

SENT BY: VOICES FOR IL CHILDREN;



January 20, 2004

Honorable Peter Fitzgerald
 U.S. Senator
 555 Dirksen Building
 Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Fitzgerald:

I write to ask your crucial help in gathering the best possible data on the health and well-being of Illinois children, to better guide our policy decisions.

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) reauthorization bill, H.R. 4, was reported out by the Senate Finance Committee last September and is expected to be taken up by the full chamber next month. I am concerned about the bill's provision to expand the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), which would not provide the state-specific, cross-sectional survey data needed to evaluate Illinois' TANF program. Accordingly, I write to ask that you co-sponsor a freestanding bill and floor amendment that Senator Rockefeller is proposing, to provide for the collection such useful data instead of resorting to the SIPP expansion.

The overarching purpose of welfare reform, set forth in the current reauthorization legislation, is to improve the well-being of children. To evaluate the effectiveness of state TANF policy, states need reliable data on how their children are faring. The reauthorization bill provides for expansion of the existing SIPP survey, but that data set will not provide adequate, state-by-state data - even for larger states like Illinois. However, a state-level cross sectional survey built on the National Survey of Child Health *would* do so. Therefore, we believe such a survey of child and family well-being would be a better investment of the \$10 million allocated to research within the reauthorization bill. Indeed, this type of survey would cost no more than the SIPP expansion currently proposed in the reauthorization bill - but it would greatly improve states' policymaking capacity.

The state-level, cross-sectional survey we support would be administered every two years. Its data would be available for use by researchers and policymakers only four to six months after collection; in contrast, SIPP data is unavailable for at least a year after it is collected. The data we seek would be easy to use by state policymakers, while SIPP data is so complex that it can be used by only a few hundred researchers nationwide. Our hoped-for model would include a sample representative of Illinois children, while the SIPP sample would include a large

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sample size from Illinois, unrepresentative of our state and in need of adjustment for use, complicating its practicality.

Illinois policymakers often are frustrated by the lack of timely, Illinois-specific data about children. This dearth of information makes it difficult to predict the impact of policy, or even gauge its consequences. Creation of the state-level data would enable Illinois leaders to better shape policies for children. Among other things, our proposed survey would provide data on:

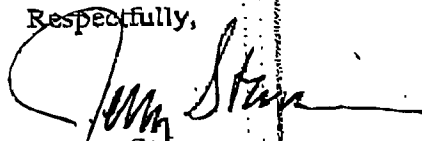
- Child health and health insurance, to help policymakers determine how best to invest in improving children's health.
- Contact with non-custodial parents, to guide decisions for improving fatherhood programs.
- Family structure and child well-being, to aid in developing proposals supporting two-parent families.
- Child care quality, to help us set priorities for child care funding.

The state-specific survey would also create a separate resource for researchers, allowing them to better assess the implications of policy choices. And if this approach is adopted, a public-private partnership will make the data even more useful, because the Annie E Casey Foundation and other funders have pledged to add at least \$1 million per year for dissemination and technical assistance.

As you know, good policy decisions rely on good information. When it comes to something as important as the well-being of our state's children, Illinois policy-makers should avoid flying blind.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Please contact me (312-516-5550) or Senior Policy Associate Sean Noble (312-516-5566), at your convenience, if we can be of any further assistance.

Respectfully,



Jerome Stermer
Executive Director

Cc: Thomas Roberge, Jr.