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January 1, 2024

The Honorable Joe Biden  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Kamala Harris  
Vice President of the United States  
The White House, Office of the Vice President  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Ms. Shalanda Young  
Director, Office of Management & Budget  
Executive Office of the President  
The White House  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Ms. Neera Tanden  
Domestic Policy Advisor  
Executive Office of the President  
The White House  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden, Vice President Harris, Director Young, and Ms. Tanden:

Children are in crisis.

Infant and child mortality, which are fundamental measures of child well-being, are rising in the U.S. Children are facing a deepening mental health crisis. Since Congress failed to extend the Build Back Better Act (BBBA) provision that would have continued the improved Child Tax Credit, child poverty has more than doubled. Child care and WIC are facing significant funding shortfalls that Congress is failing to address. And sadly, childhood vaccination rates are falling due to misinformation and increasing vaccine hesitancy. These are just a few examples that highlight the dire state of our nation's children.

In the midst of these major challenges, some state actions are putting children at even greater risk. Some states are wrongly (and even purposely) kicking millions of children off of Medicaid coverage. Others are making it harder for children to access basic care — immunizations, school-based health, services related to mental health, substance use, and reproductive health, and sometimes, even life-saving services — under the guise of laws protecting “parental rights.” A wave of states is also seeking to roll back child labor laws in disturbing ways that may increase the risk of harm to children. Other states have dragged public schools, students, and teachers into harmful culture war battles that further marginalize and harm kids.

Several federal actions also present risks for children. With respect to the federal budget, the House of Representatives has chosen to disproportionately target children for severe budget cuts, including a proposed 80% cut to public schools serving low-income children, and other essential programs

such as Head Start, Healthy Start, teenage pregnancy prevention and family planning programs, and youth training.

Through neglectful inaction or abusive action, federal and state politicians are compounding the challenges children face. Children are experiencing a crisis, and opinion polls show that the public does not have much reassurance for the future. In a recent NBC News poll, a record low (19% of voters) said they feel confident the life of their children's generation will be better than that of their own generation.

In contrast, we have been enormously grateful to the Biden-Harris Administration for its leadership on kids.

The Biden-Harris Administration has taken important regulatory actions for children. On child care, these include the requirement that applications for funding from the CHIPS and Science Act must include plans for affordable, accessible, and high-quality child care for employees, and the HHS proposed rule to improve the affordability and accessibility of child care for families and compensation for child care professionals. The Administration has also worked to strengthen child health through numerous actions, such as: fixing the "family glitch" so that over 5 million people can now afford health insurance coverage, removing barriers to coverage for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients within Medicaid, CHIP, and the Health Insurance Marketplace, and efforts to enforce the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act so that families with private health insurance or Medicaid have access to mental health and substance use disorder services. Finally, other regulatory actions seek to improve economic stability and health for children and families. For example, the new proposed Temporary Assistance for Needy Families regulations will require states to better direct funding to poor children and families, and agency frameworks such as the Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program Health-Related Social Needs Framework provide states guidance on using funds to address housing and nutritional insecurity for youth.

These regulatory measures, along with the proposed investments for children's programs in President Biden's budget request and the release of the American Families Plan, all sought to address the problems facing children with a positive, forward-looking agenda. When the President unveiled the American Families Plan, First Focus Campaign for Children said it "has the potential to be the most important piece of legislation for children and families to ever be enacted into law."

We also appreciate the Biden-Harris Administration's support and signing of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in 2021, which made historic investments that helped struggling families deal with both the global pandemic and the economic recession. Because of ARPA, child poverty in the United States was cut to a record low of 5.2% in the midst of this dual crisis.

The *Children's Budget 2023* finds that these investments pushed the share of federal spending dedicated to kids from a record low of 7.56% in 2020 (the last year of the previous Administration) to 11.93% in 2022.

