



Voices for Children of San Antonio

January 19, 2004

FAX: 202-224-0776

Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchinson
United States Senate
Russell Senate Office Building Room 284
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Hutchinson:

Let me begin by thanking you for your vote to increase Head Start appropriations! It's heartening to know there are elected representatives like you who understand the great opportunity those early years can afford us. The benefits reaped in adulthood are well-documented as an impressive return on investment.

As a child advocacy organization in San Antonio, this is a key message we are working hard to share with our business and governmental leaders. Again, so pleased you already get it!

As we network with our brother- and sister-organizations at the state and national levels, I have learned that 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 Texas' 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.

Voices for Children of San Antonio is a research and advocacy organization committed to improving the quality of life for San Antonio's children through strategic planning, research, advocacy and action. We believe that data should drive policy, not emotional or political bias. But for data to drive policy, that data must be available to the policy makers.

As I understand it, 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...and 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.

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 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 Texas' children are doing, researchers would have to adjust the sample – another feature which makes the data unusable by policy makers in our state.

Researchers, advocates and policy makers in Texas are often frustrated by the lack of timely Texas-specific data. The lack of information makes it difficult to predict the impact of policy or even 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 Texas 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

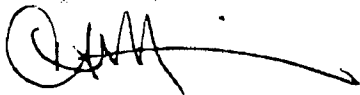
E Casey Foundation and other funders have pledged to add at least \$1 million per year for dissemination and technical assistance.

As you know, good policy decisions rely on good information. When it comes to something as important as the well-being of our state's children, Texas policy-makers should not be flying blind. I hope you can help us get the tools—access to data—that can inform our decisions and improve the effectiveness of our efforts.

I sincerely appreciate the good judgment you have exhibited in the past and hope we can enjoy the benefit of your attention to this matter as well.

Please contact me at your convenience if I can be of any further assistance.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CAM', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

C. A. "Cam" Messina
Executive Director
Voices for Children of San Antonio

Cc: Katherine Haley