assistance and resources to early childhood providers.
- » **Improving recovery and reunifying families:** The SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act allocates \$15 million to HHS to replicate a “recovery coach” program for parents with children in foster care due to parental substance abuse, which has been shown to reduce the length of time children spend in foster care. Given the dearth of evidence-based programs addressing family-based treatment for substance-use disorders, we urge Congress to allocate more funding to the replication of these programs.
- » **Building capacity for family-focused residential treatment:** Beginning in FY 2020, states will be eligible to receive funding to provide evidence-based substance abuse prevention and treatment services to families with children at risk of entering foster care (because of the Family First Prevention Services Act). The SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act authorizes \$20 million in funding for HHS to award to states to develop, enhance, or evaluate family-focused treatment programs to increase the number of evidence-based programs that will later qualify for funding under Family First. Because states and communities lack capital investments and funding to pay for the construction or acquisition of physical buildings for residential treatment programs, we urge Congress to allocate significantly more funding to this provision to meaningfully allow states to provide more residential family-based services.
- » **Fully Implement the Family First Prevention Services Act:** Congress recently enacted the Family First Prevention Services Act, which presents states with an historic opportunity to leverage systems to efficiently serve families in a holistic manner; stem the tide of children entering the foster system, particularly children impacted by parental substance abuse, and reform foster care so that it works better for the children currently in care.

5.2 Pass Policies That Improve Outcomes for Foster Children and Youth Transitioning Out of Care

Many more policy initiatives are needed to ensure that at-risk families receive the assistance needed to keep children safely at home, that improvements in foster care are made to improve outcomes for foster children, and that youth transitioning out of care are supported and positioned to succeed as they enter adulthood.

We recommend swift passage of the following legislative proposals:

- » **Health Insurance for Former Foster Youth Act (S. 1797/H.R. 4998):** Introduced by Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) and Rep. Karen Bass (D-CA), this legislation would ensure that former foster youth, who often suffer from chronic health conditions, have continuous Medicaid coverage until age 26 as they enter adulthood. We note that this legislation was in part included in the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act, with a five-year delay in its implementation. We urge Congress to make this provision effective immediately to provide critical health services for former foster youth and make it applicable to children and youth who have aged out of kinship care.
- » **Child Welfare Oversight and Accountability Act of 2017 (S. 1964):** Introduced by Finance Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-UT) and Ranking Member Wyden (D-OR), this bipartisan legislation would strengthen accountability in the child welfare system, encourage kinship guardian placements and support payment rate equity for kinship guardian placements and strengthen national data on child fatalities from maltreatment.

- » [Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth \(S. 1795/H.R. 3740\)](#): Introduced by Sen. Murray (D-WA) and Rep. Katherine Clark (D-MA), this legislation would improve the financial aid process for homeless and foster children and youth to facilitate their obtaining a college education. With less than 5 percent of foster youth graduating from college, this law is needed to help former foster youth successfully obtain higher education needed to put them on a path to economic stability.
- » [Timely Mental Health for Foster Youth Act \(S. 439/H.R. 1069\)](#): Introduced by Sen. Blunt (R-MO) and Rep. Brenda Lawrence (D-MI), this bipartisan legislation would require mental health screenings for all children entering foster care.
- » [Look-Back Elimination Act of 2017 \(H.R. 269\)](#): Introduced by Rep. John Lewis (D-GA), this bill amends part E (Foster Care and Adoption Assistance) of Title IV of the Social Security Act to extend federal funding to states for maintenance payments on behalf of each foster child, regardless of whether the child would have been eligible for aid under the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children program at the time of removal from the home.
- » [Trauma-Informed Care for Children and Families Act \(H.R. 1757\)](#): Introduced by Rep. Danny Davis (D-IL), this legislation would address psychological, developmental, social, and emotional needs of children, youth and families who have experienced trauma. It would require the development of a federal task force to recommend improvements for identifying, referring, and supporting children and families who have experienced trauma.

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6

EXPAND ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, HIGH QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Science tells us that in many ways the future success of our children is determined in their very early years, when their brains are rapidly developing. In fact, a child's brain undergoes enormous growth from birth to age 3, producing over one-million neural connections every second. Many factors influence a child's brain development, including their relationships, experiences, and environment. Unfortunately, far too many children are exposed to adverse experiences in their early years, including economic hardship, physical and emotional abuse or neglect, neighborhood violence, parental incarceration, and other harmful circumstances. These negative experiences are toxic to their brain development, often causing children to suffer adverse health, educational and economic consequences throughout their lives.

