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# THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN CHILD

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Staff of the Subcommittee on Children and Families*

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*“Children are 20 percent of our population, but 100 percent of our future.” – Chris Dodd*

## **The State of the American Child**

### **Overview**

As the Chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee on Children and Families, and founder of the “Children’s Caucus” in 1983, Senator Chris Dodd has dedicated much of his career to improving the lives of American families and children.

A few months after his decision to retire from the United States Senate, Senator Dodd announced that he would conduct a series of hearings on the state of American children with the goal of answering several important questions: What do our children need to succeed? How are we doing in providing those resources? And how can we improve upon our current efforts?

The “State of the American Child” series, which began in June and concluded with its fourth hearing in late November, examined all aspects of children’s lives: their health from birth to adulthood, their educational experiences inside and outside of the classroom, and their life at home with their families and in their communities. At the same time, each of these hearings focused on the inter-connectedness of these various aspects of children’s lives and how they shape and define our children.

This report serves two main purposes: first, it synthesizes the findings from Senator Dodd’s State of the American Child hearings and describes in detail the barriers that prevent far too many of our children from achieving their potential; second, it serves to focus our nation’s attention on our children and outline key policies that need to be implemented in the coming Congress to improve their well-being.

### **Moving Forward**

In light of the testimony at these hearings, the Subcommittee on Children and Families is recommending that Congress take the following actions to help alleviate the many challenges currently facing our nation’s children.

- Extend and expand key programs to help children and families and make them more responsive to their needs.
- Take action to ensure better-paying jobs by raising the minimum wage and increasing the Child Tax Credit.
- Guarantee universal access to early childhood programs by permanently increasing funding for child care and Head Start and indexing these funds to inflation.
- Make serious efforts to reduce the childhood obesity epidemic.

## **Why Now?**

Among the many legislative battles Senator Dodd has fought over the years, he considers his work on behalf of our nation's children and their families to be among the most important and rewarding. Ever since he was sworn in for his first Senate term in 1981, Senator Dodd has been an unrelenting crusader for the health and well-being of the most vulnerable members of our society, our children. In 1983, Senator Dodd teamed up with then-Republican Senator Arlen Specter to form the Children's Caucus, Congress's only bipartisan, bicameral caucus devoted exclusively to issues that affect our nation's young people.

As he did then, Senator Dodd continually and consistently formed partnerships with lawmakers from both parties during his career to improve health care and educational opportunities for millions of America's children and expand the safety net for working families who have fallen on hard times. Now, as a retiring member of the Senate, Senator Dodd is looking to the next generation of Senators to continue this important work by investing in our children's well-being, and in so doing, our country's future. In order to fully understand what is at stake, we need to understand how children are doing in all dimensions of their lives today.

## **The "Children's Senator"**

Chief among Senator Dodd's contributions to families and their children was his work on the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Having first authored this bill in 1986, Senator Dodd worked hard for seven years, overcoming two vetoes by President George H. W. Bush, until it was finally signed into law by President Clinton in 1993. Since its enactment, this groundbreaking legislation has allowed tens of millions of Americans to take up to twelve weeks of job-protected leave if they fall ill, or if they need to care for a sick relative or a new child. Senator Dodd has always believed that every American worker deserves the right to take time off of work for a family issue or to deal with a medical emergency without worrying about whether they will lose their job. By establishing national leave requirements for employers, passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act represented a historic, career-defining achievement for Senator Dodd.

Senator Dodd is also well-known for his work on children's health issues. Long before enactment of the landmark health care reform bill earlier this year, Senator Dodd fought hard to ensure that low-income children in this country would receive access to quality, affordable health care. In 1997, he joined his long-time friend and colleague Senator Kennedy in authoring the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), a federal-state partnership that provides health insurance coverage to uninsured children who are not eligible for Medicaid. Twelve years later, Senator Dodd helped lead the fight to pass legislation reauthorizing CHIP, after a previous reauthorization bill was vetoed by President Bush in 2008.

Senator Dodd has also demonstrated his commitment to protecting the health of our nation's children through his longstanding work on newborn health issues. In 2006, Senator Dodd joined Republican Senator Lamar Alexander in passing legislation that expands federal research into premature births and provides new educational and support services to pregnant women in order

to reduce their incidence. Two years later, Senator Dodd worked with his Republican colleague Senator Orrin Hatch to author legislation that provides more effective education about the importance of newborn screening to parents and health care providers and helps states upgrade their own newborn screening initiatives.

In addition to his work on these critically important health care-related matters, Senator Dodd has made it his career's mission to help families afford safe, quality child care. During his second term in office, Senator Dodd scored a major victory for working families in this country when legislation that he authored creating the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program was signed into law. Under this law, the first of its kind since World War II, the federal government has provided billions of dollars in aid to help families responsibly balance their jobs with caring for their children by providing safe, reliable child care options in their communities. In recognition of the historic nature of this legislation and the millions of working families who have benefited from its provisions, Senator Dodd was awarded the "Lifetime Leadership Award for Quality Child Care" by the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies in 2001.

