



September 3, 2025

The Honorable Susan Collins  
Chair  
U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee  
Washington, DC. 20510

The Honorable Tom Cole  
Chair  
U.S. House Appropriations Committee  
Washington, DC. 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro  
Ranking Member  
U.S. House Appropriations Committee  
Washington, DC. 20515

Dear Chair Collins, Ranking Member Murray, Chair Cole, and Ranking Member DeLauro,

I am writing on behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring children are central in federal policy and budget decisions, to urge you to prioritize children as you continue work on the Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) annual spending bills that will have consequential effects on the lives of our children and grandchildren. Child-centered policy is good for our country and is good for our kids. The serious challenges children experience affect every aspect of their day-to-day lives – infant and child mortality are rising, child poverty is rising, uninsured rates for children are rising, child care is in crisis, the children's mental health crisis is soaring, homelessness is up, and hunger is surging. These overwhelming challenges require more attention, understanding, and investment, not less as you proceed with FY26 funding decisions. We urge you to make children a greater priority in federal budget and policy decisions by:

- Centering children when making upcoming decisions about FY26 spending bills and opposing policy riders often debated as part of the appropriations process that could harm children's healthy development, safety and well-being;
- Rejecting any proposals to reorganize, restructure, or entirely eliminate federal agencies and departments during consideration of the FY26 annual spending bills, continuing resolutions, and proposed rescissions legislation;
- Insisting that the administration follows the law and releases the FY2025 funding that Congress enacted in March and does not withhold additional funding approved by Congress going forward; and
- Opposing future rescissions proposals that claw back congressionally approved resources for programs supporting children and their families.

### **Reverse Downward Spending Trend on Children**

Too many kids are at risk of losing health care and quality education, going to bed hungry, struggling to find employment, and falling into poverty because lawmakers neglect to prioritize them in federal budget decisions. We have an obligation to protect our children. If we do not work together and take bold action to improve the lives of our children, their bright future is in jeopardy.

A broad range of federal programs and services work together to support our nation's children, but additional investments are widely needed to meet their unique, urgent, and growing needs. Our annual

Children's Budget provides a comprehensive analysis of the share of spending allocated to children over more than 250 programs, both mandatory and discretionary, in the federal budget. Our analysis shows that historically children have not received anywhere close to their fair share of government funds, dismissing evidence that investing in children results in near and long-term positive outcomes for them and benefits their families and the country's overall economy – there is an estimated savings of \$7 for every \$1 dollar spent on reducing childhood poverty.

Preliminary analysis for FY25 estimates the share of federal spending on children is 8.57% and the FY24 share for babies and toddlers was a mere 1.52%. The ongoing analysis suggests that discretionary spending on kids fell by 2.8% adjusted for inflation in FY25, making it the fourth straight year of declining investments for kids. The House topline spending for FY26 also would result in roughly a 6% decrease in non-defense discretionary spending. Real harm to children certainly would come under the Trump Administration's proposed FY26 Budget which would cut discretionary spending on children by nearly \$27 billion – a reduction of 23.6% in discretionary funding for kids. The budget request also proposes the consolidation or elimination of over 50 programs that support children that would account for nearly \$19 million in funding cuts. Alarmingly, recent actions by Congress, the administration, and the courts are harming our children. Passage of H.R. 1 will severely and heartlessly cut nearly a trillion dollars from Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program and dramatically reduce funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by close to \$200 billion. These historic cuts mean millions of kids will suffer.

As many families continue to face significant economic challenges, the annual appropriations process presents a great opportunity to prioritize the well-being of children by investing in programs proven to have both immediate and long-term benefits for kids and their families here and abroad. While not comprehensive, below we provide recommendations for the FY26 Agriculture, Commerce/Justice/Science, Interior/Environment, Labor/Health and Human Services/Education, State/Foreign Operations (National Security/Department of State), and Transportation/HUD bills that would help to reverse the disinvestment in our children and improve their health, education, safety, and economic security.

## **AGRICULTURE/RURAL DEVELOPMENT/FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION**

### Nutrition Assistance

**We urge lawmakers to support full funding of \$8.2 billion provided by the Senate-mark for the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).** WIC serves 7 million women and children nationwide. The Senate's funding level is a \$603 million increase over fiscal year 2025 and ensures that all eligible participants can continue to rely on the essential nutrition assistance and support provided by WIC. Importantly, the bill also continues full funding for additional fruit and vegetable benefits, which President Trump's budget request sought to reduce to 2014 levels—eliminating essential, nutritious support for women and children.

### FDA Center for Tobacco Products

As you consider the FY226 Agriculture appropriations bill, please do not include language that would prohibit FDA from finalizing or implementing a proposed rule to establish requirements for tobacco manufacturers regarding the manufacture, design, packing, and storage of their products. Manufacturing standards for tobacco products are an important public health protection, and this rider would prevent FDA from finalizing a rule that would take common sense actions such as minimizing or preventing the contamination of tobacco products with foreign substances; ensuring that the actual nicotine concentrations in e-cigarettes do not vary from what is listed in the product's labeling; and establishing the ability to trace all components, parts, ingredients, additives, and materials to aid in investigations of tobacco products that do not meet specifications.

Additionally, we support funding for robust enforcement activities for efforts against illicit e-cigarettes and urge Congress to fully fund these, particularly as significant staff have been cut from the Center for Tobacco Products, which will hobble the agency's enforcement efforts against illegal e-cigarette products that target children in their marketing.

