



717 South Houston, Suite 200
Tulsa, Oklahoma 74127

Senator Don Nickles
133 Senate Hart Building
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

January 12, 2004

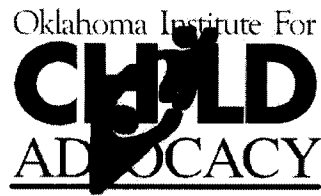
Dear Senator Nickles:

As you know, 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 early next year. We are writing to express our concern about the bill's provision to expand the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). We believe that a state-specific cross sectional survey would provide much more useful data needed to evaluate Oklahoma's TANF program. We are hopeful that you would consider supporting funding for a state-level survey.

It appears that President Bush, the U.S. House of Representatives, and the U.S. Senate all agree to reauthorization language that would explicitly state for the first time that, "The purpose of [TANF] is to increase *the flexibility of states* in operating a program designed to improve *the well-being of children...*" (*emphasis added*) To evaluate the effectiveness of state TANF policy in accomplishing this goal, states need reliable and timely data on how their children are faring.

The reauthorization bill indeed recognizes the importance of data collection by expanding the existing Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). The SIPP, while worthwhile for some purposes, is simply not the right tool for monitoring the performance of a program whose implementation has devolved to the states. It is particularly difficult to evaluate TANF performance in Oklahoma (and 26 other states) using SIPP data because of the small number of families surveyed here. Even under an expanded SIPP, national-level conclusions could not necessarily be applied to policy performance in Oklahoma.

A state-level cross sectional survey would dramatically improve the ability of state policymakers – particularly in Oklahoma – to make informed choices and to make the most productive use of our public investment in TANF and related programs. Two particular improvements merit special mention. First, a state-level survey would cover approximately 2000 families in Oklahoma, a significant improvement over the 990 likely



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to be surveyed under an expanded SIPP. Second, state-level results can be compiled much more quickly than national results. Data analysis would take three to four months at the state level, compared to 12 months for the SIPP. Improved timeliness will help Oklahoma policymakers respond more quickly to what is going right and what is going wrong.

You have already received a letter from the presidents of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the McKnight Foundation outlining the importance of a state-level survey tool and their commitment to invest more than \$1 million each year to analyze and disseminate data generated by a state-level cross sectional survey of child and family well-being.

In addition, Senator Rockefeller has prepared a free-standing bill and floor amendment supporting the replacement of the SIPP expansion with a state-level survey of child and family well-being in the TANF reauthorization bill. Given the impossibility of funding both the SIPP and a state-level survey, and the clear superiority of the latter for evaluating policy performance, we hope you will consider supporting Senator Rockefeller's proposal.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Please contact either Steven Dow at (918) 382-3217 or Anne Roberts at (405) 236-5437, ext. 110 or if we may be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Steven Dow, Executive Director
Community Action Project

Anne Roberts, Director
Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy