



AGENDA FOR CHILDREN

A VOICE FOR LOUISIANA'S CHILDREN

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May 5, 2009

Representative Charles Boustany
1117 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-1807
By Fax (202) 225-5724

Dear Representative Boustany:

As executive director of Agenda for Children, an organization dedicated to providing a strong and consistent voice for children, youth and families in Louisiana, I am writing to ask for your support on an important bill that would significantly improve access to critical information about the condition of Louisiana's children. Obtaining this information will allow policy-makers to more effectively analyze how programs are working on the ground and what steps are needed to improve the quality of life for children in our state.

Representative Chaka Fattah is preparing to introduce The State Child Well-Being Research Act of 2009, which would expand the National Survey of Child Health. I urge you to cosponsor Congressman Fattah's legislation. Senator Jay Rockefeller will introduce companion legislation in the Senate. As a member of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, we are hopeful that you can lend your voice to this important issue.

As you know, over the past decade the federal government has given states far greater authority to administer programs for children and families. In order to make informed decisions about where our limited resources should be invested, we need accurate, timely and reliable data about Louisiana's children and whether the current programs are providing them with the assistance they need. Moreover, the U.S. government needs this information in order to assure that our scarce federal dollars are spent effectively.

Unfortunately, for the most part, that data does not currently exist. Child Trends, the nation's only national research and policy center conducting research and analyzing data focused *exclusively* on improving outcomes for children, has conducted a study of the available state level data on child well-being. Their analysis shows that national surveys do not have adequate sample sizes to provide statistically significant data on small- or medium-sized states such as Louisiana. While some state level surveys do exist, the data they provide has large gaps. In addition, program administration data for programs such as Medicaid, SCHIP, TANF or child care provides information only on children in the programs, not on all children.

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A member of Voices for America's Children

The State Child Well-Being Research Act would expand the National Survey of Child Health and allow the collection and dissemination of important data in each and every state, rather than just the dozen or so feasible in the current SIPP program. Data would be collected on a rolling basis, so that key data would be available every year and subgroup data every two years. Data would be available to local, state, and federal policy-makers four to six months after collection. In Louisiana, this data would be based on the experiences of about 1,800 families. We estimate that this study would cost \$20 million a year.

Furthermore, if Congress adopts the state-level data approach that we are supporting, it will be made even more useful because of a public/private partnership that has been proposed. The Annie E. Casey Foundation and other foundations have offered to invest at least \$1 million a year in order to train and provide technical assistance to state officials and policy analysts, thus ensuring that the data will be understandable, accessible and will become an excellent tool to increase child well-being in Louisiana and across the country.

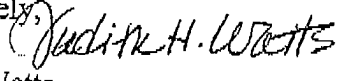
The information collected would guide our decisions not just on programs for low-income residents, but also on a wide range of other programs serving Louisiana's children and families. While the Maternal and Child Health agency experts would determine the actual questions included in the survey in consultation with other federal agency staff and outside advisors, some information that would be gathered includes:

- Children's health data, to help guide decisions on how to best invest in improving children's health outcomes;
- Identification of children who are eligible for public health insurance but are not covered ensuring that all eligible children have access to health care;
- Data on children's contact with non-custodial parents, which can be used to promote fatherhood programs;
- Family structure and child well-being data (which can be used to assess the effectiveness of marriage promotion efforts funded through TANF);
- Data on parental perceptions of child-care quality, accessibility, and affordability;
- Data on the amount of time children generally spend in child care, in order to guide decisions on hourly work requirements for families moving from welfare to work.

The growing federal debt and nationwide state funding shortfalls make it essential that policy makers have access to timely, high quality data to help ensure that every dollar spent goes to effective programs that provide real support to our most vulnerable populations.

Congressman Fattah's bill would help hard-pressed state policy-makers and administrations across the nation. A state-level cross-sectional survey would ensure samples sizes of about 1,800 households with children in each and every state, providing states with an invaluable resource for everyone concerned about the well-being of America's children and families.

We encourage you to support the State Child Well-Being Research Act and we look forward to continuing to work with you on behalf of Louisiana's children and families. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Judy Watts
President/CEO