That award was not the first time Senator Dodd had been recognized for his tremendous contributions to the well-being and educational enrichment of our nation's children. In fact, Senator Dodd was named "Senator of the Decade" in 1991 by the National Head Start Association for his years of work in support of the Head Start program. Senator Dodd has always believed that the key to a child's success in life is access to a top-notch, world-class education, and that early childhood learning is particularly important to the future development of all children. As a result, Senator Dodd has spent the better part of his tenure in the Senate working to ensure that Head Start, which has helped nearly 20 million American youngsters since it began in 1965, receives the federal resources it needs to continue providing a better future for our nation's children.

But Senator Dodd's efforts to ensure that America's children receive the support and enrichment they need to succeed in life extends well beyond the walls of the classroom. Senator Dodd was instrumental in the creation of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Centers program, which offers children afterschool opportunities for additional instruction in math, science, and reading. Senator Dodd believes that safe, healthy, and academically-enriching afterschool programs are absolutely critical to helping children with working parents improve their grades and stay out of trouble. And so he has worked hard to expand federal support for these programs and ensure that more American children have the opportunity to benefit from them.

## **The Current State of the American Child**

America's children are in crisis. Over the course of a series of hearings launched this year by the Subcommittee on Children and Families, entitled "The State of the American Child," experts at the local, state and federal levels have painted a dire picture of the lives of millions of America's children: more than one in five live in poverty<sup>1</sup>, one in four uses food stamps<sup>2</sup>, nearly one in three is overweight or obese<sup>3</sup> and a majority of children cannot read or do math at grade level in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>4</sup> This crisis is so severe that according to one report by Mission Readiness, a bipartisan organization of senior retired military leaders, 75 percent of our children are unfit to enlist in the military "because they fail to graduate high school, have a criminal record, or are physically unfit."<sup>5</sup> In the wealthiest nation on earth, it is not only unacceptable, but shameful that so many children and their families must struggle on a daily basis just to survive, let alone thrive and reach their potential.

The current economic downturn, which began nationally in December 2007, has highlighted the plight of our most vulnerable citizens, our children. But unfortunately, the current crisis in child well-being has been festering for decades. As economist Harry Holzer noted in his testimony at our first hearing, "Even in the best of times, child poverty rates in the U.S. are very high, and many millions of children live with unemployed parents."<sup>6</sup> Despite the success of numerous child focused programs like the Children's Health Insurance Program, Head Start, and the Child Care Development Block Grant, their achievements have often waned when the focus of our nation has turned away from our children.

What we must comprehend is that when we shift our attention away from improving the well-being of our nation's children, we handicap our ability to solve other key priorities. As Alma Powell, Chair of America's Promise Alliance succinctly told the committee, the fate of our nation's children impacts all our big priorities.<sup>7</sup>

The fate of who we are as nation is at stake. If we don't stand for our children, as Marian Wright Edelman stated at our final hearing, we as a nation don't stand for anything.

### ***Family Economic Security***

Even before the current recession, millions of families and children were in trouble. According to recent data collected by the Census Bureau, a typical American household earned less money in 2009 than they did in 1999.<sup>8</sup> And as incomes fell for the typical family, costs for the basics of a middle class life (homeownership, health care, child care, and college) rose so much that the

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Table B-2

<sup>2</sup> DeParle, J. & Gebeloff, R. (2009)

<sup>3</sup> White House Task force on Childhood Obesity. (2010)

<sup>4</sup> The State of the American Child: Securing Our Children's Future. (2010). Marian Wright Edelman Testimony

<sup>5</sup> Mission Readiness: Military Leaders for Kids. (2009)

<sup>6</sup> The State of the American Child. (2010). Dr. Harry Holzer Testimony

<sup>7</sup> The State of the American Child. (2010). Alma Powell Testimony

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Table A-1

typical two-breadwinner family has less discretionary income today than single breadwinner families a generation ago.<sup>9</sup>

Financial insecurity in its most extreme form, poverty, can have serious long-term effects on children and families. Children who grow up poor have less education, lower levels of employment and earning and a greater propensity to become poor themselves. As Dr. Holzer stated in his testimony,

*While social scientists continue to debate whether it is low income per se that drives these results as opposed to the behaviors and characteristics of parents who happen to be poor, there is no doubt that children growing up in such families have less opportunity to succeed.<sup>10</sup>*