High-quality early childhood programs, which have been found to have significant and lasting positive impacts on the health and development of young children, serve as “game changers” with the potential to set the stage for their later success in school and life. According to Nobel Laureate economist, James Heckman, high-quality, early learning opportunities are one of the most effective ways to improve children's health, education and economic outcomes, providing as much as nearly \$7 return for each dollar invested. The importance of early childhood investments is undisputed, but unfortunately, many families struggle to pay for high quality early care and education. According to the 2018 ChildCare Aware report, “The US and the High Cost of Child Care,” the average cost of center-based child care lands at just under \$10,000 annually.¹ Comparing that to the national median income for married couples with children under the age of 18, the report estimates that the cost of child care would take more than 10.6 percent of the household income. For single parents, that number jumps to 37 percent of the household income being needed to pay for one child in child care.²

Chief among early childhood supports sits greater access to high quality child care that is affordable, equitable and sustainable, providing all young children with a safe and nurturing environment for them to learn. Access to affordable, high quality child care allows parents to work and pursue opportunities for education and professional training, knowing that their children are learning in a safe environment. This access, in turn, could help to ensure that parents can work steady hours and even longer hours to increase family income lifting lower income families out of poverty.

Based on a recent report from the National Women's Law Center,³ affordable, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), which comprises the bulk of the federal government's support for child care assistance for low-income families, is currently not funded sufficiently to provide working families with adequate access to child care. The report highlights that low state eligibility limits for the CCDBG limits access to child care for families

earning just 150 percent of the poverty level. In addition, not all eligible families receive child care assistance due to large waiting lists or frozen intake procedures in 19 states.

Access to affordable, high-quality child care clearly benefits working parents and their children, but employers realize benefits too as they undoubtedly depend on a reliable workforce. The 2018 ChildCare Aware report also highlights striking data related to this point: 1) Over a six-month period, 45 percent of parents are absent from work at least once due to child care breakdowns, 2) 65 percent of parents' work schedules are affected by child care challenges, an average of 7.5 times over a six-month period, 3) U.S. businesses lose approximately \$4.4 billion annually due to employee absenteeism as a result of child care breakdowns, and 4) An estimated \$28.9 billion in wages is lost annually by working families who do not have access to affordable child care and paid family and medical leave.⁴

Achieving the benefits associated with access to affordable high quality early education rests heavily on the continued development and retention of a highly qualified early care and education (ECE) workforce. Retention of a highly qualified workforce remains a challenge for employers as oftentimes these educators are severely underpaid and lack professional support. According to The National Academies of Sciences 2018 Consensus Study, our ECE professionals' wages are significantly lower than other professionals with similar educational backgrounds.⁵ Tackling this workforce issue may require creative solutions such as the initiation of an effective apprenticeship program that benefits both the workforce and the employer. Such an apprenticeship program would grow the pool pipeline of highly qualified ECE professionals through improved career development opportunities that integrate classroom learning with on-the-job training, availability of mentorships and professional support, and improved compensation for educators.

Another successful early childhood program is the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program. Enacted in 2010 as one of the cornerstones of evidence-based policy, the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program provides funding to states, territories and tribes and tribal organizations to implement or expand evidence-based and promising home visiting programs that have been proven to improve the health, education and economic stability of children and families living in poverty and experiencing other risk factors.

Home visiting programs partner at-risk parents and their children with nurses, social workers or paraprofessionals. These providers regularly meet with families through home visits, delivering information and support during pregnancy and throughout the child's earliest years. Research demonstrates that evidence-based home visiting works, with tangible results such as better birth outcomes, improved early childhood health and development, improved school readiness and academic achievements, and reduced child abuse and neglect. Home visiting also benefits parents by helping young mothers graduate from high school and seek higher education and gainful employment.

We anticipate that the national evaluation of MIECHV will be released in early 2019. Based on preliminary reports on MIECHV, the program is working to improve the lives and self-sufficiency of children and families. Preliminary outcomes demonstrate that 81 percent of states have showed improvements in maternal and newborn health; 85 percent showed improvements in school readiness; 85 percent showed improvements in family economic self-sufficiency; and 70 percent showed improvements in reducing domestic violence and crime.

In addition, paid family leave also promotes healthy child development and supports family economic security. Paid leave is particularly important for parents to bond with their newborn babies without jeopardizing their ability to pay for basic necessities. In addition to a core component of early childhood policy, paid leave also helps to combat poverty among working parents and families who too often face the impossible choice between staying home to care for and bond with their newborn and earning necessary income.

