

Principles to Advance Child Health and Well-Being in the 117th Congress: What Children and Families Need from Policymakers

The State of America's Children

As our nation continues to manage the multiple, devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no denying that our children are struggling. School and regular child care have been disrupted; children are missing critical routine health and developmental screenings and services, including milestone well-child visits and vaccines; and parents have lost jobs and, with them, their health insurance coverage. Children also are experiencing greater stress, anxiety, and other mental health effects stemming from social isolation and increased economic insecurity in their families. While there is hope that the COVID-19 crisis is improving, children's lives and health have been upended in consequential dimensions.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 increased the challenges that children face, but even before the pandemic the state of children was precarious. Recent statistics from before COVID-19 paint a sobering picture: one in seven children live in poverty; the rates of uninsured kids have been on the rise for the first time in decades; maternal mortality is increasing at an alarming rate, especially for women of color; and U.S. rates of low birthweight babies and infant mortality are among the highest in the industrialized world. Other key measures of child well-being also are concerning: child suicide, child hunger, homelessness, and family and community violence have been growing at startling rates.

This data paints a bleak picture, but such statistics should not be surprising, as federal investments in programs that support children have been seriously lagging. While they make up 25% of the U.S. population, only 7.5% of the federal budget is dedicated to spending on children. The U.S. does not lack the resources to make sure every child has a chance to succeed, but, too frequently, policymakers simply decide to invest elsewhere. The recently enacted American Rescue Plan Act (P.L.117-2) included

crucial temporary relief for families by increasing the Child Tax Credit. However, to ensure a long-term effect, policymakers must make this support permanent and continue to prioritize the needs of children. The evidence is clear that when we invest in our children, we not only improve their health and ensure positive, long-term health outcomes, we also create a solid foundation for our nation's future prosperity.

We Urge Congress and the Biden Administration to Prioritize the Needs of Children and Families by Advancing Policies that Adhere to the Following Principles:

- » **All children need access to comprehensive and affordable coverage.** Coverage is foundational for a healthy childhood. All children must have access to comprehensive, age-appropriate benefits modeled after Medicaid's Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment (EPSDT) benefit. These must include preventive, developmental, and behavioral health services, and all other necessary services, especially for children with special health care needs. Pregnant

women also must have access to comprehensive, quality care that meets all their prenatal and postpartum health care needs. Further, all sources of health coverage — both public and private — must be affordable so children and pregnant women can get the care they need when they need it without jeopardizing the financial security of their families.

- » **Coverage must be accessible, reliable, and continuous.** All children, pregnant women, and their families must have continuous, consistent coverage with no gaps in care. Families should be able to follow a simple, user-friendly process to sign up for coverage and to stay enrolled, whether they are covered by Medicaid, the Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP), or private insurance. If family income or other circumstances trigger a change in coverage (for example, between Medicaid or CHIP and private plans), children must have ongoing, seamless access to providers and services necessary to meet their needs.
- » **Coverage must be of high quality.** All children and pregnant women must receive high-quality, culturally competent care, including access to coordinated care and a medical home. All health plans must be required to report on comprehensive pediatric and maternal health-specific quality measures to assess the quality of care on an ongoing basis.
- » **Medicaid and CHIP must be protected and improved.** Serving as essential sources of coverage for more than one in three children and almost half of births in the U.S., Medicaid and CHIP are the bedrock of coverage for low-income children, children with complex medical conditions, and pregnant women. Policymakers must build on what is working well for millions of children and pregnant women by keeping Medicaid and CHIP strong. In addition, private insurance must provide comprehensive benefits similar to Medicaid’s EPSDT benefit to ensure the unique health and developmental needs of all children and pregnant women are met.
- » **Equitable care must be available for everyone in our nation.** Every child, every pregnant woman, every person in America must have equal access to high-quality, evidence-based health care regardless of their socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity, citizenship status, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Policymakers must take immediate action to address health disparities and eliminate barriers to good health and health care, especially for children of color and all marginalized populations, by improving access to high-quality health care, increasing data collection, and expanding investments in and access to culturally competent, community-based health care services.
- » **No child should live in poverty.** Children remain the poorest age group in America, with children of color suffering the highest poverty rates due in part to our nation’s long history of structural racism and discrimination. To end child poverty, low-income children must have access to public coverage and other essential supports, including Medicaid and CHIP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Child Tax Credit, and the Earned Income Tax Credit, along with other community investments in early childhood, child care, housing, and education programs to ensure their basic needs are met.
- » **Children must have access to a broad range of services and supports beyond medical care.** A variety of non-health factors, including access to nutritious foods, safe communities,

stable housing, high-quality schools, and family and income stability — the social determinants of health — play a critical role in each child’s physical, cognitive and emotional development. To ensure a healthy childhood and support the health of the whole child, children must have access to a broad range of social, environmental, and community services and supports that go beyond those provided in a doctor’s office.

» **Systems that care for children must be integrated and prioritize prevention.**

Recognizing that children’s needs extend beyond the health care system, the next generation of policy solutions that support children must focus on building bridges between heavily over-financed medical care and other essential family support systems, funneling limited health care dollars to support upstream prevention. Siloed funding streams must be broken down so services are coordinated across the multiple

systems that serve children and families. This will streamline access to needed services, reduce service duplication, improve data and information sharing across programs, and enable more strategic deployment of resources.

We know what children need. Now is the time for policymakers to act.

Despite significant evidence that investments in children are cost-effective and yield positive health outcomes for children and for society, policymakers continually fail to prioritize policies that support child health and well-being. All children deserve the opportunity for a healthy childhood that sets them on a trajectory to become healthy and productive adults. For the sake of our children and our nation’s future economic prosperity, Congress and the Biden Administration must prioritize the needs of children and adopt policies that follow these principles. We owe it to our children and our nation’s future to do everything we can to help all children achieve their full potential.

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