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Executive Director

The Honorable John Cornyn
United States Senate
Russell Senate Office Building Room 370
Washington, D.C. 20510

February 18, 2004

Dear Senator Cornyn:

I am Executive Director of Texans Care For Children, a statewide advocacy group that speaks for all Texas children. Our work is based upon data—what the data tells us about how children are doing. We are currently leading a Children's Campaign which is attempting to collect data on how children are doing. Unfortunately, too often we are finding that such data is simply not available. I am writing to ask you to support an amendment that would ensure that Texas policymakers have access to the data they need to make good decisions for the well-being of Texas children.

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. It includes a provision to expand the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). We believe that an alternative proposal, a state-specific cross sectional survey, would provide much more useful data for Texas policy makers to administer the TANF program. I urge you to consider co-sponsoring Senator Rockefeller's bill and amendment to provide for the state-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 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). Unfortunately, that data set will not provide adequate state level data even for larger states like Texas. 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 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 state 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 Texas; while the SIPP sample would include a large sample size from Texas, that sample would not be representative of the state and in order to use it to determine how that sample would not be representative of the state and in order to use it to determine how Texas' children are doing, researchers would have to adjust the sample –another feature which makes the data unusable by policy makers in our state.

Right now in Texas, we cannot find important data on basic aspects of child well-being. While the final framing of the survey would be done by the Department of Health and Human Services, here are some of the kinds of data that we do not currently have, for which the survey would probably provide the answers:

- The number of families that are eligible for, but not enrolled in, Head Start
- The number of families that have trouble with getting/keeping employment because non-traditional child care hours aren't available
- The number or percentage of children with/without medical homes
- The number or percentage of children with untreated dental decay
- The number of children eligible but not enrolled in CHIP and Medicaid (this is irregularly available as estimated from federal HHS, but it is so irregular that it is not of much help to state policy makers)
- The number of children who have a need for but are not receiving mental health treatment from any source

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.

We greatly appreciate your support for children's issues at the federal level, as you did by voting to increase the Head Start appropriations in 2003. I hope you agree with me that

this amendment would similarly enable state level policymakers to support children more effectively in Texas.

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 512-473-2274.

Respectfully,

Susan Craven
Executive Director
Texans Care for Children