Although the Administration supposed the continuation of many of these critically important investments in children with the passage of the Build Back Better Act (BBBA) in the House of

Representatives, the Senate allowed them to expire. And in its journey from BBBA to final passage as the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), the number of references to children dropped from 436 to just 1. As an example of the impact, in 2022 child poverty more than doubled to 12.4%.

Furthermore, the share of federal spending dedicated to children has dropped to 9.89% and will almost certainly drop again in 2024 based on the caps and cuts to discretionary spending, which will disproportionately negatively impact children.

As President Biden often says:

*Don't tell me what you value. Show me your budget, and I'll tell you what you value.*

In a time of crisis, we must value our children.

### **We Urge the Biden-Harris Administration to Do All It Can to Address This Crisis**

Children desperately need our nation's leaders to step up and address these issues. Unfortunately, this Congress seems hard pressed to do that. At First Focus Campaign for Children, we have identified well over 100 bills (many of them bipartisan) that would improve child health, education, safety, and well-being, and yet, they are languishing.

Congress is distracted by recurring votes to pick a Speaker, an inability to pass budget or appropriations bills, and endless votes to demean public servants in the Administration by trying to cut their salaries to \$1 rather than supporting agencies with the resources necessary to address these problems.

Unfortunately, this failure is not just an oversight. The agenda of chaos and disarray is quite purposeful. In the context of children, purveyors of this agenda openly admit to fueling lies and misinformation to increase distrust in public schools, vaccines, books, history, and science. Kids are openly bullied by adults for expressing concern about issues, such as gun violence, climate change, reproductive rights, or their education. Many LGBTQ youth are even attacked for just wanting to live their lives fully and authentically as themselves. And in the name of "parental rights," adults are threatening our children's basic human rights to education, health, safety, and well-being.

### **A Call to Action for the Biden-Harris Administration**

The President wrote in *Promises to Keep: On Life and Politics*:

*It's time for a president to stand up and remind the American people that we have promises to keep—promises to the world, promises to one another, promises to our children and to our grandchildren. In rededicating ourselves to the hard work of fulfilling those promises, we restore America as the hope of the world and the vision of a brighter future.*

We urge the Biden-Harris Administration to step into the void left by this willfully ineffectual Congress and continue to build on the regulatory and Administrative actions taken to better the lives of children. Rather than allow the political forces of chaos, distraction, and distrust to prevail,

we urge the Administration to act within its power to address some of the many threats facing children and youth.

Our kids can't wait.

As Vice President Harris has said:

*Every action we make has a profound impact on our children and their future. It's vital we think about them when making decisions.*

### **Administrative Actions for Children**

The Administration has within its power the ability to take the following actions and achieve our shared goals for children:

- **Establish a Child Poverty Reduction Target:** The Administration led the enactment of an expanded Child Tax Credit that cut child poverty to the lowest level ever recorded. Unfortunately, due to focusing on the “deservingness” of parents rather than the needs of children, the U.S. Senate failed to extend the Child Tax Credit. Through its inaction, the child poverty rate more than doubled between 2021 and 2022 – from 5.2% to 12.4%.

The Administration has the authority, through Executive Order, to establish a Child Poverty Reduction Target for the nation (for example, cutting child poverty in half by 2026), which would return the focus to where it should be: better outcomes and results for children.

A Child Poverty Reduction Target is supported by members of Congress. Last November, 24 members of Congress wrote to the White House to ask President Biden to establish a target through Executive Action.

The American public also supports a target. In a 2020 election eve poll by Lake Research Partners, voters supported the creation of a Child Poverty Reduction Target by a 70-20% margin. In a May 2022 poll, Lake Research Partners found that voters believe we are spending too little rather than too much on child poverty by a more than 6-to-1 margin (66-10%).

- **Propose a Plan to Cover All Kids:** At the close of the Obama-Biden Administration, the uninsured rate for children had dropped to 5.1%, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A 2020 election eve poll by Lake Research Partners found that the American people, by an 85-12% margin, said it was important to them “to ensure that every child in the U.S. has health insurance coverage.”