## **COMMERCE/JUSTICE/SCIENCE:**

Mandated by the Constitution, the federal government conducts a count of the country's entire population every 10 years. The goal of the census is to count every person, regardless of citizenship status, in all our communities once and only once, and collect basic information about them in a secure, convenient, and confidential manner. A fair, accurate, and comprehensive census is immensely important because the data determines our congressional reapportionment, guides state and local government representation, and impacts the equitable distribution of trillions of federal dollars. We are concerned by the [Census Bureau findings](#) that the number of U.S. children ages 0 to 4 counted in the 2020 Census was about 1 million lower than the benchmark population estimate — an [undercount of 5.46%](#). It identified this undercount of young children to be larger than [any other age group](#). **We strongly oppose Section 556 of the House bill that ignores the constitution and would require the U.S. Census Bureau to exclude persons who are unlawfully in the U.S. from the state population totals used to apportion seats in the U.S. House of Representatives after each census.** In addition, the Census Bureau cannot reliably determine the number of undocumented immigrants in each state without destroying the chance for an accurate census in every state and every community. Even posing a question on citizenship to every person in every household would cause census responses to [decline](#), rendering the survey inaccurate and also gravely impact the count of young children. We support robust funding for the Census Bureau to ensure it can test strategies now that could help improve the count of young children in 2030.

## **LABOR/HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES/EDUCATION**

### **Department of Labor**

We are opposed to the President's proposal to restructure the Training and Employment Services by consolidating ten workforce development programs, including Youth Activities and Youth Build, into a "Make America Skilled Again" that would result in an over \$900 million decrease in funding. We also oppose the request to significantly cut the Job Corps program that would reduce its funding to roughly 10% of its FY24 funding level. These programs provide a springboard for young people to set themselves up for a more secure future. People aged 16-24 face significantly higher unemployment than people in general and are more than twice as likely to be searching for work and unable to find it. Youth training programs can help fill this gap.

### **Department of Health and Human Services**

#### **Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)**

We appreciate the funding included by the Labor HHS Appropriations Subcommittee in the FY 26 Appropriations bill, and we request additional funding for a total of \$13.05 billion for CCDBG, which will increase the availability of care for families, help better support the early learning workforce, and support states in making targeted investments to their child care systems to serve their long-term needs. CCDBG is the largest source of federal funding for child care, but is only able to reach less than 15% of eligible children.

### **Head Start and Early Head Start**

We similarly appreciate the funding provided for Early Head Start and Head Start by the Senate Labor HHS Appropriations Subcommittee, and we ask for additional funding to total \$17.47 billion, in order to allow the program to better serve families, support increased compensation and a cost of living adjustment for teachers, and fund quality improvement efforts. Head Start currently serves over 775,000 children and their families, including children with disabilities, those in foster care, and children experiencing homelessness, by providing them and their families with nutrition, care, health, and support services. Head Start has faced numerous threats to its important work, including staffing losses and threats of elimination during this administration. We ask you to continue the bipartisan support Head Start has always enjoyed and provide the funding that will allow this vital program to continue serving children and their families in our communities.

### **Preschool Development Grants**

We request \$500 million for Preschool Development Grants, which are used to increase the quality and efficiency of existing early learning programs and systems and strategically optimize federal and state funding streams. These grants allow states to do long-term planning for their early learning systems and best optimize other federal sources of funding.

### **Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS)**

We urge you to provide at least \$500 million in funding for CCAMPIS which would ensure that roughly 100,000 more parenting college students receive child care assistance. CCAMPIS helps low-income student parents enrolled in higher education access child care. More than 20% of all undergraduate students are raising children, but at current funding and award levels, the program only supports a fraction of the student parents who rely on child care to succeed in school.

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Parts C and Part B, Section 619**

We ask that you provide at least \$974.8 million for IDEA Part C and \$683.5 million for preschool special education services under IDEA Part B, Section 619. Federal investments in both the IDEA Part C infant and toddler program and Part B, Section 619 preschool program have failed to match increases in the number of children served, as well as the cost of inflation. Consequently, both programs have experienced significant erosion of funding over the last two decades, which has caused financial constraints at the state level that have impacted access to services for children with disabilities.

### **Gun Violence Prevention Research**

We urge you to provide \$35 million for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), \$25 million for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and \$1 million for the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to conduct public health research into firearm morbidity and mortality prevention. We are grateful to Congress for providing \$12.5 million for the CDC and \$12.5 million for the NIH in FY 2025 and that the Senate Labor HHS Appropriations Subcommittee's FY26 bill continues this funding, and we encourage you to sustain and build on these levels in FY 2026. Across this country, communities are suffering from preventable firearm-related injuries and deaths. Suicide, violent crime, and accidental shootings cause trauma to children, families, and communities affected by these preventable tragedies. In 2023, the most recent year for which we have data, firearm-related injuries led to 46,728 total fatalities, with suicides contributing to more than half of those deaths. This research funding previously appropriated by Congress is already improving scientific understanding of firearm-related morbidity and mortality and rigorously evaluating the effectiveness of death and injury prevention strategies, as well as determinants of firearm injury, the identification of those at risk, and the evaluation of innovative interventions. This work will help save and improve the lives of children and we ask for your continued support.

### **Family Violence Prevention & Services Act (FVPSA)**

We urge you to provide \$500 million for FVPSA in FY2026. This is the only federal funding stream for survivors and children to access shelter, counseling, hotline services, and other supportive services resulting from domestic violence. It provides training and technical assistance and funds the Survivor Leadership Cohort funded through the National Health Resource Center. FVPSA also includes the Specialized Services for Abused Parents and Children program, which supports shelters and other community-based agencies to address the specific needs of children exposed to domestic violence.