We recommend that Congress takes action to expand access to existing high quality early childhood development programs and establishes complementary programs that improve opportunities for working parents, their children, and the ECE workforce, paving the way for success.

Recommendations

6.1 Provide Affordable Access to High Quality Early Care and Education

- » [Pass the Child Care for Working Families Act \(S. 1806\)](#) sponsored by Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) and a companion bill (H.R. 3773) introduced by Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) that would create a comprehensive early learning and child care program to ensure affordable, high-quality child care for working families across the country. Importantly, this legislation would ensure that working families earning 150 percent of their state's median income will pay no more than 7 percent of their income on child care. This legislation would additionally establish provider payment levels that reflect higher wages for child care workers and support Head Start in its transition to full-day/full-year programming. This comprehensive legislation also would establish a voluntary high-quality preschool grant program for 3, 4 or 5-year olds who are not yet enrolled in kindergarten to promote children's development, improve curricula and teacher-child interaction, increase family engagement, and generally improve the transition of children from preschool to elementary school.

Until the enactment and implementation of the Murray/Scott legislation, we urge Congress to support increased funding for the discretionary and mandatory provisions of the CCDBG program, as well as the Pre-K grant program, Head Start and Early Head Start. All of the discretionary programs are funded through the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies annual spending bill.

- » [Support legislation modeled after the Child First Act of 2017 \(H.R. 3643\)](#) led by Rep. Joe Crowley (D-NY). This proposed legislation would provide additional mandatory funding for the existing CCDBG program to help low-income working families afford high quality child care. The proposal also would provide sufficient funding so that provider payment rates are set at a level high enough to support high-quality child care for infants and toddlers, including infants and toddlers with disabilities. According to a recent report by the National Women's Law Center, only one state has set its payment rates at federally-recommended levels. This legislation would allow states to set more realistic provider rates which in turn would promote greater quality care.
- » [Establish a national targeted federal apprenticeship program for youth modeled after the Early Care Educator Apprenticeship Consortium in Pennsylvania](#) which creates a career pathway pipeline for the ECE workforce to obtain associate degrees. The components of the program include on-the-job training, on-site mentorship, accelerated coursework with wage-increases for specific accomplishments. The objectives are to provide an affordable and incentivized pathway for the ECE workforce to build skills as educators, support employers' ability to attract and retain a skilled education workforce, enhance preparation of young children for kindergarten and beyond, and increase the number of early childhood educators with degrees and increased wages. The apprenticeship program engages employers, community college administration and educators, state agencies and nonprofit stakeholders.

6.2 Increase Funding for the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program

In 2018, Congress reauthorized MIECHV for five years, until 2022. Unfortunately, Congress failed to allocate additional funding for MIECHV beyond its funding level of \$400 million annually. Stagnant funding has meant that MIECHV serves only a fraction of the children and families who could benefit from home visiting. According to the Home Visiting Yearbook,⁶ MIECHV currently serves approximately 150,000 families, whereas it could benefit 18 million children and families nationally. Given the positive outcomes associated with evidence-based home visiting and the great need for home visiting services, we recommend that Congress double funding for MIECHV from \$400 million annually to \$800 million annually over the remaining 4 years to enable MIECHV to serve more children and families in need. We also recommend that Congress include funding for MIECHV at \$800 million annually in the baseline to facilitate greater funding increases for this important program during future reauthorizations.

6.3 Establish a Universal Paid Family and Medical Leave Program

Among the constellation of early childhood programs and supports we are recommending is enactment of national paid leave legislation that allows working parents to take paid time off of work to care for a newborn. We recommend that Congress enact the Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act (S.947/H.R. 337) led by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT). This legislation would establish national paid family and medical leave so that all workers in America would have access to paid family and medical leave. Eight out of ten eligible workers cannot afford to take FMLA leave, making the FAMILY Act a necessity for millions of Americans. Please see the Poverty Section (#1) for more detailed information regarding this important recommendation.

Contact Information

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7 ESTABLISH “BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD” STANDARD FOR ALL IMMIGRATION POLICY DECISIONS

Immigration policies that guide enforcement procedures including the arrest, detention, and removal of non-U.S. citizens have a significant impact on the lives of children involved in these circumstances. The denial of an asylum claim for a parent often means their children are deported to dangerous situations from which they have escaped. Work place raids and increased interior enforcement of non-criminal persons result in the loss of a child’s primary caregiver or a family’s main source of income which leaves the children subject to the child welfare system. Swift changes to longstanding protections for families, such as the removal of Temporary Protected Status (TPS), forces families into the shadows which will result in lifelong negative consequences for the health, safety, and education of their children. Despite being directly affected, children are often an afterthought in policy efforts to curb legal and illegal immigration. Recent changes to immigration and asylum policies are already having a significant impact on the lives of children and families.