The moral cost of child poverty is clear—it is a huge impediment to children being able to reach their potential in life. There is also an enormous economic cost that all of American society bears when children live in poverty. In 2007, Dr. Holzer, along with several colleagues, reviewed a wide variety of studies examining the relationships between child poverty and earning potential, propensity to commit crime, and health later in life. Their findings led them to conservatively estimate the economic cost of child poverty to be 4 percent of GDP, or around \$500 billion per year.<sup>11</sup> Those costs have almost certainly risen as the proportion of children who lived in poverty has grown from 18 percent in 2007 to 20.7 percent in 2009.<sup>12</sup> In Connecticut, when poor children grow up and enter the workforce they will earn \$19,000 less annually than children who do not live in poverty.<sup>13</sup>

Even short spells of poverty can have deleterious effects on children. A recent study found that high school graduation rates for kids who fell into poverty during a recession were 15 percentage points lower than for children who did not fall into poverty. This research also showed that the health status of children who fell into poverty during a recession, versus those who were already in poverty, were nearly identical. And children who fell into poverty during a recession were twice as likely to be low-income later in life.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the current recession is not simply a short spell of economic distress. It has been deep and persistently long. And a 2010 report by the President's Council of Economic Advisers projects annual unemployment rates of 9.2, 8.2, 7.3, 6.5 and 5.9 percent from 2011 through 2015.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, more American children are susceptible to falling into poverty. In fact, some experts have estimated that child poverty rates may climb to nearly 25 percent by 2013.<sup>16</sup> As the figures above show, this will cause nearly one-quarter of America's children to start out on the wrong path. Unfortunately, once a child starts down that path, changing course can become extremely difficult.

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<sup>9</sup> Warren, E. & Tyagi, A. W. (2004)

<sup>10</sup> The State of the American Child. (2010). Dr. Harry Holzer Testimony

<sup>11</sup> Holzer, H. et al. (2007)

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Table B-2

<sup>13</sup> Connecticut Commission on Children. (2009)

<sup>14</sup> Linden, M. (2009)

<sup>15</sup> Council of Economic Advisers. (2010)

<sup>16</sup> Sawhill, I. & Monea, E. (2009). Table 3

Oftentimes finding a job is not the only problem. Many parents, especially mothers, have found the biggest barrier to starting a new job is finding affordable child care. In May, the *New York Times* reported that many low-income mothers who wanted to work could not do so because of the lack of affordable child care. Many were simply forced to stay unemployed, since child care absorbs nearly one-third of the total household budget for families with working mothers who live below the poverty line.<sup>17</sup> It is no surprise then that 37 percent of children with working mothers have no regular child care and 19 percent are home alone after school.<sup>18</sup> While child care costs vary widely by region and the age of the child, data from the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) shows that the average cost of full time child care in 2010 for an infant ranged from \$4,560 to \$18,773. For a four year old, the cost ranged from \$4,460 to \$13,158.<sup>19</sup> Given that the typical household's median income was \$49,777, the lack of affordable child care is a problem for both low and middle-income families. In fact, in nearly half of all states, child care expenses for infants exceed rent payments for the typical family.<sup>20</sup> If we want to help families get back to work, we will need to also focus on child care assistance.

When a parent does find a job, he or she needs support in order to maintain that job and care for a family at the same time. The Family and Medical Leave Act has been used more than 100 million times to take critical time off when necessary without forcing workers to choose between their families and their jobs. This law has been a huge success, and in recent years, some critical advancements have been made in extending FMLA to previously underserved communities. Senator Dodd led the fight to make it possible for loved ones of our nation's service members to take additional leave to care for their wounded family members when they return from combat. And earlier this year, the Department of Labor extended FMLA protections to gay and lesbian couples.

However, nearly 50 percent of workers are not eligible for FMLA because they work for businesses with fewer than 50 employees or have not been at their jobs long enough to qualify. Part-time workers are also not covered because of the requirement that they work at least 1,250 hours per year. And 40 percent of workers, or nearly 40 million employees, do not have access to paid sick days.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, we have much more work to do in this area. Senator Dodd joined the late Senator Kennedy in championing the Healthy Families Act (HFA), which would allow workers to earn up to seven paid sick days to tend to their own or a family member's medical needs. As a result of the HFA, at least 30.3 million additional workers would have access to paid sick leave.<sup>22</sup> This proposal has wide public support, with 86 percent of Americans favoring a law that guarantees paid sick leave for all workers.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Goodman, P. S. (2010)

<sup>18</sup> National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA). (2010a)

<sup>19</sup> National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA). (2010a)

<sup>20</sup> National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA). (2010b)

<sup>21</sup> National Partnership for Women and Families. (2010a)

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee. (2010)

<sup>23</sup> Smith, T. & Kim, J. (2010)

Senator Dodd also believes that we must continue to fight for paid family and medical leave. According to one study, three out of four workers who were eligible for FMLA but did not take it did so because they could not afford unpaid time off from work. All too often, workers in this country are unable to take time off work to care for themselves or a family member who has fallen ill because they cannot afford to do so. This must change and this country needs a national policy providing paid family and medical leave.

