

**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**

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Honorable Lincoln Chafee
United States Senate
141 A Russell
Washington, D.C. 20510

January 15, 2004

Dear Senator Chafee:

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 state-specific cross sectional survey would provide much more useful data needed to evaluate Rhode Island's TANF program.

I am hopeful that you would consider co-sponsoring Senator Rockefeller's bill and amendment to provide for the state-specific cross sectional survey instead of the SIPP expansion. 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 re-authorization bill. We hope that you will consider becoming a principal co-sponsor of Senator Rockefeller's proposal.

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 state TANF policy, states need 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). However, even after expansion, the SIPP would not provide state-specific data for the twenty seven least populous states, including Rhode Island. A state-level cross sectional survey built on the National Survey of Child Health would provide state-specific data on child well-being for *every* state. Therefore, we believe that a state-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 state-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 state policy making capacity.

The state-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 as quickly as four months after collection. Data from the SIPP, in contrast, is not available for at least a year after it is collected.

Policy makers in Rhode Island are often frustrated by the lack of timely Rhode Island - specific data. The lack of information makes it difficult to predict the impact of policy or gauge its consequences. Creation of the state level data would enable our policy makers to make informed choices and adjust state policy as necessary. Examples of the new information such a survey would provide Rhode Island 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 state-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. 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 401.351.9400

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Burke Bryant
Executive Director

Cc: Lindsey Brill