Unfortunately, after all the progress that has been made, we are witnessing a rise in the uninsured rate of children. This increase comes as we are facing down public health crises, such as rising infant and child mortality rates. With the leadership of the Biden-Harris Administration, we should recommit to “cover all kids” in this country.

- **Make Children a Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) through OMB:** Establishing children as a Cross-Agency Priority would require the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to identify and integrate children's welfare as a critical factor across all federal agencies. This systemic approach would ensure that children's needs are considered in policy-making and budgetary processes, fostering interagency collaboration and resource allocation to benefit youth.
- **Create Child Impact Statements:** Governments use child impact statements to ensure that considerations of child well-being are built into the design of policy. As with environmental impact statements, this approach would have government agencies answer the fundamental questions about the potential positive or negative effects of regulations, rules, policies, programs, and guidance on children. The Administration could use an Executive Order or directive to establish this approach, which would be similar to impact assessments and/or statements with respect to the environment, business, and unfunded mandates to state, local, and tribal governments.
- **Adopt a “Best Interest of the Child” Standard:** By establishing such a principle across the Administration, the well-being of children would be placed at the center of all decisions affecting them. This standard would call for a thorough assessment of the potential impact of policies on children’s physical, emotional, and psychological development, ensuring that their “best interests” are the paramount concern in all legislative and administrative actions.

In a May 2022 poll by Lake Research Partners, voters agreed, by an 82-10% margin, that “federal policy involving children should always be governed by a ‘best interest of the child’ standard that makes the protection and the safety of children the first priority.”

The Administration already took a step in this direction in a 2021 Modernize Regulatory Review directive to all federal agencies asking them to review and make recommendations to “promote public health and safety, economic growth, social welfare, racial justice, environmental stewardship, human dignity, equity, and the *interests of future generations*.”

- **Create a White House Office of Children and Youth and/or a Children’s Cabinet:** In a May 2022 poll by Lake Research Partners, voters agreed by an 82-13% margin that “programs for children need greater attention and coordination.” Creating a White House Office on Children and Youth and/or a Children’s Cabinet would help ensure that children are no longer treated as an afterthought and that services for children and families – both here and abroad – are better coordinated across federal agencies and departments.
- **Prioritize Work by the Children’s Interagency Coordinating Council (CICC):** In a similar vein, Congress has appropriated funding for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to create a Children’s Interagency Coordinating Council to better coordinate policy that impacts children.

To ensure this effort succeeds, it is imperative that the CICC not just exist in name only but actively work to enhance policy coordination impacting children within HHS and across other agencies, including the Department of Education, the Agriculture Department, the Justice Department, the State Department, Treasury, and USAID. A strong CICC would ensure that program assistance and funding for children and families are not siloed but are part of a coherent and cohesive strategy.

- **Streamline Access to Services:** The current Medicaid “unwinding” process, where states are reassessing Medicaid eligibility for millions of people post-COVID, has inadvertently resulted in the wrongful termination of coverage for millions of eligible children.

The Administration should wield its full authority to end this practice and to be creative in how best to reduce administrative obstacles and bureaucratic red tape that prevent children and families from accessing services and benefits. Methods could include simplifying the application process, such as through unified applications and data-sharing initiatives, and enhancing outreach and enrollment.

Families face the burden of repeatedly providing the same information to federal and state agencies to prove eligibility for different programs, sometimes even when such programs are located within the same department. This repetition is not just inefficient and wasteful; it’s a barrier that prevents timely access to crucial services. Modern technology should be leveraged to streamline these processes and eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape.