Nearly 140 children remain separated from their parents due to an egregious policy by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that called for the prosecution of all parents who crossed the Southern border between ports of entry. This resulted in the traumatic separation of more than 2,600 children from their parents.¹ More than 273,000 U.S. citizen children whose parents are recipients of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) will be forced into the shadows because the Trump administration ended TPS protections for nationals of El Salvador, Sudan, Nicaragua, Haiti, Nepal, and Honduras. 800,000 young adults who were brought to the U.S. as children remain uncertain about their future in the U.S. due to the administration’s rescission of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program.²

In Morristown, TN, 160 children experienced the loss of a parent or caregiver during a single workplace raid.³ More than 14,000 unaccompanied children are in the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)⁴. This is a record setting number of kids in custody and is a result of increased enforcement activity involving the family members who step up to sponsor unaccompanied children.⁵

The United States must implement a “Best Interest of the Child” standard for all immigration enforcement decisions. This standard must ensure that a child’s safety is a priority in all decisions, the child has a voice in his/ her proceedings, the child remains together with family members in the least restrictive setting, and all decisions must promote the health and well-being of the child.⁶

Recommendations

7.1 Guarantee Children Facing Immigration Court Proceedings Have Legal Representation

Children must have a voice in the decisions that will affect the rest of their lives. In order to pursue this standard, we must ensure that all children in immigration proceedings, both accompanied and unaccompanied, have legal representation. The Fair Day in Court for Kids Act (S.2468/H.R.2043) led by Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard would ensure that children seeking protection in the United States are guaranteed legal counsel in their immigration proceedings. No child should be forced to face a courtroom alone, especially when the outcome may be a matter of life or death. Additionally, the needs of both the children and parents must be considered during immigration proceedings. Children must be appointed an advocate who acts on the wishes and in the best interest of the child when determining the care and custody of immigrant children.

7.2 Ensure Children are Free From Detention and Placed in the Least Restrictive Setting as Quickly as Possible

The U.S. government must seek out alternatives to detention (ATDs) for children and families. The Reunite Every Unaccompanied Newborn Infant Toddler and Other Children Expeditiously (REUNITE) Act (S. 3227/H.R. 6594), introduced by Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) and Rep. Adriano Epailat (D-NY), calls for DHS to establish ATDs with case management services as well as restore the Family Case Management Program which had a proven 99 percent compliance rate for court appearances. The detention of a child even if he/she is with family, is traumatic and has significant effects on a child's mental health and physical development. Similarly, the Prevent CHILD Harm Act of 2018 (H.R. 7030), a bill with bipartisan support sponsored by Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), calls for an end to the harmful practice of using information gained from unaccompanied children to detain and deport family members which causes children to languish in detention rather than being united with loved ones.

Decades of litigation over the horrific conditions in which migrant children were being held in detention resulted in the 1997 Flores Settlement Agreement (FSA). This agreement set national standards for the detention, release, and treatment of children in the custody of DHS and declares that children should be in the least restrictive setting. This agreement must not be undermined or modified to meet the needs of an enforcement-only approach to immigration reform. If the FSA is modified to allow for indefinite family detention, children will suffer negative life-long consequences and impediments to their childhood development.

7.3 Prioritize Keeping Families Together in Immigration Policy Decisions When It Is in the Best Interest of the Child

Family unity must be a priority in both the claims of the parent and the child involved in removal proceedings. Several bills have been introduced in both the House and Senate to address these concerns. The Keep Families Together Act (S.3036/H.R. 6135), sponsored by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), prohibits the removal of children from their parents by DHS or the Department of Justice (DOJ) within 100 miles of the U.S. border unless it is in the child's best interest.

A trio of bills introduced by Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA) aims to alleviate the pressures that children and families face at the border. The Protect Family Values at the Border Act (H.R. 2572) aims to ensure that the best interest of the child is considered when determining repatriation or referral for prosecution of parents and legal guardians of children. The Humane Enforcement and Legal Protections (HELP) for Separated Children Act (H.R. 5950) allows parents to make arrangements for their child's care and for children to visit their parents while they are detained. Additionally, this bill requires U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to consider the best interests of the children in all detention, release, and transfer decisions affecting their parents.