### **Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) Grants**

We request that you fully fund CBCAP grants and reject the proposal in the president's FY26 budget to cut the program by \$10 million. CBCAP grants are funded under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act and support community-based efforts to develop, operate, expand, enhance, and coordinate initiatives, programs, and activities to prevent child abuse and neglect. CAPTA emphasizes identifying parent leaders and involving parents, including members from underrepresented and underserved groups, in the planning, implementation, and improvement of community-based child abuse prevention programs.

### **The MaryLee Allen Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) program**

We ask you to fully fund the PSSF program and reject the proposal in the president's FY26 budget to cut the program by \$10 million. PSSF provides formula grants each year to states, territories, and tribes to prevent child maltreatment and the unnecessary separation of children from their families; improve the quality of care and services to children and their families; and ensure permanency for children by reuniting them with their parents, or by promoting adoption or another permanent living arrangement. Funding may be used to develop, establish, or expand, and to operate coordinated programs of community-based family support services, family preservation services, family reunification services, and adoption promotion and support services.

### **Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA)**

We request that you fund the Runaway and Homeless Youth program at \$200 million in FY26. This critical program is designed to meet the needs of runaway youth by funding local facilities, providing temporary residential care and counseling, and establishing a national toll-free hotline. The RHYA provides services that are proven to help young people experiencing homelessness build long-term stability—and it does so more cost-effectively than other systems they too often encounter, such as juvenile or adult courts. Yet, despite their impact, RHYA programs have been chronically underfunded since their creation. Today, only about one percent of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness receive support through a RHYA program each year.

[With increased funding, approximately 1,400 RHYA programs across the country could expand their reach](#)—providing housing and supportive services to nearly 50,000 young people and connecting with more than 70,000 youth through street outreach and drop-in centers. While the need is far greater, this investment would significantly strengthen our nation's capacity to prevent and ultimately end youth homelessness.

### **CDC Office on Smoking and Health**

We urge Congress to fund the CDC Office on Smoking and Health (OSH) at \$310 million and reject attempts by the current administration to [eliminate it](#). Tobacco and e-cigarette use in youth continues to be a serious problem. CDC and the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) most recent National Youth Tobacco Survey showed that more than 1.6 million youth, including 7.8 percent of high schoolers, reported using e-cigarettes last year. Alarming, 42.1 percent of high school e-cigarette users reported use on 20 days or more a month, including nearly 30 percent who reported daily use.

To combat youth tobacco use, OSH staff have worked with state and local health departments to identify and implement effective strategies to reduce youth e-cigarette use and assist youth who are addicted to nicotine, as well as conducted critical surveillance and research on youth tobacco product use, including the types of products used and patterns of use, information that is essential for understanding the scope of the problem and developing effective responses. OSH also administers the National Youth Tobacco Survey, which collects vital information on current and emerging trends in youth tobacco use. The elimination of OSH would harm our progress in preventing kids from using tobacco products, and instead a robust public health response is needed to prevent e-cigarettes and other new tobacco products from placing a new generation at risk for nicotine addiction and tobacco use.

### **Healthy Start**

We urge you to include \$145.25 million for the Healthy Start program for Fiscal Year 2026, as the Senate Labor HHS Appropriations Subcommittee did in its bill. For more than three decades, Healthy Start has served as a lifeline for thousands of families, particularly in maternity care deserts, where access to prenatal and maternal care is severely limited or nonexistent. Established in 1991 with strong bipartisan support, Healthy Start remains a critical tool in our nation's fight against infant mortality and in improving maternal health.

### **Title V Maternal and Child Health Services Block Grant**

We urge you to support at least \$1 billion for the Title V Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Services Block Grant in FY2026, reflecting increases for both the state formula fund as well as Special Projects of Regional and National Significance (SPRANS). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 700 pregnancy-related deaths occur in the U.S. each year, and more than 80 percent of these deaths are preventable. Further, CDC released data indicating that the total infant mortality rate in the U.S. increased by 3% from 2021-2022. The Title V MCH Block Grant is the only federal program of its kind devoted solely to improving the health of all women and children. State health departments use the Title V MCH Block Grant to design and implement a wide range of statewide and community-level maternal and child health programs to fit the needs of their specific populations, and its funding provided access to health care and public health services for an estimated 59 million people in FY23, including 99% of infants, 94% of all pregnant people, and 51% of children nationwide.

### **Surveillance for Emerging Threats to Moms and Babies (SET-NET)**

We request \$100 million for SET-NET at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention CDC. SET-NET helps families, health care providers, public health professionals, and policymakers take action to save lives, reduce risk, and improve the health of pregnant individuals and infants. This funding would enable SET-NET to reach additional jurisdictions, track more threats, and lead the nationwide preparedness and response needed to protect pregnant individuals and infants in the United States from emerging and re-emerging public health threats. We also ask you to include the following bill report language:

*Surveillance for Emerging Threats to Mothers and Babies* — The committee includes \$100,000,000 to expand CDC's Surveillance for Emerging Threats to Mother and Babies funded entities to additional threats and additional U.S. States, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and tribal entities. The program supports CDC's collaboration with State, tribal, territorial, and local health departments to monitor the impact of emerging health threats on pregnant people and their babies and inform public health and clinical decision-making to improve the health of pregnant people and infants.