### ***Education***

A good education is the cornerstone of America's economic security. A well-educated workforce makes the United States more competitive by attracting more businesses to our shores. And a person entering the workforce with a higher education has a higher earning potential and is more likely to find stable employment than a high school graduate. According to a report by the President's Middle Class Task Force, a college graduate earned 46 percent more per hour than a high school graduate in 1973, but by 2007 this difference had grown to 77 percent.<sup>24</sup> And 2009 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that individuals with only a high school diploma have nearly double the unemployment rate of those with bachelor's degrees and nearly 1.5 times the unemployment rate of those with associate's degrees.<sup>25</sup>

The road to higher education, and the success of children overall, begins in early childhood. Early childhood education prepares students for future schooling, and sets them up for future achievement. As a recent report from First Focus and the Brookings Institution points out, there is a...

*consensus among researchers and business leaders alike that children who are nurtured from their earliest stages of development have the best chances of achieving life long success. Whether the objective is reducing crime, increasing high school graduation rates, or providing children with an equal shot at the American Dream, evidence shows that effective early investment can make a real difference by starting children off on the right foot.*<sup>26</sup>

And yet, despite the importance of early childhood education, 40 percent of children ages 3 to 5 are not enrolled in nursery school, pre-school or kindergarten,<sup>27</sup> hampering the success of millions of children on their first day of elementary school.

The reality is that in the United States advancements in student achievement have stalled at all levels - elementary, high school and college. Our National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading and math scores have remained stagnant for the past decade, with more than one-quarter of all students scoring below the basic level of proficiency on these tests.<sup>28</sup> The U.S. is the only developed nation whose youngest generation will likely receive less education than those before it.

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<sup>24</sup> Middle Class Task Force. (2009)

<sup>25</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010)

<sup>26</sup> Isaacs, J. (2008)

<sup>27</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2009)

<sup>28</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2009)

While American students lag behind, other countries are surpassing the U.S. in student achievement scores. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United States, which once had the world's highest rate of high school graduation, now ranks 18<sup>th</sup> out of 25 developed nations.<sup>29</sup> Children in the United States perform below children in other industrialized nations on math and science tests, ranking 25<sup>th</sup> out of 30 in math and 24<sup>th</sup> out of 30 nations in science.<sup>30</sup> And this growing disparity between the United States and other developed countries is also apparent in our highest achieving students. In math, for example, Korea, Belgium and the Czech Republic have more than five times the rate of highest achieving students as the United States.<sup>31</sup>

This underachievement is further magnified when we look at the difference in achievement levels between various populations of our society - a gap significantly larger in the United States than in many other developed nations.<sup>32</sup> By the fourth grade, African-American and Latino students are, on average, two academic years behind their white peers.<sup>33</sup> According to a recent study, "between the fourth and twelfth grades, the gap versus white student math scores grows 41 percent for Latinos and 22 percent for blacks."<sup>34</sup>

The most alarming news is not the persistence of this gap, but the fact that it expands as children get older. A student's reading performance in third grade is a strong predictor of future success. While nearly 60 percent of students who are reading at grade level in the third grade attend college, only 20 percent of their peers who read below grade level will ever reach higher education.<sup>35</sup> While 78 percent of white students graduate on time, only 56 percent of African-American and 52 percent of Hispanic students do so.<sup>36</sup> And if minorities become a greater proportion of the general population, as predicted, this achievement gap will eventually weaken our nation's academic strength. An Alliance for Excellent Education research paper projects that if graduation rates among minorities remain constant, the national graduation rate will actually decrease.<sup>37</sup>

Even if students do attend college, that is no guarantee that they will actually graduate: slightly more than half (57 percent) of bachelors degree students graduate within six years, and less than one-quarter who attend a community college graduate within three years. While the U.S. used to have the highest proportion of 25 to 34 year olds with college degrees, we now place 12<sup>th</sup> out of 36 developed nations.<sup>38</sup> A recent Education Trust study found that public universities often graduate only half of their black students, compared with 81 percent of their white students.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately, even when students are prepared, the high price tag can dissuade many from entering higher education. Each year as many as 170,000 high school graduates who are

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<sup>29</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2009)

<sup>30</sup> McKinsey and Company. (2009)

<sup>31</sup> McKinsey and Company. (2009)

<sup>32</sup> McKinsey and Company. (2009)

<sup>33</sup> Teacher's College at Columbia University. (2005)

<sup>34</sup> McKinsey and Company. (2009)

<sup>35</sup> Lesnick, J. et al.