Similarly, the Help Separated Families Act of 2018 (H.R. 5414) combats the stress felt by families by ensuring

that the immigration status of a parent, legal guardian, or relative caregiver is not by itself a disqualifying factor in evaluating the placement of a child and prohibits child welfare agencies from eliminating parental rights when a fit or willing parent or relative has been deported or detained. Family unity should be a priority both at the border and during interior enforcement activities such as workplace raids. Other steps to promote family unity include reinstating judicial discretion in cases involving the caregivers of minor children and allowing parents in removal proceedings to argue the hardship on behalf of their children.

Additionally, more must be done on behalf of children and families who know only the United States as their home. The ESPERER Act of 2017 (H.R. 4184), a bipartisan piece of legislation sponsored by Rep. Carlos Curbelo (R-FL), extends protections and permanent residency status for eligible refugees such as those who have lived in the U.S. for decades with TPS. Lastly, the DREAM Act of 2017 (S.1615), a bipartisan bill sponsored by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), addresses the plight of young people who were brought to the country at a young age and have no pathway to citizenship.

7.4 Ensure All Decisions Account for Child Well-Being and Healthy Development

Finally, immigration enforcement decisions involving children must incorporate child welfare professionals and consultation with experts on the healthy development needs of children. The Child Trafficking Victims Protection and Welfare Act (S.3558), sponsored by Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI), ensures that qualified child welfare professionals and language interpreters are available at ports of entry as well as border patrol stations. Additionally, this act outlines standards of care for the short-term custody of children with the U. S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP). These standards include a safe and sanitary living environment, access to legal services, and access to food and climate appropriate clothing. Immigration enforcement decisions should never impede a child's healthy development or a child's right to education.

Contact Information

For more on this policy issue, reach out to Kristen Torres, Director, Child Welfare & Immigration, at kristent@firstfocus.org.

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8

PRIORITIZE CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING INSTABILITY

Affordable housing remains one of the main barriers to economic stability for many families. Housing costs continue to increase in the United States, yet family income has not kept pace. One-third of U.S. children live in households with a high housing cost burden, defined as spending more than 30 percent of the household's monthly income on housing.¹

Housing instability, which includes situations such as being behind on rent and making multiple moves, is associated with an increased risk of poor child health, including hospitalizations, and of maternal depression.² Sustained housing instability can lead to homelessness, further destabilizing families and causing trauma that has severe negative implications for children's healthy development and educational attainment, yet few households with children that are eligible for housing assistance receive it. Access to housing assistance remains extremely limited—only 1 in 4 families who are eligible for rent assistance in the United States receive it. Families with children are also decreasing as a share of federal housing assistance beneficiaries³ despite the fact that the majority of households on the waiting list for housing assistance (60 percent) are families with children⁴ and they are given no priority.

Millions of children and families experience homelessness in the United States each year, and numbers only continue to increase. The U.S. Department of Education identified over 1.35 million homeless students in the 2016-2017 school year, which is a 27 percent increase from 2010, even after the end of the recession.⁵ Families and youth often become homeless due to traumatic experiences such as job loss, substance abuse, mental health issues, and domestic violence. Therefore, homelessness is both a symptom and a cause of trauma for children, youth, and families. Homelessness causes instability in a child's life, resulting in multiple moves and overcrowded living situations, and too often, homelessness puts children directly at risk of physical harm and abuse.

Homelessness, even for a brief time, is extremely detrimental to a child's healthy development. The younger and longer a child experiences homelessness, the greater the cumulative toll of negative health outcomes;⁶ moreover, homelessness is associated with an 87 percent greater likelihood of dropping out of school.⁷

Homelessness can take many different forms and often results in very fluid and unstable situations. This is because homeless families with children, and youth who are on their own, stay wherever they can. These situations often include run-down motels or overcrowded spaces temporarily shared with others because there is no family or youth shelter in the community, shelters are full, or shelter policies exclude them.

A recent survey from the University of Chicago Chapin Hall shows the prevalence of youth experiencing

homelessness on their own. Two-thirds of the homeless youth surveyed reported couch-surfing or other less visible forms of homelessness at some point. This is particularly true in rural communities, where the rate of youth homelessness was just as high as in urban and suburban communities. These less visible forms of homelessness mean that youth are often invisible to public systems, putting them at high risk of harm, abuse, and neglect, including trafficking. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, runaway/homeless status and unstable housing are among the top five risk factors for human trafficking.⁸

