



October 7, 2013

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Eric Cantor
Majority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Majority Whip
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Republican Conference Chair
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Boehner, Leader Cantor, Whip McCarthy, and Conference Chair McMorris Rodgers:

I am writing on behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children to urge you, as leaders of the House of Representatives, to make children and families a priority in the federal policy and budget decisions that are currently being discussed and debated on Capitol Hill. We want to raise to your attention to some recent actions where Congress, although possibly unintentional, has ignored the needs of children and treated children as an after-thought in a manner that will have negative repercussions for our next generation and our nation's future.

First, it is important to underscore the fact that the Republican Party has historically made the goal of improving the lives of children and families a centerpiece of its legislative agenda at very instrumental moments in our history. Over a century ago and in a special message to Congress in 1909 that was a precursor to his successful effort to create the Federal Children's Bureau, President Theodore Roosevelt said, "Each of our children represents either a potential addition to the productive capacity and the enlightened citizenship of the nation, or, if allowed to suffer from neglect, a potential addition to the destructive forces of the community."

Children and families have also been a key piece of broader legislation, including the 1986 reform of the tax code where President Ronald Reagan championed the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The EITC has proven to be critically important to lifting millions of children in working families out of poverty. As President Reagan said at the bill's signing, ". . . I'm certain that the bill I'm signing today is not only an historic overhaul of our tax code and a sweeping victory for fairness; it's also the best antipoverty bill, the best pro-family measure, and the best job-creation program ever to come out of the Congress of the United States."

A few years later, President George H.W. Bush worked with Congress to create a National Commission on Children that issued a series of major recommendations to Congress that were instrumental in the adoption of the pro-family reform to the tax code through the Child Tax Credit in 1993. As the National Commission explained, "When society values children and the quality of family life, individuals, families themselves, and outside institutions are moved to make the necessary commitment and create supportive environments at home, at school, at work, and in the community."

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In 1997, just a few years later and also building off the recommendations of the National Commission on Children, the Republican-led Congress worked on a bipartisan basis with President Bill Clinton to pass the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). That legislation is widely recognized as one of the most successful initiatives that has been enacted to benefit children, as it has effectively worked to cut the uninsured rate for children by more than half since its inception.

These are all examples of policies that were advanced with strong Republican leadership and enacted on a bipartisan basis. And since tough times are the most important times to protect children, it is what children desperately need today.

Unfortunately, far too often, the opposite has happened. As times have gotten tougher due to the recession, the child poverty rate in this country has risen to 22 percent – an unconscionable level – with hardly a word and certainly no policy focus from either political party on doing something to address it. This is the highest level in twenty years and goes largely unaddressed despite the fact that Harry Holzer of the Urban Institute testified before the Congress that the problem is costing our nation \$500 billion a year. Furthermore, our nation's inaction stands in sharp contrast to Great Britain where all three of the major political parties closely monitor, measure, and offer solutions that have successfully cut the child poverty rate by more than half since they began their national commitment to address it in 1999.

Child poverty is just one of many problems facing our nation's children. Outcomes for children are falling in a variety of measures, as highlighted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT reports, the Foundation for Child Development's Child Well-Being Index, and our report with Save the Children entitled America's Report Card 2012: Children in the U.S. We know, for example, that the U.S. has the 2nd worst infant mortality rate among industrialized nations, over 1 million students are homeless, over 750,000 children are abused and neglected annually, and over 1 in 5 students drop out before graduating from high school.

Instead of affirmative steps to address these problems, children have, instead, become an after-thought in the conversations and debate around federal budget and policy decisions. For example, the Urban Institute just released a new study entitled Kids' Share 2013 that shows federal investments in children declined by \$28 billion in just one year. And projections going forward show that unless Congress changes course, less than 2 cents of every additional federal dollar spent over the next decade will be invested in children.

If the federal budget is any indication of our nation's priorities, the share of spending that goes to children highlights that we do not make our youngest citizens a priority. According to our report entitled Children's Budget 2013, the federal investment dedicated to children has declined for three years in a row and is now below 8 percent. Therefore, while there have been budget cuts to reduce the federal deficit and we strongly believe that reducing the federal deficit is absolutely a children's issue, the problem is that children are absorbing an unfair share of those cuts. Children did not create the recession and have the greatest need during tough times, and yet, are disproportionately bearing the burden of budget cuts at both the federal and state levels.

American voters are deeply concerned by these trends. According to a Public Opinion Strategies (R) poll, by 56-20 percent, Americans expressed deep concern that the lives of children have gotten worse rather than better over the last decade. And, Republican women are the most concerned, as they believe things have become worse over the last ten years for children by an overwhelming 74-10 percent margin. Americans also believe this generation will be the first to fare worse than their parents.

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If we care about our future, we must do better. What is desperately needed is a new and fresh vision for change in support of our nation's children.

As Speaker Boehner has said, “. . .I've been chasing the American Dream my whole career. There're some – some things that are real – very difficult to talk about – family, kids. . .Making sure that these kids have a shot at the American Dream, like I did. It's important.”

We agree with you Mr. Speaker. And to do that, we must focus on and work to ensure that the next generation is better off than us – not worse. Clearly, such an agenda dictates that the place to start is by investing in and tackling the problems facing our future and our nation's children rather than ignoring them. We all know you cannot expect returns on investments that you simply do not make. If we want a pathway forward, we need to renew commitment to tackle the problems facing America's children. It is all about making choices, setting priorities, and valuing families.

