



Michigan League FOR Human Services

July 10, 2009

Honorable Gary Peters
U.S. House of Representatives
1130 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
By Fax (202) 226-2356

Dear Congressman Peters:

As President and CEO of the Michigan League for Human Services, an organization focused on the needs of vulnerable populations in Michigan—particularly low-income children and families, I am writing to ask for your support on an important bill that would significantly improve access to critical information about the condition of children in Michigan. Obtaining this information would allow policy-makers to analyze more effectively how programs are working on the ground and what steps are needed to improve the quality of life for children in our state.

Representatives Chaka Fattah and Dave Camp have introduced H.R.2558, The State Child Well-Being Research Act of 2009, which would expand the National Survey of Child Health. I urge you to cosponsor this legislation. Senators Jay Rockefeller and Olympia Snowe have introduced companion legislation in the Senate, S.1151.

As you know, over the past decade the federal government has given the states far greater power 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 state-level data about 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, such data do not currently exist. Child Trends, the only national research and policy center that focuses *exclusively* on improving outcomes for children, has reviewed 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 for all states. While some state-level surveys do exist, the data they provide are very patchy, with large gaps. Program administration data for programs such as Medicaid, SCHIP, TANF or child care provide information only on children in the programs, not on all 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 provided 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 Michigan these data would be based on the experiences of about 1,800 families. Estimates show this study would cost \$20 million a year.

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Furthermore, if Congress adopts the state-level data approach that we are supporting, it will be even more useful because of a proposed public/private partnership. 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 useful as a tool to improve child well-being in our state.

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 children and families in Michigan. While the Maternal and Child Health agency experts in consultation with other federal agency staff and outside advisors would determine the actual questions included in the survey, some information that could be gathered includes:

- Children's health data, to help guide decisions about ways to improve children's health outcomes;
- Identification of children who are eligible for public health insurance but are not covered in order to increase enrollment rates in SCHIP;
- Data on children's contact with non-custodial parents, which can be used to improve 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.

Congressmen Fattah and Camp's bill would help hard-pressed state policy-makers and administrations across the nation. A state-level cross-sectional survey would ensure sample sizes of about 1,800 households with children in each and every state, thereby providing states with an invaluable resource to decision-making to improve the well-being of children and families.

We are hopeful you will support the State Child Well-Being Research Act. Elizabeth King, in Representative Fattah's office, is responsible for managing new sponsors. She can be reached at Elizabeth.King@mail.house.gov or 202-225-4001. We look forward to continuing to work with you on behalf of our state.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Sharon Parks
President and CEO