### **Pediatric Mental Health Care Access (PMHCA) Program**

We ask you to provide \$31 million for the PMHCA program. There are currently 54 PMHCA programs helping children in 46 states, D.C., and several U.S. territories and tribal nations. The PMHCA program supports pediatric primary care practices with telehealth consultation by child mental health teams, including child and adolescent psychiatrists, thereby increasing access to mental health services for children. The PMHCA program also enhances the capacity of pediatricians to screen, treat, and refer children with mental health concerns. Integrating mental health and primary care has been shown to substantially expand access to mental health care, improve health and functional outcomes, increase satisfaction with care, and achieve cost savings. These programs enhance access to mental health care for children, at a time when the need could not be more urgent.

### **Project Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health (LAUNCH)**

Developed to create a foundation for promoting early childhood mental health and preventing diagnosable conditions, Project LAUNCH enables states and communities to create systems of care that meet the mental health needs of children ages birth to age 8. We ask you to maintain funding for this important program in FY2026.

### **Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Grants**

IECMH grants are one of only two federal funding streams dedicated to infant and early childhood mental health and directly invests in mental health services for young children ages birth to 12 years. These funds ensure young children at risk of mental health disorders are identified and receive interventions early, preventing more severe conditions down the line. We ask Congress to maintain funding for this program in FY2026.

### **Pregnant and Postpartum Women (PPW) Program**

Maternal mental health is of critical importance not only for pregnant and postpartum mothers, but also for early childhood experience and development. Pregnant and postpartum women with substance use disorders face significant challenges receiving the services they need to care for themselves and their babies, a gap the PPW program was designed to address. By providing access to effective residential treatment, serving mothers and their children, and supporting the transition back into the community, PPW keeps mothers in recovery at a particularly high-risk time, strengthening health outcomes for mothers, children, and families. We ask that you maintain funding for this program in FY2026.

### **Children's Hospital Graduate Medical Education (CHGME) program**

We request \$778 million in FY 2026 for the Children's Hospital Graduate Medical Education (CHGME) program, which provides funds to children's teaching hospitals for the operation of accredited graduate medical residency training programs. CHGME trains more than half of the nation's pediatricians and pediatric subspecialists but receives less than half the funding per resident as adult training programs.

### **988 Report Language**

In 2023, 40% of high school students reported feeling hopelessness and sadness. Nine percent of students attempted suicide, a national rate that increased by 12.5% over the last decade. Between 2018 and 2022, over 30,000 teens and young adults died by suicide, establishing suicide as the second leading cause of death for Americans aged 15 to 24. These numbers are even worse for LGBTQ+ youth, who experience suicide rates up to four times as high. In 2022, Congress took action to address this epidemic by enacting 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and created a specialized option for LGBTQ+ youth to access via 988. However, research shows that as recently as 2024, only 5% of young adults were aware of 988 and its life-saving support, compared to 15% of all adults, and the LGBTQ+ option for youth was recently

eliminated. We ask that you include the following report language in the FY2026 Labor HHS, Education, and Related Agencies appropriations bill to address youth suicide:

**988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.** — *The Committee continues to be concerned that suicide remains a leading cause of death amongst adolescents and young adults, however only 5% of individuals aged 18-29 were aware of the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in 2024. The Committee directs SAMHSA to coordinate with the relevant Departments and young adult behavioral health stakeholders, such as stakeholders serving secondary school and postsecondary students to increase adolescent and young adult awareness of 988 via awareness activities, including the publication of 988 on newly-printed standard issue student identification cards and driver's licenses, as authorized under P.L. 117-328 §1103.*

**Garrett Lee Smith Youth Suicide Prevention Campus Grants.** — *The Committee recognizes that delays in youth receiving treatment leads to higher acuity levels, health care costs, and risks of suicide. Campus programs training students on primary prevention and early intervention with their classmates have been shown to improve treatment-seeking and mental health referrals. The Committee directs the Assistant Secretary to prioritize applications proposing to support student groups on campus that both educate and train students on primary prevention and intervention with their classmates at risk of experiencing mental health and substance use disorders, with the goal of increasing classmates' treatment-seeking behaviors as is authorized under P.L. 117-328 § 1423. Additionally, the Assistant Secretary shall prioritize applications that include a plan to seek input from relevant stakeholders including student-serving mental health groups on campus as authorized. The Assistant Secretary shall include in their study and annual report to Congress details on the initial effectiveness of the awarded grants prioritizing such activities and input.*

### **Children's Interagency Coordinating Council (CICC)**

The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) was assigned the responsibility for establishing the CICC and it was launched in November 2023. There is dedicated federal funding to focus on child poverty reduction and the promotion of family economic security. Part of the federal resources is directed to the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine to study impacts of the Child Tax Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit on child poverty. We recommend that the Committee continues current funding at \$3,000,000 for the interagency council's activities. We also recommend that the Committee requests a briefing within 180 days of enactment of this act on the interagency council's activities, including efforts to establish a permanent leadership structure and identify officials from key agencies across the government who will participate as members of the council.

### **Reaching children eligible for Social Security survivor benefits**

Surviving children and their caregivers face tremendous financial hardship when faced with the death of a parent, which leads to other negative outcomes for children in nearly every facet of their lives. Though these children fortunately qualify for survivor benefits, estimates suggest nearly one million such children are not reached by the Social Security system. We ask lawmakers to urge the Social Security Administration, using data it has already collected, to prioritize and improve efforts to reach children who qualify for survivor benefits, thereby reducing the number of children who are eligible but do not receive benefits. Lawmakers should appropriate such sums as necessary for this purpose.

### **Department of Education**

Investments in our public education system are more critical now than ever before. This past year has been far from typical for our schools, resulting in negative impacts on students and creating an urgent

need for increased funding. The Department of Education has faced unprecedented threats, including the elimination of half of its workforce. These actions have already had serious consequences, such as the dismissal of thousands of civil rights complaints. Moreover, the termination of numerous Department of Education grants has created problems such as undermining efforts to track student performance through research and has impeded the professional development of educators. The intentional withholding of funds has further limited schools' ability to provide essential supports for students, including after-school and summer programs. Continued threats to education funding have placed additional strain on schools, forcing them to make increasingly difficult decisions.