<sup>36</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education. (2006)

<sup>37</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education. (2006)

<sup>38</sup> Lewin, T. (2010b)

<sup>39</sup> Thomas, E. (2010)

prepared to attend college never do so because they cannot afford it.<sup>40</sup> According to a report by the Middle Class Task Force, since 1979, real median family income has grown by 10 percent while private tuition has grown by 154 percent and public tuition has grown by 186 percent.<sup>41</sup> Recent increases in student aid, namely federal Pell Grants as well as education tax credits, have helped mitigate the growing cost of college tuition.<sup>42</sup> But unfortunately, this aid does not help students pay for other expenses associated with college, like books and room and board, which have continued to grow while family incomes have stagnated. It comes as little surprise then that even with this assistance, many students and their families still feel that a college education is out of reach. Research conducted by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education found that the proportion of respondents who say that “there are many people who are qualified to go [to college] but don’t have the opportunity to do so” increased from 47 percent in 2000 to 57 percent in 2003.<sup>43</sup> And for many who do pursue higher education, the opportunity comes at a high cost. Research conducted by the College Board found that 55 percent of bachelor’s degree recipients from public colleges graduated with debt and those students had an average debt of 19,800 dollars.<sup>44</sup>

## ***Health***

We have made great strides in many areas of children’s health over the years. A variety of environmental hazards have been improved including fewer incidences of lead poisoning and increased access to safe drinking water. And even during this recession, the proportion of children covered by health insurance has actually grown. This increase is due to greater coverage of children by government programs. According to the most recent data from the Census Bureau, the percentage of children covered by health insurance has grown from 87.5 percent to 90 percent in the past ten years, as government insurance coverage has risen from 20.3 percent to 33.8 percent. Simultaneously, private insurance coverage has fallen by nearly ten percentage points.<sup>45</sup> Of those children who are not insured, research by Genevieve Kenney at the Urban Institute indicates that 65 percent of them were eligible for either Medicaid or CHIP.<sup>46</sup> The recent CHIP Reauthorization of 2009 will make considerable gains in enrolling many of these eligible children. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the reauthorization will provide coverage to an additional 6.5 million children under CHIP and Medicaid by 2013. Approximately 4.1 million of these children would have been uninsured if not for the reauthorization.<sup>47</sup>

While health insurance coverage does not guarantee that a child will actually receive care, it does greatly improve the chances of this happening. According to an analysis done by the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, “Children with Medicaid and CHIP report access to preventive and primary care at approximately equal levels to their privately insured

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<sup>40</sup> Burd, S. (2002)

<sup>41</sup> Middle Class Task Force. (2009)

<sup>42</sup> Lewin, T. (2010a)

<sup>43</sup> Middle Class Task Force. (2009).

<sup>44</sup> College Board Advocacy & Policy Center. (2010)

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2010) Table C-3

<sup>46</sup> Kenney, G. et al. (2010)

<sup>47</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation. (2009)

counterparts.<sup>48</sup> Without health insurance coverage, Americans in general are more than twice as likely to delay or forgo needed care.<sup>49</sup> The Affordable Care Act ensures that even more children have access to health insurance coverage. The law extends federal funding for CHIP for two additional years and increases outreach and enrollment grants for states to reach more children. The law also prohibits insurance plans from denying coverage for children under the age of 19 with pre-existing medical conditions, thus further increasing access to health insurance coverage.

Even with these gains in health insurance coverage, experts who examine children's health holistically expect it to decline overall, primarily because of the child obesity crisis in this country.<sup>50</sup> Childhood obesity is characterized by having a body mass index (BMI) at or above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile for children of the same age and gender. In the 1970s, slightly more than one in 20 children (5.5 percent) were obese. Today that has more than tripled to 17 percent. And when experts also count overweight children, this rate nearly doubles to 32 percent.<sup>51</sup> The fact that nearly one in three American children is overweight or obese poses one of the most significant public health challenges this country faces.

All of us—parents, schools, government, employers—need to see the rising childhood obesity rates for what they are: a medical emergency. This problem is so severe that it affects our national security—more than one-quarter of all 17 to 24 year olds in this country are unqualified for military service because they are overweight.<sup>52</sup> Obesity causes numerous chronic health problems including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, asthma, and cancer. As a result of obesity, one-third of children born at the beginning of this century are now expected to develop diabetes during their lifetime.<sup>53</sup> Obese children and teenagers have a 70 percent chance of one risk factor for cardiovascular disease and nearly a 40 percent chance of having two risk factors.<sup>54</sup> Fortunately, the Affordable Care Act provides \$25 million in funding for the Childhood Obesity Demonstration Project, created through CHIP reauthorization, to develop a comprehensive and systematic model for reducing childhood obesity. Additionally, the law requires that each state design a public awareness campaign on preventive and obesity-related services available to Medicaid beneficiaries.

