



"Forging a Brighter Future for Children and Families"
AT THE EVANS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS | UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

June 25, 2009

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
United States Senate
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510
By Fax (202) 228-0514

Dear Senator Cantwell,

As Director of the Human Services Policy Center and *Washington Kids Count* project at the University of Washington, I am writing to call your attention to efforts to improve the data available for tracking and analyzing the conditions of children and families in Washington State and the U.S.. While as part of the University of Washington we do not support or oppose any particular piece of legislation, I do think it is important to alert you to a need and opportunity.

We at UW, as other institutions in the state, are continually struggling to obtain adequate data to conduct the kinds of compelling analysis that state and local policy makers are seeking as they address issues ranging from health, to education to child welfare. State administrative data is useful, but only tells us about children already in the service system, not those who are well or failing to receive services. Since most children receiving public services are low income, administrative data does not let us compare conditions, services or outcomes for low income children to those from more affluent families. For such analysis, we need household survey data.

There are several useful national surveys that we regularly employ in our research, but they do not have adequate sample sizes to provide statistically significant data on small- or medium-sized states such as Washington. As you well know, state and local policy makers rightly want to know what is happening to our children here in Washington. We have pointed out on numerous occasions that it is far more cost effective to conduct national surveys with "over-samples" for each state than to have each state develop its own surveys. Not only does this approach avoid the costs of developing duplicative survey and sampling methods, it allows valid comparisons of each state to others and to the national average. It also allows us to analyze the impact of state and national policies by linking comparable data on the conditions of children in each state to the policies adopted by the states. Since so much federal policy now provides substantial leeway for state variation, such information is essential for evaluating its impact. We can do this to some extent for education programs, since the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the national Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) are now conducted with valid samples for each state. However, we do not have the same capacity for the vital health and human services programs under the jurisdiction of the Finance Committee.

We have become aware of proposals to 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. It has been suggested that data be collected on a rolling basis, so that key data would be available every year and subgroup data every two years. This is important



"Forging a Brighter Future for Children and Families"

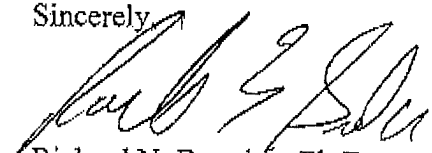
AT THE EVANS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS | UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

for tracking policies that often change each year, and to take into account changing economic conditions. For example, current data does not reflect the impact of the current deep recession on children, and waiting another 4 years to get the information would delay our ability to respond.

You know as well as any of us that child health is both essential in its own right, and vitally linked to such factors as family structure and support, utilization of child care and levels of income and eligibility for a range of state and local programs. I therefore hope that as you consider supporting an expansion of the Child Health Survey to include valid over-samples for each state, you will also consider expanding the content of the survey to include such additional information.

If you or your staff have any questions about the types of analysis of child and family issues that we conduct, and how such additional information would be valuable, please feel free to contact me at 206-543-8483 or brandon@u.washington.edu.

Sincerely



Richard N. Brandon, Ph.D.