Recommendations

8.1 Reform Federal Homeless Assistance to Better Address the Unique Developmental Needs of Children and Youth

The bipartisan, bicameral Homeless Children and Youth Act (S. 611/H.R. 1511), led by Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Rob Portman (R-OH) and Reps. Steve Stivers (R-OH) and Dave Loebsack (D-IA), would remove barriers that communities face in addressing family, child, and youth homelessness, and give them the flexibility to tailor homeless assistance interventions based on the unique needs of their homeless population. Communities would have the discretion to target services based on local assessment of need, and to serve the most vulnerable homeless children, youth, and families, regardless of what form of homelessness they are experiencing. This approach would increase visibility and awareness of child, youth, young adult, and family homelessness through increased data transparency; more accurate counts; and collaboration with early childhood programs, institutions of higher education, and local educational agencies, thus helping communities to leverage and attract more public and private resources to address homelessness.

H.R. 1511 passed out of the House Financial Services Committee through a bipartisan vote on July 24, 2018⁹ and is supported by over 60 national organizations and hundreds of state and local organizations that work closest with homeless families and youth.¹⁰

8.2 Improve Services for Homeless Youth and Young Adults

In December 2018, Congress passed the Juvenile Justice Reform Act (H.R. 6964), which along with reauthorizing the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, provided a straight two-year reauthorization for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA). Yet additional updates to RHYA are needed to strengthen prevention efforts offered through the Street Outreach and Basic Center programs, enable Basic Center programs to serve youth for 30 days, allow Transitional Living Programs to serve youth through age 24, and ensure trafficking is prevented and victims are served through outreach, identification, prevention, referrals and reporting. The bipartisan, bicameral Runaway and Homeless Youth & Trafficking Prevention Act, led by Sens. Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Susan Collins (R-ME) and Reps. John Yarmuth (D-KY) and Dave Reichert (R-WA) would make these changes.¹¹

8.3 Increase Access to Civil Legal Services

Nearly 30 percent of households living in a rented home have experienced a related civil legal problem in the past year.¹² One primary civil legal problem for low-income households is the threat of eviction. Each year millions of families in the United States are evicted from their homes, and families with children are evicted at much higher rates than those without children. Children who experience eviction often face high rates of mobility and unstable living environments that have negative consequences for their education, physical health, mental health, and interpersonal relationships.¹³

Civil legal services and eviction prevention programs help keep children and families in their homes and protect them from the negative effects of being evicted. Yet most low-income families lack access to these services. The Legal Services Corporation, which provides grants to civil legal aid organizations, received only \$425 million in fiscal year 2018, and the president's 2019 budget proposed to eliminate this funding altogether. The Equal Opportunity for Residential Representation Act of 2017 (H.R. 1146), led by Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN), would create a pilot program to provide grants to organizations that serve families facing eviction, landlord-tenant

disputes, fair housing discrimination, or other housing-related issues. These grants would be equitably distributed between urban and rural areas, with at least 20 percent guaranteed for rural areas.¹⁴

8.4 Expand Federal Housing Assistance for Households with Children

Research shows that rent assistance lifts children out of poverty—nearly one million children were lifted out of poverty by housing subsidies in 2017.¹⁵ This assistance helps families with the cost of rent and frees up money for them to spend on other basic needs, thereby improving their financial stability and supporting healthy child development. Vouchers can also improve a child's chances for economic mobility—one study finds that children in households receiving vouchers have higher adult earnings and a lower chance of incarceration.¹⁶

Congress should expand the Housing Choice Voucher Program so more households can have access to affordable housing. Families with children and youth on their own, especially those experiencing all forms of homelessness, should be made priority populations for these vouchers. Any expansion of rental housing assistance must also be accompanied with source of income protections for tenants, so landlords are prevented from refusing to rent to voucher holders and other households receiving rental assistance.¹⁷

Rental assistance for households with children and youth on their own must be coordinated with other systems serving these households such as public schools, in order to improve child outcomes. Congress should pass the Affordable Housing for Educational Achievement Demonstration (AHEAD) Act (S. 1949), led by Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), which would incentivize partnerships between housing authorities and school districts to keep families permanently housed and improve educational outcomes for children.¹⁸

Contact Information

For more on this policy issue, reach out to Cara Baldari, Vice President, Family Economics, Housing and Homelessness at carab@firstfocus.org.

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9

ENSURE ALL CHILDREN HAVE THE FOOD THEY NEED TO THRIVE

The nation's children continue to experience food insecurity—the lack of consistent access to enough healthy food to lead a productive life—at higher rates than the general population. ¹ In 2017, 12.5 million children—or 17 percent—lived in food insecure households, compared to 11 percent of adults. Meanwhile, 540,000 children lived in households with very low food security, which refers to reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns at some time during the year.