As an example, we wanted to bring to your attention instances where children have been neglected with consequences that may be unintentional but are real nevertheless. For example, as the House of Representatives took up the Continuing Resolution (CR), an amendment offered by Representatives Steve Scalise not only defunded the Affordable Care Act (ACA) but also mistakenly swept up and slashed funding for CHIP by 70 percent. Since the Republican Party originally championed CHIP, the GOP should be celebrating its incredible success and protecting its future – not mistakenly putting the program in peril.

Fortunately, a subsequent amendment by Representative Tom Graves with over 60 cosponsors would have protected CHIP from such devastating cuts, but Representative Marsha Blackburn offered an amendment that would have delayed funding for the ACA, but once again, swept up and cut CHIP by 70 percent rather than including the Graves language protecting the health coverage of millions of children.

It is important to note that, if the Senate had taken up and the President had signed either of the first two House-passed CRs, the health of millions of children would have been put at risk in states across the country.

Although it was apparently not intentional, the possible impact on children of the Scalise and Blackburn language was not considered, according to congressional staff we have talked to. A leadership statement in support of the CR read, “. . .the House voted to ensure the federal government remains open, continuing to fund basic services essential to millions of Americans, like paying our men and women in uniform, funding veterans' programs, supporting millions of seniors who rely on Social Security and Medicare, and much more.” Thus, like the defunding amendments by Representatives Scalise and Blackburn, the protection of children was missing from the House leadership statement.

Since then, the government shutdown has exposed children to disproportionate risk. Because most children's programs are discretionary and therefore subjected to the shutdown, there are numerous examples in which children across this country that are being left behind or threatened. This includes the 8.9 million women and children served by the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) who are at imminent risk of being cut off from feeding assistance and the estimated 19,000 children already cut off of Head Start due to the lack of funding and which is compounded by the sequestration cuts to Head Start that had previously cut off 57,000 children. An extended shutdown will have further repercussions, including disruptions to our nation's schools, funding to combat child abuse and neglect, support for child care, housing support, and a long list that grows by the day.

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This is not the agenda that the American public seeks for our nation's children. Rather, voters wish for an agenda and vision that continues support for CHIP, medical research at the National Institutes for Health (NIH), WIC, Head Start, and other investments for children so they can reach and obtain the American Dream. These important investments for children include the Child Tax Credit, EITC, education, early childhood, the prevention of child abuse and neglect, and the DREAM Act. And yet, rather than receive the support and protection they need, all are being threatened or stalled in Congress to one extent or the other.

Although there are certainly issues that are partisan and very difficult to get beyond, particularly in the current environment, children's issues should be a place where we can all work together to forge national bipartisan solutions. As such, we ask that you work with the children's advocacy community toward achieving evidence-based and cost-effective solutions to improve the lives of our nation's children and their families.

To that end, although we would not agree with all the policy prescriptions proposed by Leader Cantor at his speech this past February at the American Enterprise Institute, we applaud him for thinking about and making children a centerpiece of his speech and agenda. As he said, "Government policy should aim to strike a balance between what is needed to advance the next generation, what we can afford, what is a federal responsibility and what is necessary to ensure our children are safe, healthy and able to reach their dreams."

Specifically, on the issue of the Child Tax Credit, Leader Cantor said, "Working families should come first. Everyone agrees a fairer, simpler tax code would give us all more time. In our attempt to make the tax code simpler, we must continue to demonstrate support for young parents who invest in having kids and raising a family. They are America's most valued investors. In 1997, a Republican Congress created the child tax credit specifically to help ease the financial burden of families raising children. In 2001, it was expanded. Such a policy helps to limit the size of government and results in fewer Americans looking to the government for support."

On this, we agree with Leader Cantor and look forward to working with him and the House on protecting the Child Tax Credit and considering an expansion of it, such as that recently proposed by Senator Mike Lee or a more targeted approach of doubling the credit for families with young children, who often need it the most.

The American people are looking for an agenda and vision that values American families and children. This means changing our budget priorities so that children do not continue to bear a disproportionate share of cuts and moving toward an affirmative policy and budget agenda that make the right choices for children. While we strongly believe that would require investments in certain areas, such as education and early childhood, we also recognize that the federal budget deficit is an important issue. Therefore, we are interested in working with the House on a series of low- or no-cost policy changes that would be helpful to children.

A simple but important first step would be a simple commitment to create a dialogue with a set of bipartisan or non-partisan children's organizations so that we can help you fully consider the implications and impact on children with respect to bills before the Congress by asking and answering the simple question: "Is it good for the children?"

In that way, we might identify possible improvements for children that might otherwise go unconsidered and avoid negative, unintended consequences to children, such as the House CR, which would have mistakenly slashed CHIP by 70 percent. If nothing else, we would have been able to highlight the language that Representative Graves had drafted that should have been incorporated into both the Scalise and Blackburn amendments.

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As another example, by a 66-22 percent margin (79-15 percent among women), a poll of American voters demonstrated support for the adoption of a children's budget at the federal level. Such a measure would simply require the President to provide information to Congress about federal spending dedicated to children, so that there is a fuller understanding of what the picture is for the whole child and allow a focus to decide what should potentially be increased or decreased to improve the delivery of services for children in comparison to the rest of the federal budget.

And, by 82-13 percent (83-12 percent among women), Americans support the president and Congress agreeing to adopt a commitment to cut child poverty in half by 2022, just as Great Britain has successfully done.

Furthermore, by 78-15 percent (82-12 percent among women), Americans support the creation of a bipartisan commission, much like the successful 1991 Commission on Children led by President Bush, to recommend solutions to the problems facing America's children.

These are just a few examples of a set of proposals that may lay a pathway toward progress for children. We know you share that desire and we hope to work with you more closely toward a shared vision that will improve the lives and well-being of our nation's children.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bruce Lesley