These medical conditions have huge budgetary implications for our nation. Overweight children cost America \$3 billion in total direct spending every year. Since obese children are, according to some studies, 10 times more likely to become obese adults, these costs grow with our children's waistlines. As those children mature into adults, they incur an estimated \$1,429 more in medical expenses than their healthy weight peers, with total medical spending that directly results from obesity-related health issues totaling \$147 billion in 2008.<sup>55</sup> And perhaps most troubling is the number of people who die every year from factors directly related to obesity. According to the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, which reviewed numerous

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<sup>48</sup> Georgetown University Health Policy Institute: Center for Children and Families. (2009)

<sup>49</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation. (2010)

<sup>50</sup> Foundation for Child Development. (2010)

<sup>51</sup> *The State of the American Child: The Impact of Federal Policies on Children*. (2010). Dr. Cecilia Rouse Testimony

<sup>52</sup> White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity. (2010)

<sup>53</sup> White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity. (2010)

<sup>54</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009)

<sup>55</sup> White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity. (2010)

scientific studies, “obesity is estimated to cause 112,000 deaths per year in the United States. The current generation may even be on track to have a shorter lifespan than their parents.”<sup>56</sup> Even though obesity is often viewed solely as a health challenge, it is important to note that obesity, like many other health issues, has spillover effects on other aspects of children’s lives. As Dr. David Satcher noted in his testimony at the final hearing on the State of the American Child “children who eat well and are physically active learn and perform better on standardized exams in reading and math. These children are also better disciplined and less likely to be absent from school.”<sup>57</sup>

While obesity is one of the most catastrophic issues in public health that this nation faces, it is by no means the only issue. Even with improvements in quality prenatal care, “we continue to trail other industrialized countries and some developing countries in infant mortality.”<sup>58</sup> A 2004 CDC study, the most recent data available, found that the “the United States ranked 29th in the world in infant mortality, tied with Poland and Slovakia.”<sup>59</sup> In 2005, more than two-thirds of infant deaths occurred among pre-term babies, with one-third of deaths due directly to pre-term related causes.<sup>60</sup>

While insurance coverage, obesity, and infant mortality represent only a small portion of the health challenges facing our country, they do highlight the fact that health obstacles occur at the earliest stages of life and are persistent throughout childhood.

## **The Impact of Successful Programs on Improving Childhood Well-Being**

Despite the troubling outlook of child well-being today, history shows that public policy and government programs can play a critical role in improving the lives of children and families, whether it be CHIP, access to parental leave, the Earned Income Tax Credit or Head Start and child care programs. The impact and importance of several government policies, including the Child Tax Credit, unemployment insurance and additional child care funding has only heightened during this economic downturn.

The well-being of children begins in the womb and proper nutrition is important to ensuring the health of both the mother and her child. The Women, Infant and Children (WIC) Program provides coupons to low-income pregnant women to purchase milk, formula and other supplemental foods so that they can nourish their infants. There is substantial evidence that WIC improves health outcomes. In reviewing 17 studies of WIC, the Government Accountability Office found that “WIC participation reduced the incidence of low birth weight by 21 to 53 percent. These numbers represent huge improvements in the health of newborns...providing WIC services to mothers of babies born in 1990, saved taxpayers more than \$337 million in medical costs.”<sup>61</sup> The largest nutrition program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has also been shown to significantly reduce the risk of hunger. According to a recent

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<sup>56</sup> White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity. (2010)

<sup>57</sup> *The State of the American Child: Securing Our Children's Future*. (2010). Dr. David Satcher Testimony

<sup>58</sup> *The State of the American Child: Securing Our Children's Future*. (2010). Dr. David Satcher Testimony

<sup>59</sup> MacDorman, M. & Matthews, T. (2010)

<sup>60</sup> MacDorman, M. & Matthews, T. (2010)

<sup>61</sup> Currie, J. (2006)

report by the Urban Institute, SNAP benefits reduce the risk of hunger by roughly 30 percent and reduces the risk of severe hunger by 20 percent.<sup>62</sup> Food stamps also help low-income mothers afford essential nourishment, which can improve the well-being of their babies. One report found that pregnant mothers who received food stamps three months prior to the birth of their child had babies with higher birth weights, with the largest gains among the smallest children.<sup>63</sup> These findings provide evidence that SNAP is meeting its key goal of reducing food-related hardship.