Children who are food insecure face a host of harmful consequences to their health (such as increased risk for poor nutrition, illness, obesity, hospitalizations), mental wellbeing (higher risk for depression, anxiety, and hyperactivity), and education (lower math and reading skills, higher rates of absenteeism, and tardiness). ² As a result, the negative impact of food insecurity can last well into adulthood.

Families primarily suffer from food insecurity because they lack the resources necessary to access and purchase healthy, adequate food. Federal food assistance programs are critically important supports that help children get the food they need. However, Congress can and should take steps to strengthen and expand these programs to fight child food insecurity ensure better child nutrition.

Recommendations

9.1 Protect and Strengthen the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Though the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is not technically a child nutrition program, it is in fact the largest federal assistance program serving children (19.2 million in Fiscal Year 2016) and acts in many respects as the first line of defense against child food insecurity. Beyond its role in fighting food insecurity, SNAP significantly reduces child poverty and helps struggling families to make ends meet: SNAP benefits lifted 1.5 million children out of poverty in 2017 alone.

We commend Congress for recently passing a bipartisan five-year Farm Bill (H.R. 2), led by Sens. Pat Roberts (R-KS) and Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) and Reps. Mike Conaway (R-TX) and Colin Peterson (D-MN) that rejected harmful proposed cuts to SNAP and protects the ability of low-income families with children to put food on the table.

However, though SNAP is a successful program, benefits are often modest and do not always last through the entire month.³ Updating the underlying formula guiding SNAP benefits and increasing their overall value for families with children is a critical step to ensuring that children have enough to eat during their critical stages of development. We urge congress Pass legislation that increases SNAP benefits for families with children such as the SNAP for Kids Act of 2018 (S. 2723) led by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY). This legislation which would increase the underlying SNAP benefit formula for every child between the ages of 5 and 17 years old in a given household.

We are also concerned by expected proposed rules would reduce eligibility for SNAP amongst low-income families with children and increase burdensome work requirements for so-called able-bodied adults without dependents, as that population may include non-custodial parents or vulnerable young people who have aged out of the foster care system or were unaccompanied homeless youth. We urge lawmakers to remain vigilant against such administrative threats.

9.2 Increase Access to High-Quality Child Nutrition Programs Year-Round

The National School Lunch and National School Breakfast Programs and Summer Food Service Program are critical services that work in complement with SNAP to ensure that low-income children have enough to eat. However, these programs require investments and improvements that will further reduce the risk of food insecurity and poor nutrition, especially in the wake of a US Department of Agriculture final rule that will erode school meal nutrition standards around whole grains, sodium, and flavored milk. For low-income children who lack the option to bring meals from home, it is especially crucial that school meals consist of nutritious, healthy ingredients. Congress should therefore invest in the capacity of educational institutions to serve healthy meals. Legislation to support this goal includes the School Food Modernization Act of 2017 (S.1402/H.R. 3006), led by Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) and Rep. Lou Barletta (R-PA), which would offer loan guarantees to finance infrastructure improvements or equipment purchases with a preference to applicants that demonstrate a substantial or disproportionate need.

Congress must also do more to address “meal gaps” wherein children who rely on free or reduced-price school meals for nourishment during the school day and struggle to get enough to eat during the summer, weekends, and extended holidays. Legislative avenues include the Weekends Without Hunger Act (H.R. 7185), led by Rep. Dina Titus (D-NV), which would create a pilot program to allow schools, food banks, homeless shelters, summer meal programs, and more to provide kids with nutritious take-home bags of food so that a vacation from school doesn’t mean hunger for kids. The Stop Child Summer Hunger Act of 2018 (S.3268/H.R. 61516), led by Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) and Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA), would further provide households with children who rely on free or reduced-price school meals with a Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card to support increased food purchases. This legislation would serve as a useful supplement to, but not replacement of, the Summer Food Service Program, which provides nutritious meals and opportunities for educational enrichment in the summer time, with legislation like the

Similarly, legislators should address the gap that occurs when young children age out of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—which provides food and nutrition education to pregnant and post-partum women, infants, and young children deemed to be at nutritional risk—before they enter kindergarten. To support continued access to healthy food for these very young children, we recommend legislation modeled after the Wise Investment in our Children (WIC) Act of 2015, led by Rep. DeLauro (D-CT) and Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA), which would expand WIC eligibility for children from age 5 to age 6, ensuring that children will have access to school meals programs before they stop participating in WIC.