We urge appropriators to reject recommendations made by the White House to cut education funding. We oppose block granting any funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Congress must uphold the existing statutory requirements of these and other education and civil rights laws so that schools can serve and support all students, including students with disabilities, especially those served by states and districts through Part B preschool (ages 3-5) and all Part D National Activities. Similarly, we oppose the consolidation of education programs, which could lead to the effective discontinuation of critical education programs. We would support funding levels for the programs below and language ensuring that the funds allocated for the specific programs are used only for their distinct purposes.

#### **IDEA Part B (Grants to States)**

We request \$16.661 billion in IDEA Part B Special Education Grants to States. These grants are part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and assist states in meeting the cost of providing free special education and related services to children with disabilities. When Congress authorized IDEA, it committed to Part B Funding covering 40% of the excess cost of educating students with disabilities. According to the Congressional Research Service, however, the IDEA shortfall in the 2024-2025 school year nationwide was \$38.66 billion.

#### **Title I-A**

We urge funding of \$20.54 billion for the Title I grants to Local Education Agencies that rely on these federal resources to provide extra academic support for the education of disadvantaged children. State and local governments have different funding formulas and levels of wealth, resulting in different schools receiving vastly different resources, often correlating to factors such as race and income level. The Title I grants help to compensate for inequities in high-poverty areas with lower levels of local revenue to fund public education.

#### **Title III**

We urge funding of \$2 billion for the Title III grants program (authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act) focused on improving the academic attainment of English Learner (EL) students both linguistically and academically. It is the only federal funding stream designated for ELs. These state grants are used to support activities including, consultation to develop statewide standardized entrance and exit procedures, effective language instructional programs, professional development, and more.

#### **Institute for Education Sciences (IES)**

We urge funding of \$900 million for the Institute for Education Sciences. IES funds development and rigorous testing of new approaches for improving education outcomes for all students and conducts large-scale evaluation of federal education programs and policies. IES also supports education sciences, evidence-based policies and practices and collects and reports education statistics on how well the U.S. is educating its students. We oppose the president's proposal to cut IES by more than 50%.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers**

We urge funding of \$2.1 billion for this program in FY26. The Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers program is a critical source of federal funding dedicated entirely to supporting before- and-after school and summer activities for students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. This program provides academic enrichment opportunities for children during out-of-school time, offering social emotional learning, STEM activities, tutoring and physical activities. It is estimated that 1 in 5 children still do not have someone to care for them after school, so inadequate funding and delays in the release of resources would have devastating impacts across the country.

### **McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program:**

We urge support of \$200 million for the EHCY program in FY26. The EHCY program is the only federal education program that helps to mitigate some of the negative consequences of homelessness for children. It helps to identify homeless students, assist them in school enrollment, and coordinate services for them so that they will succeed. The investment also supports tutoring, counseling, purchasing of school supplies, and professional development for educators and community organizations. Nationally, only 24 percent of school districts receive EHCY grants and increased funding would raise the number of schools that receive EHCY grants. As child and youth homelessness continues to increase, it is essential that schools are equipped to identify and assist students experiencing homelessness. The rate of eviction for households with children is more than double the eviction rate for households without children.— each year from 2007-2016, 2.9 million children lived in households experiencing an eviction filing. Recent research finds that babies and toddlers are the most at risk of eviction. Furthermore, research tells us that there are enormous racial disparities in filing and eviction rates that persist across levels of income.

### **Full Service Community Schools**

We urge funding Full-Service Community Schools at the highest level possible in FY 2026. This investment will reach over 250,000 students in schools and communities that have shown a need for this program. This investment proves to be a wise one: coordinating resources at the school and system levels translates to a return on investment of over \$7 for every \$1 invested in a Coordinator's salary. In addition, during the most recent Full-Service Community School request for proposals, over 400 communities submitted letters of intent to apply, continuing a three-year trend of increasing demand for this evidence-based strategy. This demonstrates that leaders from across the nation recognize the efficacy of Full-Service Community Schools in rural, tribal, and urban areas as a means by which to help students achieve academically. Community Schools are an effective strategy for coordinating and aligning school and community resources, increasing family and community engagement to support students' success.

## **INTERIOR/ENVIRONMENT**

### **Lead Testing in Schools**

As work continues on the FY226 Interior/Environment funding bill, we urge Congress to provide at least \$50 million for Lead Testing in Schools under the State and Tribal Assistance Grant which would ensure the continued success the EPA has had in protecting children and school faculty from lead. There is no safe level of lead in drinking water, especially for children. Exposure to lead is a significant health concern. The growing bodies of children and infants absorb more lead than the average adult. The Lead Testing in Schools program has benefited 8.8 million children and counting, testing over 12,000 schools and over 20,000 child care facilities. This program works and we urge Congress to continue this successful effort by rejecting attempts by the current administration to cut funding by a cruel 39.2% from FY 2024.

We urge Congress to provide at least \$7 million in funding to the EPA's Children and Other Sensitive Populations: Agency Coordination program. As stated in the Congressional Justification: [protecting children's environmental health is foundational to EPA's mission](#). To ensure the EPA follows this mission, this program should receive more than approximately flat funding in order to successfully coordinate efforts across the EPA and ensure children are protected from toxic material and environmental factors, which is in line with the current administration's Executive Order 14212, Establishing the President's Make America Health Again Commission.