In addition to adequate nutrition, very young children need exposure to mental stimulation so that they can be school ready. There is strong evidence that Head Start, a key child care program for poor children, has had positive effects on cognitive and language development, educational attainment and health. An extensive review of research on early childhood programs,<sup>64</sup> (essential since 64 percent of women with children under age three work outside the home), has shown that they have “long lasting effects on schooling attainment and other outcomes such as teen pregnancy and crime.”<sup>65</sup> Two of the most prominent studies, the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the Perry Preschool Project, in which children were randomly assigned to these programs, both “found positive effect on schooling.”<sup>66</sup> They also had long-term cost savings: in the Abecedarian study, researchers found that each dollar spent saved taxpayers four dollars, while every dollar spent in the Perry Preschool study has saved taxpayers up to seven dollars in social costs.<sup>67</sup> Head Start and Early Head Start are early childhood programs for low-income children between zero and five years that provide quality preschool services for low-income parents. Several recent studies have found that Head Start has significant positive effects on educational attainment, and reduces behavior problems, depression and obesity.<sup>68</sup>

Early childhood education also confers huge long-term economic benefits on children. Raj Chetty, a Harvard economist, followed 12,000 children through adulthood and found that at 27, a child made \$100 additional dollars for every percentile they moved up in their test scores during kindergarten. For example, “a student who went from the average to the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile—a typical jump for a 5 year old with a good teacher—could expect to make about \$1,000 more a year at age 27 than a student who remained at the average.”<sup>69</sup>

Low-income children have on average poorer health and well-being than other American children. Programs like the Earned Income and Child Tax Credit (EITC and CTC), provide income support through tax credits to low-income working Americans with children. While the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) was first created in the 1970s as a reimbursement for payroll taxes, it was significantly expanded in 1993 so that working parents of children began to receive a substantially larger credit than Americans with no children. It is now one of the largest anti-poverty programs in the United States and can boost low income families’ income by up to 15

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<sup>62</sup> Ratcliffe, C. & McKernan, S.-M. (2010)

<sup>63</sup> Almond, D. et al. (2008)

<sup>64</sup> Almond, D. & Currie, J. (2010)

<sup>65</sup> Almond, D. & Currie, J. (2010)

<sup>66</sup> Almond, D. & Currie, J. (2010)

<sup>67</sup> Almond, D. & Currie, J. (2010)

<sup>68</sup> Almond, D. & Currie, J. (2010)

<sup>69</sup> Leonhardt, D. (2010)

percent.<sup>70</sup> EITC benefits have been calculated to result in a 2.2 percent reduction in child poverty.<sup>71</sup> According to several studies, “the large amount of cash transferred to working families as a result of the EITC has been demonstrated to reduce poverty for [families with children].”<sup>72</sup> Recent research has suggested that not only does this program reduce poverty by increasing the gross income of recipients, it can also improve maternal health, including reducing the incidence of depression. The EITC also has positive impacts on children’s test scores. Every additional \$1,000 a family receives from the EITC raises math test scores by 2.1 percent and reading test scores by 3.6 percent.<sup>73</sup>

CHIP has been immensely successful in expanding health insurance coverage to low-income children. The percentage of low-income children (those with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty line or about \$30,520 for a family of three) who were uninsured has declined. This continued a longer trend that began after the CHIP was created in 1997 of increases in the number and proportion of low-income children with health insurance. From 1997 to the first quarter of 2003, the percentage of uninsured low-income children dropped by about one-third, signaling a major success in public policy efforts to reduce the number of uninsured children in the United States.<sup>74</sup>

The importance of these programs has only increased with the onset of the current economic downturn. Millions of Americans have had to survive with less, and have often needed to rely on many successful and effective programs to meet their basic needs. At the beginning of 2009, the United States Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which included important provisions for America’s children and families. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities conservatively estimates that seven of the Recovery Act’s provisions kept six million Americans out of poverty in 2008, including 2.4 million children. Of these seven provisions, the expanded Child Tax Credit kept 600,000 children and 400,000 adults out of poverty; the Earned Income Tax Credit expansion kept 300,000 children and 200,000 adults above the poverty line; and food stamps kept 1.1 million Americans including 500,000 children out of poverty.<sup>75</sup> The Child Tax Credit, which was also temporarily expanded, will now “reach 2.9 million new children and will provide another 10 million children with a larger credit than they would have received under the 2008 rules.”<sup>76</sup> The Recovery Act kept millions of American families and children out of poverty. But given that many of these provisions have already expired (including the widely supported TANF Emergency Contingency Fund), or will expire soon, these positive benefits will also unfortunately fade even as unemployment is expected to remain high.