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10 REVITALIZE INFRASTRUCTURE SERVING THE NATION'S CHILDREN

American infrastructure is in desperate need of repair, improvements, and new investments. This is especially true of schools and child care facilities. The American Society of Civil Engineers 2017 Infrastructure Report Card found that more than half of public schools need to make investments for repairs, renovations, and modernizations to be considered to be in “good” condition and gave America’s K-12 school infrastructure a “D+” grade.¹ In the past 10 years, Capital spending — funding to build new schools, renovate and expand facilities, and equip schools with more modern technologies — fell sharply in most states.²

A 2016 “State of Our Schools” report indicates that as a result, there is a nationwide, annual gap of \$46 billion in funding necessary for the proper maintenance and operations, capital construction, and construction of new facilities across the nation’s K-12 schools alone.³ Federal funding currently accounts for just 0.2% of the total current capital investment in our nation’s schools.

The failure to invest in the nation’s infrastructure has extended to water treatment systems and the capital needs of subsidized housing.

This neglect has left millions of children susceptible to environmental harm, and lead to water contamination crises in cities like Flint, Michigan. However, Flint is hardly the only American city to suffer from lead contamination. In 2016, 500,000 children had elevated levels of lead in their blood. But even lower levels of lead—impacting hundreds of thousands of additional children—are dangerous and can damage the brain, leading to impaired memory and executive functioning skills. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 4 million children in the U.S. are living in environments with lead-based paint.⁴ Even though 5.5 to 10 million lead service lines provide water to an estimated 15 to 22 million people in the United States, many schools have never tested their water.⁵

Recommendations

10.1 Make Federal Investments in School Infrastructure projects

Congress should invest in the future of its children by passing legislation aimed at the repair, renovation, and construction of public preschools, elementary schools, and secondary schools—as well as expand existing measures to include child care centers. The School Building Improvement Act of 2017 (S. 1674) led by Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI) would provide \$70 billion in direct federal grants and \$30 billion in school construction bonds over

10 years. The grant structure would focus assistance on communities with the greatest financial needs. This legislation also would require the Government Accountability Office to report on projects carried out within two years after enactment and create a comprehensive study of the physical condition of public schools at least once every five years.

10.2 Eradicate Childhood Lead Exposure at School and at Home

Ensure that federal, state, and local entities continue to identify and address lead contamination in the paint and water in children's homes, child-care facilities, and schools by supporting legislation modeled on legislation proposed by Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) and companion legislation introduced by Rep. Brenda Lawrence (D-MI), titled the Get the Lead Out of Schools Act of 2017 (S. 1401/H.R. 6951). This proposal would ensure periodic testing for lead contamination in schools, while also providing schools with additional resources to monitor lead levels and replace outdated water infrastructure systems.

Support the bipartisan Lead Safe Housing for Kids Act of 2017 (S. 1845/H.R. 6252) introduced by Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Rep. Donald McEachin (D-VA). This proposal would further support lead prevention in assisted housing under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The legislation prohibits the use of visual assessments in housing built before 1978, and instead requires risk assessments – a more comprehensive tool to determine presence of lead hazards. It also necessitates a process for families to relocate if a lead problem is found and the landlord does not mitigate the problem within 30 days of notification. Finally, the bill requires landlords to disclose if lead is known to be in the home.

Pass the bipartisan, bicameral legislation Get the Lead out of Assisted Housing Act of 2018 (S. 3492/H.R. 6887) sponsored by Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-MI) and Rep. Dan Kildee (D-MI). The bill would help protect families from lead exposure by requiring the (HUD) to inspect for lead in water service lines, create a grant program to address lead contamination, and allow a cross-check for lead in water when remediating a home for lead found in paint. Congress must ensure a process for relocation, whether temporary or permanent, for families when lead water service lines are found in a home.

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Conclusion

Any policies that affect children should base their foundations on the best interests of the child.

All children in the United States deserve equal access to health care, education, proper nutrition, housing and the support they need to have a fair chance to succeed.

Doing right by our children is not only the right thing to do, but it also makes smart economic sense. In the coming decades, the ratio of seniors to those of working age will be twice as great as it was in the 20th century. This means far fewer workers to support our economy and replace those who are retiring. This shift would be even more dramatic if it weren't for immigration, because grown children from immigrant families will account for about three-quarters of the growth in working-age population projected from 2020 to 2030.¹

Therefore it is now more critical than ever to invest in our nation's children, who are our future workforce and tax base. We urge the 116th Congress to recognize their value and make children a top priority through implementing this cross-sector set of recommendations.

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