**Comments to EPA's Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee (CHPAC) can be [found here](#). "First Focus on Children strongly urges CHPAC to make recommendations to EPA Administrator Zeldin to ensure EPA's position as a premiere federal leader on children's environmental health protection.**

[We recommend that top priorities for the Administrator are supporting the EPA's critical work and funding to achieve healthy schools](#) and increasing recognition of the incredible expertise the agency's team brings to that work. In addition, EPA's Office of Children's Health must be empowered to continue its vital role of incorporating children's health considerations into all EPA regulations, guidance, and policy. Strong support and leadership from the Administrator for EPA's Office of Children's Health and healthy schools work presents an immediate and achievable opportunity to reduce harmful exposures, prevent chronic illness, and support healthier learning and development for all children."

We also are gravely concerned about the proposed elimination of the following programs in the FY26 budget request: Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Programs, Clean Air and Climate: Climate Protection, Climate and Health, Environmental Justice, Indoor Air: Radon Program, National Asthma Control Program, and Office of Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes. We strongly urge you to support continued funding for these critical programs.

## **SENATE STATE/FOREIGN OPERATIONS and HOUSE NATIONAL SECURITY/DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

The United States has had an impressive legacy of safeguarding and improving the lives of the most vulnerable children worldwide. Over the past 40 years, increased global investments in maternal and child health, nutrition, clean water and sanitation, and the prevention and treatment of disease have yielded massive strides in the reduction of preventable suffering and deaths of young children. Thanks in large part to Congressional investment in poverty-focused development and humanitarian assistance, [deaths of children](#) under 5 years of age due to preventable disease and malnutrition fell from more than 12 million a year in 1990 to less than 5 million by the end of 2024 and the prevalence of child stunting dropped by [44 %](#). Other U.S. triumphs globally included controlling or mitigating the most fearsome diseases of poverty such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. These notable achievements of U.S. foreign aid over the past 20 years resulted in [7.8 million babies being born HIV-free](#), 26 million men, women and children being saved from HIV and nearly 12 million lives — mostly of little children and pregnant women — saved from malaria, one of the most prolific killers worldwide for millennia.

But sadly, that progress has been halted and reversed since January of 2025. Researchers estimate that the loss of USAID will result in the additional deaths of 14 million people by 2030 including over 4.5 million children under five or about [700,000 extra child deaths per year](#).

We strongly urge Congress to enable the U.S. to retake its leadership position on the world's stage by fully funding the State, Foreign Operations/National Security, State Department budget at \$60 billion for FY26 and directing the administration to obligate and disburse such funding including for the specific

programs below. Further, **we ask for bill language directing the administration to reinstate PEPFAR Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) programs that were shut down in January. Previously 10% of PEPFAR resources were protecting millions of orphans and vulnerable children from violence, abuse and sex trafficking.** These programs provided children with nutritious food and paid for their school fees and transportation to receive HIV testing and treatment. OVC are among the poorest children in the world and the cost of regular travel to clinics makes HIV treatment inaccessible absent assistance from PEPFAR OVC programs. These children cannot survive without this support.

### **Vulnerable Children**

Children, almost by definition, are vulnerable, but the most vulnerable among them are unable to reach their full development potential due to physical, emotional, social and financial deprivation. They include children experiencing poor nutrition or lack of nurturing, children subject to violence or abuse, children living outside of family care, or those who have disabilities, or who have been subject to child marriage or sex trafficking. Vulnerable children often experience multiple adversities at the same time and over many years, placing their physical safety, healthy development, and mental health at grave risk.

Researchers estimate that these vulnerable children include more than 250 million worldwide who are growing up with stunted brains and bodies resulting from the worst aspects of poverty and a lack of nurturing care. In addition, the World Health Organization reports that 400 million children under age 5 worldwide regularly suffer physical or psychological abuse at the hands of their parents or caregivers.

Vulnerable Children funding is used to promote health, nutrition, safety, security for young children and training in responsive caregiving and positive parenting for their parents and caregivers. The funds also support keeping children in families (rather than orphanages or institutions, which can be harmful to child development) and protecting children from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. We are seeking a funding level of \$32.5 million for Vulnerable Children in FY26.

### **Maternal and Child Health**

Over the past 35 years, a number of factors have helped deliver great progress in cutting the rate of preventable deaths among children under-5 worldwide. Cheap yet impactful interventions costing just a few cents each, such as oral rehydration therapy and Vitamin A supplementation, have been very effective. Childhood vaccines, including those against polio, measles, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, pneumococcal disease and rotavirus, have magnified the progress created by social and behavior change around clean water and sanitation, increased use of skilled birth attendants and health facility delivery, and greater promotion of exclusive breast feeding for the first six months of life and proper nutritional habits.

Since 2000, such interventions have reduced deaths among children under 5 by 55% and dropped maternal mortality by 45% across USAID's priority countries. Sadly, that progress has been halted and reversed due to the dissolution of USAID.

Maternal, Newborn and Child Health funding reduces preventable maternal and child deaths. Funding supports routine childhood immunizations, nutrition counseling, the prevention and treatment of common childhood illnesses, antenatal and post-natal care, skilled birth attendants, breastfeeding counseling, growth monitoring and the promotion of hygiene. Also included is the U.S. contribution to GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, to help vaccinate more than half of the world's children against deadly and debilitating infectious disease. We are urging lawmakers to support \$915 million for Maternal and Child Health in FY26.

