



Greater Cleveland
for *Greater Kids*

January 27, 2004

Honorable Mike DeWine
United States Senate
140 Russell Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Fax: (202) 224-6519

Dear Senator DeWine:

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) reauthorization bill, H.R. 4, was reported out by the Senate Finance Committee on September 10, 2003, and is expected to be taken up by the full Senate this February. I am writing to express my concern about the bill's provision to expand the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). I believe that a Ohio-specific cross sectional survey would provide much more useful data needed to evaluate Ohio's TANF program. I am hopeful that you would consider co-sponsoring Senator Rockefeller's bill and amendment to provide for the Ohio-specific cross sectional survey instead of the SIPP expansion.

The overarching purpose of welfare reform, set forth in the current reauthorization legislation, is to improve the well-being of children. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of Ohio TANF policy, Ohio needs reliable data on how their children are faring. With this in mind, the reauthorization bill provides for expansion of the existing Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). Unfortunately, that data set will not provide adequate Ohio level data even for larger states like Ohio. An Ohio-level cross sectional survey built on the National Survey of Child Health would provide Ohio-specific data on child well-being for every child in Ohio.. Therefore, we believe that a Ohio-level cross sectional survey of child and family well-being built on the National Survey of Child Health would be a better investment of the funds allocated to research within the reauthorization bill.

It is important to note that the Ohio-level cross sectional survey we describe would not cost more than the SIPP expansion currently provided for in the reauthorization bill. Both current law and the House bill already include \$10 million in annual funding for tracking child well-being. The amendment we propose is designed to invest that funding more productively to improve Ohio policy making capacity.

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Senator Rockefeller has prepared a free-standing bill and floor amendment supporting the replacement of the SIPP expansion with a Ohio-level survey of child and family well-being in the TANF re-authorization bill. We hope that you will consider becoming a principal co-sponsor of Senator Rockefeller's proposal.

The Ohio-level cross sectional survey we support would be administered every two years. Data from the survey would be available for use by researchers and policy makers only four to six months after collection. Data from the SIPP, in contrast, is not available for at least a year after it is collected. It would be easily usable by Ohio policy makers; the SIPP data is so complex that only a few hundred researchers around the country can use it. It would include a sample representative of Ohio; while the SIPP sample would include a large sample size from Ohio, that sample would not be representative of the Ohio and in order to use it to determine how Ohio's children are doing, researchers would have to adjust the sample –another feature which makes the data unusable by policy makers in our Ohio.

Policy makers in Ohio are often frustrated by the lack of timely Ohio-specific data. The lack of information makes it difficult to predict the impact of policy or even gauge its consequences. Creation of the Ohio level data would enable our policy makers to make informed choices and adjust Ohio policy as necessary. Examples of the new information such a survey would provide Ohio include:

- Data on child health, to guide policy makers in how best to invest in improving children's health.
- Data on children's health insurance, to assess our progress in insuring more children.
- Data on contact with non-custodial parents, to guide policy makers in improving fatherhood programs.
- Data on family structure and child well-being, to guide policy makers in developing proposals to support two parent families.
- Data on quality of child care, to guide policy makers in setting priorities for investing child care funding.

The Ohio-specific survey would also create a separate resource for researchers to allow them to better assess and track the implications of policy choices. Moreover, 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 Ohio's children, Ohio policy-makers should not be flying blind.

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Thank you for your attention to this matter. Please contact me at your convenience if I can be of any further assistance. My telephone number is 216-881-7860.

Respectfully,

Amy N. Swanson
Executive Director