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October 19, 2009

The Hon Nydia M. Velázquez
Chair, Congressional Hispanic Caucus
2466 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Velázquez:

On behalf of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and its KIDS COUNT–Puerto Rico Project, I am writing to urge your co-sponsorship of an important bill that will improve access to and availability of critical information regarding children residing in Puerto Rico. The “State Child Well-Being Research Act of 2009” (H.R. 2558/S. 1151), introduced in the House by Representative Chaka Fattah (D–PA) and in the Senate by Senator Jay D. Rockefeller (D–WV), would provide more detailed and updated information on the effectiveness of public programs for the children of Puerto Rico and the United States overall, guiding decisions to improve the quality of life for all children and their families through the National Survey of Child Health.

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 more informed decisions about where our limited resources should be invested, we need accurate, timely, and reliable data about children. Existing programs must demonstrate that they are providing our children with the critical assistance they need.

Unfortunately, there are few reliable statistics available on children in Puerto Rico. A recent study by Child Trends, entitled, *Overview of State-Level Data on Child Well-Being Available through the Federal Statistical System*, analyzed the data available concerning child welfare. The analysis shows that national polls do not have samples of appropriate size to provide statistically significant data on the majority of states. It further demonstrates that Puerto Rico is included in less than half of these surveys. Even when there are some state-level surveys, the data they provide have large gaps and limitations. The statistics on programs such as Medicaid, CHIP, and TANF—as well as child care programs—provide information only on those children who are enrolled in these programs, rather than 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. NCLR believes that children in Puerto Rico must be included in this legislation. Data will be collected continuously, so that key information would be available each year and data on population subgroups would be available every two years. The statistics would be available to local, state, and federal policymakers two to six months after their collection. Each state would have available data based on the experiences of approximately 2,000 families. It is estimated that this study would cost \$20 million a year.

If Congress adopts this state-level data approach, the result could be particularly dramatic due to the public/private partnerships that have been proposed. The Annie E. Casey Foundation and other foundations have offered to invest at least \$1 million a year in training and technical assistance to state officials and policy analysts, thus ensuring that the data are understandable and accessible, creating a valuable tool for improving child well-being in Puerto Rico.

The information collected as a result of this legislation would guide our decisions, not only with regard to programs for low-income residents, but also on a wide range of programs serving children and families in Puerto Rico. Although the final determination of the questions to be included in the survey would be left to experts appointed by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, some of the information that would be gathered includes:

- Children's health data to help guide decisions about how best to invest in improving children's health outcomes
- Identification of children who are eligible for public insurance but are not covered, in order to increase enrollment rates in CHIP
- Data on children's communication and contact with noncustodial parents, which can then be used to improve programs for these parents
- 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 regarding child care quality, accessibility, and affordability
- Data on the amount of time children generally spend in child care, in order to guide decisions about hourly work requirements for families transitioning from welfare to work

Given the growing federal debt and the nationwide shortfall in state funding assistance, it is essential that policymakers have access to timely and high-quality data to help ensure that every dollar spent goes to effective programs that provide real support to our most vulnerable populations.

Representative Fattah's bill would help hard-pressed state policymakers and administrations throughout the nation. A state-level cross-sectional survey would provide sample sizes of at least 2,000 households with children in each and every state, representing an excellent resource for everyone interested in and concerned about the well-being of children and families.

We appreciate the cooperation and commitment you have shown in the past to this important project that benefits the country, and especially Puerto Rican children. If you have questions, please feel free to contact Nayda I. Rivera-Hernández on my staff at (787) 641-0544.

Sincerely,



Janet Murguía
President and CEO