## **Nutrition**

Today, **more than 13,000 children under age 5 die every day** worldwide due to preventable disease and malnutrition. Nearly half of these children are newborns. Infectious diseases such as pneumonia, diarrhea and malaria are among the biggest child killers, along with birth complications and asphyxia. The vast majority of these deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Malnutrition is the underlying cause of most preventable child deaths, with 27% of these children experiencing severe “food poverty,” meaning they are unable to access and consume a nutritious and diverse diet. Rising food prices due to the knock-on effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have exacerbated this problem. Malnutrition in the early years of life can have long-term consequences for health, cognitive development, longevity and earning capacity. UNICEF estimates that in 2024, 372 million children under 5 are deficient in vitamins and other essential nutrients; 148 million have stunted growth and development due to chronic malnutrition; and 45 million suffer from “wasting,” the most life-threatening form of malnutrition. For children living in fragile contexts the situation is even more dire: In Gaza, for example, for the first time, a famine has been declared in the Middle East region. Classifying famine means that the most extreme category is triggered when three critical thresholds – extreme food deprivation, acute malnutrition and starvation-related deaths – have been breached. Hundreds of thousands of children in Gaza are experiencing catastrophic levels of hunger and malnutrition, with thousands suffering from life-threatening severe acute malnutrition. In Gaza, 80 % of all reported deaths by starvation are children.

Nutrition funding supports evidence-based, high-impact interventions that address the immediate and root causes of malnutrition. Programming includes breastfeeding counseling for mothers and their families, improved dietary diversity, promoting appropriate complimentary feeding at 6 months of age, the prevention and treatment of child-wasting, micronutrient supplementation and capacity building for health providers. We ask that Congress provide \$165 million for Nutrition in FY26.

## **Basic Education**

Primary education is one of the most effective tools for breaking the cycle of generational poverty. Basic education allows children to enjoy better health and promotes child survival. It also helps children earn more as adults, passing on the benefits to the next generation. The more education a nation’s citizens receive, the more fuel it has for its economy, security and social cohesion. Globally, every extra year of education a child receives produces a 10% increase in hourly earnings.

Currently, 251 million children are out of school globally, and three out of four children in low- to middle- income countries cannot read and understand simple text. One in six children live in areas affected by conflict, and nearly half of all refugee children were out of school in 2024. Providing educational opportunities for these children and youth will provide a pathway for them to respect and admire the U.S. and its values, avoid conflicts, and support their countries’ trade partnership with America. We ask Congress to provide \$922 million for Basic Education in FY26.

## **WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene)**

Globally, 25% of people lack access to safe drinking water, and 40% lack safely managed sanitation. Unsafe water and lack of sanitation is a major cause of preventable illnesses like diarrhea, malnutrition, and stunting, especially in children. Safe water and adequate sanitation are essential to child survival and development, improving children’s education, increasing productivity, and building resilience in the face of disease and disaster. Since 2008, the United States has helped 70 million people access sustainable drinking water services and 54.8 million people access sustainable sanitation services. We ask Congress to provide \$451 million for WASH efforts in FY26.

## **UNICEF**

In 2024, UNICEF supported mothers and babies at more than 34 million live births; reached 210 million children under the age of 5 to detect and treat wasting – the most severe form of malnutrition; provided safe water to nearly 36 million people; extended access to education to nearly 40 million children and more than 17 million children living in crisis settings, and responded to one or more infectious disease outbreaks or other public health emergencies in 98 different countries.

Contributing at least \$137 million to the account will help ensure that UNICEF can continue to reach children with health, protection, and nutrition services that also help reduce drivers of conflict, migration, and instability. This work not only assists children to reach their full potential, but it also advances U.S. interests and American values while promoting a more secure, stable and healthier world.

## **International Disaster Assistance**

The International Disaster Assistance account provides humanitarian assistance to populations experiencing sudden or long-term crises such as natural disasters, conflict or famine. A historic number of children live in conflict zones and nearly half the world's children live in countries with high risk of natural disasters. Humanitarian crises often bring damage to infrastructure, disruption to health services, over-crowding and poor sanitation. IDA seeks to save lives and prevent suffering and the spread of disease by providing affected populations with food, clean water, shelter, access to health services and protection for children. The needs of children affected by emergencies have reached an unprecedented scale. An estimated 213 million children need humanitarian assistance in 2025 due to worsening conflicts, natural disasters and hunger crises. We urge Congress to provide \$4.78 billion in FY 26 for International Disaster Assistance.

## **Migration and Refugee Assistance**

The Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account provides protection, basic necessities, and family reunification support to populations forced to flee their homes due to persecution or conflict. The needs of children affected by emergencies have reached an unprecedented scale. In 2024, an estimated 473 million children - 1 in 6 - lived in areas affected by armed conflict. Over 47% of these children have been forcibly displaced. The MRA account works to mitigate and resolve conflict-related displacement and support humanitarian action and diplomacy for displaced populations. Complex conflicts are increasing in frequency and severity. Additionally, the fund manages migration in the Western Hemisphere, including irregular migration from Central America to the United States. We ask Congress to provide \$4.03 billion in FY 26 for Migration and Refugee Assistance.

## **The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR)**

Since its inception in 2003, PEPFAR has been recognized as one of the most successful global health initiatives in history. It is credited with saving 26 million lives, enabling 7.8 million babies to be born HIV-free, protecting 13 million orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) from abuse and sex trafficking and helping to change the trajectory of the global HIV epidemic.