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<sup>70</sup> Evans, W. & Garthwaite, C. (2010)

<sup>71</sup> Danziger, S. & Danziger, S. (2010)

<sup>72</sup> Evans, W. & Garthwaite, C. (2010)

<sup>73</sup> Dahl, G. & Lochner, L. (2005)

<sup>74</sup> Ku, L. (2003)

<sup>75</sup> Sherman, A. (2009a)

<sup>76</sup> Sherman, A. (2009b)

## **The Unfinished Children's Agenda**

It has become clear during the course of these hearings that we need to make effective and robust investments in our children immediately, especially when the need is so great. Of course, our nation is facing a challenging long-term fiscal outlook that needs to be addressed as well. But as Dr. Harry Holzer stated, “important short-term investments to relieve the negative effects of poverty and unemployment on children should not be sacrificed for the sake of fiscal balance. Such sensible investments would add only miniscule amounts to the national debt and would at least partially pay for themselves over time through higher output and tax revenues.”<sup>77</sup> Spending on programs that aid low-income families and children in the short term and invest in the potential of our children in the long term can actually help reduce our deficit.

### **Provide Immediate Relief to Struggling Families and Children**

In the short run, Senator Dodd recommends reauthorizing key portions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, including the enhancements made to the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit, the Making Work Pay Tax Credit, and emergency unemployment benefits. We also must substantially reform the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) so that it is more responsive to the needs of children and families and less focused on cutting caseloads as unemployment surges. In addition, we should maintain the additional funding for Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant. We also must address the unemployment crisis in this country. Experts have suggested a variety of solutions ranging from public service employment programs to payroll tax holidays to encourage businesses to hire workers. Solving this crisis and working across party lines will be crucial in helping our most vulnerable citizens.

### **Make Work Pay by Raising the Minimum Wage and Increasing the Child Tax Credit**

Nearly 70 percent of poor children live in a family where one or both parents work.<sup>78</sup> When jobs do return, we must make sure that these jobs pay enough for American families to escape poverty. One key to ensuring better paying jobs is a higher minimum wage. The current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 would result in a person earning \$15,080 per year (40 hour work weeks, 52 weeks per year), meaning a single mother working full time at this wage would not be able to escape poverty. Crucially, the minimum wage is not indexed to inflation,<sup>79</sup> so its purchasing value erodes over time. The minimum wage needs to be raised and indexed to inflation. In 2007, the Center for American Progress estimated that if the minimum wage was “restored to 50 percent of the average wage, about \$8.40 an hour in 2006, [it would] help over 4.5 million poor workers and nearly nine million other low-income workers.”<sup>80</sup> In addition, given the higher costs of and the importance of making large investment in very young children, the federal government should consider making the Child Tax Credit available to all children by lowering

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<sup>77</sup> The State of the American Child. (2010). Dr. Harry Holzer Testimony

<sup>78</sup> Sherman, A. (2010)

<sup>79</sup> U.S. Department of Labor

<sup>80</sup> Greenberg, M. et al. (2007)

the earnings threshold to zero (meaning as long as a low income family has some earnings they are eligible). Policymakers should also consider creating a larger Child Tax Credit for babies and very young children.

## **Guarantee Universal Access to Quality Early Childhood Programs**

Given the importance of high quality child care, we must permanently increase the funding for child care and Head Start and index these sums to inflation. Parents must also have the ability to take paid family and medical leave and sick time from their jobs, rare in low wage jobs, so that they can care for their children without fear of losing their jobs. Experts across the political spectrum also believe in the value of education in ensuring equal opportunity and important role in creating a well-educated workforce. All students should be held to uniform education standards and provided with the resources to meet those goals.

## **Attack the Childhood Obesity Epidemic**

Finally, we must seriously attack our health challenges, especially obesity. In the coming years, the Affordable Care Act will significantly improve the health outcomes of our children. The law increases children's access to health services by requiring insurance plans to cover basic pediatric services, along with dental, vision, and hearing care. The law makes significant investments in school-based health clinics and expands the health care workforce including, pediatricians, pediatric nurse practitioners, and pediatric oral health professionals. In order to address the obesity epidemic and other health issues plaguing our children, the law will also require that insured children have access to free preventive services. However, our work is not complete. We must continue to enact policies that increase the availability and affordability of healthy foods at home and at school, promote exercise and work to ensure that families and children, especially pregnant mothers, have regular access to preventive services.

Even in these tough economic times, it is our responsibility to improve the outlook for every child in this country. In the 1990s, when we expanded assistance to children, with the creation of CHIP and the Child Tax Credit and the expanded the EITC, we saw child poverty rates fall by nearly 25 percent. There is also strong evidence that other programs like WIC, SNAP and Head Start improve the lives of children.

## Conclusion

Given the daunting challenges our children now face, we cannot simply turn our back and say we cannot afford to invest in our future. As Marian Wright Edelman stated:

*If the foundation of your house is crumbling, you don't say you cannot afford to fix it. Children are the foundation of America's future. We need to invest now in their health, early childhood development. Today is tomorrow.<sup>81</sup>*

We can and must without delay begin to shift our national priority to our children to ensure the success of both our families and our nation. Nothing less than our future is at stake.

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<sup>81</sup> *The State of the American Child: Securing Our Children's Future.* (2010) Marian Wright Edelman Testimony

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