FIRST FOCUS
CAMPAIGN FOR CHILDREN

1400 Eye Street NW Suite 450 Washington DC 20005
p: 202.657.0670 | Twitter: @Campaign4Kids

January 18, 2024

The Honorable Jodey Arrington
Chairman
House Committee on Budget
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Brendan Boyle
Ranking Member
House Committee on Budget
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Arrington and Ranking Member Boyle:

I am writing on behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal budget and policy decisions, to express our opposition to *H.R. 5779, the Fiscal Commission Act of 2023.* The bill would authorize a bi-partisan, bi-cameral 16-member commission charged with identifying policies to improve the fiscal situation in the medium term, achieve a sustainable debt-to-GDP ratio in the long term, and propose recommendations to balance the budget at the earliest, reasonable date. Unfortunately, the proposed legislation focuses on spending cuts as a solution, fails to center revenue-raising as an important policy option, puts in place a process that undermines Congress' legislative process, and limits public debate and input at a time when we face an investment crisis for too many of our children and their families.

We have seen the game-changing, positive outcomes stemming from increased resources dedicated to children and families. Investments to expand the Child Tax Credit and nutrition benefits, boost child care funding, increase education and housing supports, and more drove a 46% reduction in child poverty in 2021 – the largest year-to-year reduction on record of child poverty – and led to remarkable declines in child hunger and a decrease in the rate of children without health insurance. Ample evidence confirms that investing in children results in near and long-term positive outcomes for them, painting a brighter future for our children, our communities, and our country. For instance, analysts estimate $7 in savings for every $1 dollar spent on reducing childhood poverty. A responsible approach to reducing our deficit must center on raising revenue in manner that creates a fairer tax code where corporations and the wealthy pay their fair share rather than focusing on devastating cuts to programs that support and protect our children's health and well-being.

Children Are In Crisis

Our nation's children are in crisis. Across the country, children are undergoing immense challenges to living full and happy lives, and too many children lack the basic resources they need to thrive. Tragically, despite increased attention to children during the height of the pandemic, many reports have shown that matters are now getting worse—not better— for children as we choose not to sustain our commitment and federal investment. Within this overall decline of child well-being, many children of color are disproportionately suffering.

For example:

- **Child and Teen Mortality**: Child and teen mortality increased by 20% between 2019 and 2021, the largest increase in 50 years. These tragic figures come after a previous study found U.S. children had a 70% greater chance of dying in childhood than kids born in other wealthy countries. We are failing our children.

- **Infant Mortality**: The U.S. infant mortality rate, which was already much higher than in other wealthy nations, increased for the first time in two decades between 2021 and 2022. We are failing our babies.

- **Child Hunger**: 10% of all U.S. children (7.3 million kids) did not have enough food to keep them healthy in 2022. That is a nearly 7% increase of children over the previous year. Rates of food insecurity were significantly higher for households with children that included a Black or Hispanic adult.

- **Child Poverty**: Child poverty more than doubled in 2022 compared to 2021, with the rate of children living in poverty increasing from 5.2% to 12.4%. This increase represents more than 5 million children we allowed to backslide into poverty within a single year.

- **Children's Mental Health**: We are in the midst of a mental health crisis, with close to 20% of children aged 3-17 experiencing a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder. Tragically, in 2021, suicide was the second most common cause of death among children aged 10-14. Firearm deaths ranked first.

- **Children's Health Coverage**: As states have restarted Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) redeterminations following the phase out of COVID-19 continuous coverage protections, children are falling through the cracks and losing their health care coverage. At least 10 million individuals have been disenrolled and, while data is limited, children have made up nearly 4-in-10 of Medicaid disenrollments in states reporting age breakouts. Many of these disenrollments occur as a result of administrative issues, not because the children are ineligible. In the midst of a child and infant mortality crisis, these administrative issues are causing many thousands of eligible children to lose their health care coverage.

- **Homelessness:** More than 1 million school-age children were identified as homeless in the 2020-2021 school year, and 5% of all children under 6 were experiencing homelessness even before the start of the pandemic. Homelessness is even more prevalent among children of color — Black, Hispanic, Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Alaskan high school students disproportionately experience homelessness compared to their white or Asian peers. In addition, current federal funding is not sufficient to assist all families with children who struggle to afford housing and families with children are a declining share of recipients of rental assistance.

- **Child Care and Early Learning:** Quality child ccare is out of reach for many families. The cost to a family of child care for two children in a center in 2022 was more than annual mortgage paytments in 41 states and the District of Columbia, and the cost of child care for an infant at a center was more than in-state tuition at a public university in 32 states and D.C. Child care is least affordable and accessible for Black, Hispanic, and low-income working parents. Nearly 60% of Hispanic families live in a child care desert, meaning that an area has more than three young children for every licensed child care slot. The most recent data available indicate the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Head Start, and Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting programs serve just a fraction of eligible families –15% of eligible families received a subsidy under CCDBG, 36% and 11% of eligible children had access to Head Start and Early Head Start's comprehensive services, respectively, and 15% of eligible families received home visiting services.

No child should have to experience these harsh realities. And polling shows that American voters, regardless of political affiliation, want a positive children's agenda. A 2022 poll found that, by an overwhelming margin, voters believe the federal government is spending too little on children's issues. These margins grow when asked about specific issue areas. For example, by a 64-5% margin, voters believe we are spending too little rather than too much on child hunger. By a 66-10% margin, voters believe we are spending too little rather than too much on child poverty. And by a 66-7% margin, voters believe we are spending too little rather than too much on child abuse prevention. With respect to early childhood and public education, voters believe we are spending too little rather than too much by 56-10% and 60-14% margins, respectively.

A broad range of federal programs and services – supported through mandatory and discretionary spending and tax policies -- work together to benefit our nation's children, but additional investments are widely needed to meet their unique, urgent, and growing needs. As is often the case, children from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities, such as children of color, children in immigrant families, and children with disabilities, experience the deepest impact of lawmakers' failure to prioritize children in budget decisions. First Focus on Children's annual Children's Budget tracks over 250 programs and illustrates that children traditionally have not been a priority in federal budget decisions.

Our 2023 analysis shows that the share of federal funding for children dropped from a record high of nearly 12% in FY 2021 and FY 2022 to 9.8% in FY 2023 despite efforts by our congressional champions and an overwhelming need for support. Overall, children's funding has experienced a real year-to-year decline since FY 2021, dropping nearly 20% in FY 2022 and almost 16% in FY 2023. For children ages 0-3, investments comprise a very small fraction of the federal budget — consistently less than 2% and a mere 1.5% in FY 2023— despite those years being a critical time in a child's development when investments can make a profound lifelong impact. Internationally, the U.S. historically spends just a sliver of its budget on children, only 9 cents of every dollar in FY 2023.

In short, we are gravely concerned that the Fiscal Commission bill would lead to recommendations resulting in harmful cuts to supports for children and their families and exacerbate the problems they face. We urge Congress to prioritize the best interests, needs, and concerns of children who are in crisis when making critical budget and tax policy decisions and ensure those decisions are considered in a manner that allows for vital public debate and input.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely

Bruce Lesley

Bruce Lesley
President