In addition, PEPFAR boosted goodwill toward the United States, especially in Africa where the U.S. is currently competing with China for access to strategic partnerships. According to the [Bipartisan Policy Center](#), countries that received PEPFAR support had an average approval rating of the United States of 68% compared with the global average of 46%. PEPFAR also played a role in promoting global security, stability, and good governance. According to World Bank data, since 2004, PEPFAR countries in Sub-Saharan Africa reduced political instability and violent activity by [40% compared with only 3%](#) among non-PEPFAR countries in the region.

But HIV is an insidious disease, particularly when it comes to children and babies. Its impacts extend well beyond the biomedical, often leaving society's youngest without parental protection, without education, and even without food. When parents or caregivers become debilitated or die, children are at grave risk of falling into poverty, suffering abuse, contracting HIV and dying themselves. For this reason, 10% of PEPFAR resources were directed to the care and protection of orphans and vulnerable children, defined as children infected or affected by HIV, ensuring they were able to attend school, eat nutritious food, travel to clinics for testing and treatment, and receive psychosocial support to address the stigma and discrimination they experienced. These programs also trained OVC caregivers in positive parenting and provided them livelihood support, enabling them to expand microbusinesses and better provide for their children.

PEPFAR's OVC programs also played a key role in identifying HIV-positive children, getting them tested, and ensuring adherence to treatment regimens. These functions were urgently needed because children have been left behind in the global HIV response: just over half of all children living with HIV (57%) are on life-saving treatment versus roughly 77% of adults. And while children make up [only 3% of people living with HIV, they account for 12% of AIDS-related deaths](#).

Over the past two decades, PEPFAR supported over [13 million](#) orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and their caregivers with holistic interventions addressing the social and economic devastation of AIDS. It also protected [10.3 million](#) girls from sexual abuse. When children remain in school, especially girls, they can generate income, support their families, and contribute to the economy as adults. PEPFAR's OVC programs produced a [\\$4 return on economic productivity gains for every \\$1 spent on programming](#).

But sadly, OVC programs were largely shut down in January and later did not receive the waiver from Secretary of State Marco Rubio for "life-saving humanitarian assistance" as other medical components of PEPFAR did. As a result, programs were abruptly cut off and 6.6 million orphans, vulnerable children and caregivers are no longer receiving care and protection from the U.S. We urge Congress to provide \$6.045 billion for PEPFAR in FY26 and to include bill language mandating that the Administration obligate 10% of PEPFAR funding to Orphans and Vulnerable Children and that OVC programs be immediately reinstated at the State Department.

### **Child Protection Compacts (CPC)**

CPCs are \$5 million multi-year commitments between the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (JTIP) and partner governments to bolster efforts to combat child labor and sex trafficking. The CPC Partnership supports the sustainable development of partner governments' capacity to hold perpetrators of child sex and labor trafficking accountable under the law, provide comprehensive services for child trafficking survivors, and expand child trafficking prevention and awareness. An FY26 allocation of at least \$12.5 million for CPC Partnerships will allow for additional compacts to support governments around the world that currently lack the infrastructure and capacity to respond to similar forms of child trafficking.

### **Combatting Child Marriage**

Globally 1 in 5 girls are married before their 18th birthday- an estimated 640 million women and girls alive today who were married as children. Despite decades of progress, rates of child, early, and forced marriage have spiked in recent years. Rates of child marriage are even higher in times of conflict and humanitarian crisis. We ask Congress to provide \$20 million for FY26 to continue combat child marriage.

### **Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) Grants**

The alarming rise in child sex and labor trafficking globally underscores the urgent need for targeted U.S. support. We call on Congress to provide \$10 million for FY26 with \$2 million specifically allocated for children.

## **TRANSPORTATION/HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT (HUD)**

### **Housing and Urban Development**

Every child deserves a safe and stable place to call home, yet tens of millions of children in the U.S. are experiencing homelessness or are on the brink of homelessness. [Every year, 4.2 million youth and young adults experience homelessness and 700,000 of them are between the ages 13 and 17. Our youngest children are at the greatest risk of eviction](#) and homelessness at the same time when they are undergoing critical stages of brain development. Child and family homelessness has continued to increase across the country, which makes it critical that there is increased support for those struggling. Last year, there was a nearly 40% increase in family homelessness. Programs such as the Homelessness Assistance Grants and Youth Homeless Demonstration Program at the Department of Housing and Urban Development are essential in supporting children and warrant robust funding. As the Transportation and HUD annual spending bill moves through Congress, we urge you to include additional investments for the following programs.

#### **Homeless Assistance Grants**

[Due to the narrow definition of homelessness used by HUD](#), the majority of children and youth experiencing homelessness are ineligible for federal homeless assistance through Homeless Assistance Grants which fund emergency shelter and other supportive housing programs. We urge you to fund the Homeless Assistance Grants at \$4.922 billion.

#### **Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP)**

The YHDP is a national initiative aimed at reducing and ultimately ending youth homelessness. It supports a wide range communities—rural, suburban, and urban—across the United States in building and implementing coordinated, community-wide strategies to prevent and address youth homelessness. Beyond funding, HUD works to lift up the lessons learned from YHDP communities and inspire action nationwide to ensure every young person has a safe and stable place to call home. We urge you to support the YHDP at \$100 million for FY2026.

### **Conclusion**

Every child deserves the chance to grow up with joy, dignity, and the opportunity to thrive. This means meeting their basic needs and ensuring that no child's future is limited by their family's hardships. Sadly, our nation is not meeting this standard. We urge all decision-makers to center children and their families as critical budget and policy choices are made in the coming weeks and months. We all want a strong and prosperous nation in the years ahead, and that depends on meaningful, increased investments in the health, education, development, safety and well-being of the children who will build it.

Sincerely



Bruce Lesley  
President

CC: Appropriations Committee Members