- **Establish a Youth Advisory Council:** Every Administration, current and future, should hear the voices of our young people. Establishing a Youth Advisory Council would provide a platform for young people to express their concerns, aspirations, and ideas directly to policymakers. This Council could play a significant role in shaping and improving policies that are more attuned to the realities and needs of today’s youth. This Council would help empower the younger generation and inspire policies that are better informed by the people they aim to serve.
- **Create a Public Awareness Campaign on Children’s Rights and Needs:** The Administration could lead a comprehensive public awareness campaign to educate the public on the rights and needs of our nation’s children. Even on matters that are specific to children, far too often, focus is misplaced on the needs and concerns of adults. We are the only nation in the world that has failed to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of The Child. In the absence of taking such action, the least the federal government can do is engage in a campaign that would not only raise awareness but also foster a national conversation on the critical importance of prioritizing children in policymaking. By engaging with the media, schools, and community organizations, the Administration can help ensure that children’s rights are understood, championed, and no longer ignored in the U.S.
- **Convene a White House Conference on Children:** The first White House Conference on Children was held in 1909 by President Theodore Roosevelt. Over the years, these

conferences played a vital role in helping drive important changes on children's issues. However, the last White House Conference on Children was held in 1970 – more than a half-century ago. The Biden-Harris Administration could reestablish this tradition and lead a focused conversation on the needs of children that sets the nation back on a course toward improving the lives of our children.

- **Increase Data Collection and Disaggregation:** Enhancing data collection and disaggregation would entail gathering more detailed information on children's health, education, welfare, and safety while breaking down data by demographics such as age, race, gender, ethnicity, disability status, and socioeconomic status. This improved data would enable policymakers and advocates to identify disparities, track progress, and tailor interventions to the needs of specific groups of children more effectively.

Given the historic undercount of young children in decennial censuses, we greatly appreciate the U.S. Census Bureau's continued focus on improving the count of young children, which is key to ensure a fair distribution of federal resources and representation. We applaud the formation of a Cross-Directorate team on the undercount of young children as part of planning efforts for the 2030 decennial census and urge the Census Bureau to take additional efforts to ensure children are properly accounted.

- **Direct the State Department to Continue Providing 10% of Bilateral HIV Funding to Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) Programs.** The U.S. Congress has failed to reauthorize the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the 10% set aside for OVC has expired as of October 1st. Without a Congressional mandate, there is ample opportunity for these precious resources to be diverted elsewhere. OVC programs are the gold standard for addressing the needs of vulnerable children by providing them access to nutritious food, schooling, psychosocial support and livelihood opportunities for their caregivers. Currently PEPFAR is supporting 7.2 million OVC and their caregivers and we call on the Biden-Harris administration to ensure that the full 10 percent of bilateral HIV funding continues to support these children with lifesaving services.
- **Sign a Proclamation Establishing the Second Week in June as Children's Week:** The White House frequently issues proclamations to raise awareness around an array of issues that are not receiving the attention they deserve. In the area of public policy, as noted above, children are often unseen or invisible to policymakers and so their issues are ignored.

To bring attention to the issues of importance to children, the Administration could create a celebration around improving child health, education, nutrition, housing, safety, child abuse prevention, immigration, and international assistance and how these elements increase opportunities for children both at home and around the world.

In 2001, President George W. Bush proclaimed the first Sunday in June as National Children's Day. The proclamation read:

*All adults must work together to ensure the safety and well-being of our Nation's most precious resource, our children. . . We must nurture our children's dreams,*

*help them develop their talents and abilities, and ensure their healthy development so that they may reach their full potential. Our success in this endeavor will affect the direction of their lives and the future strength and vitality of our Nation.*

Predating that proclamation, President Bill Clinton declared the 2nd Sunday in October as National Children's Day. In 1998, the proclamation read:

*One of the most important measures of our success as a Nation is the well-being of our children. As a society, we have no more important responsibility than to help our families raise healthy, happy, loving children in an environment that allows kids to reach their full potential.*

Over the past eight years, child advocates have declared the 2nd Sunday in June National Children's Day and the week following as Children's Week, as we have sought to raise attention to the fact that "every issue is a children's issue."

Thank you for considering these options that the Biden-Harris Administration might use to redirect our nation toward making progress for children. For a more comprehensive Administrative Agenda for Children, please see [Kids at a Crossroads: A Children's Agenda for the Biden-Harris Administration](#).

Sincerely,



Bruce Lesley  
President, First Focus on Children