



December 15, 2008

# **Children's Leadership Council**

## ***Invest in Children, Strengthen America***

### **An Agenda for Preparing Our Children and Youth for School, Work and Life**

For too long, programs that affect America's most vulnerable population have seen little or no increase in investment, even as children and youth fail to get the services and support they need. When we fail to give children and families even the basics of health care, nutrition, early education, family economic support, and youth development, we put our entire nation at risk. Our children cannot afford to wait any longer—they need us to invest in them now. It is not just the right thing to do; it is one of the smartest investments we can make for our nation's future.

The Children's Leadership Council is a coalition of child advocates representing 36 leading national policy and advocacy organizations who are working everyday to improve the health, education, and well-being of children and youth in order to prepare them for school, work, and life. The CLC organizations have members in every state in the nation. For the first time, there is a strong, unified group of organizations speaking with one voice to achieve a singular mission – building the public awareness and creating the political will necessary to make greater federal investments in America's children and youth a reality.

The Children's Leadership Council believes investing in children and youth is investing in America. By making all of our children – from birth to young adulthood – a priority, we strengthen our country and secure everyone's future.

This is why the CLC is launching the "*Invest in Children, Strengthen America*" campaign to highlight specific economic recovery measures as well as long term investments that can help keep more children and youth from falling into poverty.

The CLC, through its "*Invest in Children, Strengthen America*" campaign, will be promoting the following platform. As the political and legislative environment changes, we will update the platform as necessary to reflect our continuing commitment to ensuring federal investments that will help prepare America's children and youth for school, work, and life.

## **I. Children's Health**

All children must have the opportunity to grow up healthy. That means having access to affordable, quality, comprehensive health care-- physical, dental, and mental health care-- that addresses the unique health care needs of children. Investing in children's health care strengthens America by creating a healthy and productive workforce. In 2009, our nation must start with, as a priority:

- Reauthorizing the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) within the first three months of 2009. SCHIP would provide health care coverage for at least an additional 4-5 million children who are currently uninsured, including legal immigrant children. Increased funding of approximately \$60 billion over five years should also support the ability of states to provide coverage to parents;
- As a crucial element of the national health care reform effort that will follow SCHIP enactment, all children and their parents should be guaranteed access to affordable, quality, comprehensive physical, dental, and mental care health care services that meet the unique health care needs of children. Preventative and developmental services should also be a key element of any national health care reform; and,
- Because new federal investments in children's health will build on the foundation of the Medicaid program, which covers 30 million low-income children, Medicaid must be strengthened and protected from anything that would weaken this foundation.

## **II. Early Care & Education**

Investing in early childhood helps America's children and strengthens our families and communities. Because infancy through age five is a critical time for brain development, young children need safe and stimulating environments that will prepare them to succeed in school, work, and life. Reliable, high-quality early childhood opportunities also give working parents the support and peace of mind they need to be productive at work. Our nation must provide a significant expansion in funding for early childhood development through:

- A new investment of \$70 billion over five years with \$10 billion in the first year to enhance programs and expand access to high-quality early care and education through Head Start and Early Head Start, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and a new federal initiative to increase states' focus on high-quality early childhood development that supports children ages birth to five.

Early care and education creates a bridge to work for so many families. In our efforts to get America working and our economy improving, these types of investments are critical.

### **III. Prevention, Early Intervention and Treatment for Vulnerable Children**

Many children in America have physical, mental or developmental disabilities or face harmful environmental conditions that require specialized services and treatment. Some of these issues can be prevented and many can be addressed most effectively through early identification and timely treatment. This type of support reduces stresses on families and helps ensure that children are not marginalized so they can participate in the everyday activities of childhood.

Between 8 and 16 percent of all children have a developmental or mental health problem, but only a fraction of them receive appropriate services. Many children grow up in families that struggle with chemical dependency, mental illness, or domestic violence that can jeopardize healthy child development if left untreated. Close to one million children are abused or neglected each year and more than 500,000 children are in foster care. The systems serving all of these children often fall far short of meeting their needs and helping them stay connected to caring adults and included in family and community life. Nearly 40 percent of the children we know are abused and neglected get no services at all. Prevent Child Abuse America estimates the *annual* total direct and indirect costs of child maltreatment to be nearly \$104 billion.

Our nation needs to invest in the well-being of all our children, especially those who are vulnerable and face tough challenges by ensuring more timely, preventive, and comprehensive responses to their needs. These investments provide government with critical long term returns by preventing and heading off problems early on in a child's life and preventing the outlay of costly dollars later in life.

Our nation must provide a new investment of \$10 billion a year to improve outcomes for vulnerable children through:

- Prevention services that would identify and address early child and family needs so we can protect children and promote healthy development. We propose immediate enactment of legislation that would expand quality home visiting programs to keep children safe and prepare them to start school and provide increased investments in other family support services through the Promoting Safe and Stable Families program;
- Early identification and treatment of developmental disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders in children, including expansion of Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Children's Mental Health Services Grant Program;
- A comprehensive, individualized response to each child's needs that takes into account the most appropriate setting and engages parents and other caring adults in the child's support and treatment;

- Increases in federal funding for the Title IV-E program, which now funds only out-of-home care for maltreated children and ignores other critical service needs. The increased funding should provide:
  - Prevention and early intervention services to reduce maltreatment and keep children safely with their families;
  - Specialized treatment to help children and families challenged by substance abuse, mental health problems, and domestic violence;
  - Services for children who leave foster care through reunification, placement with relatives, or adoption to help them remain with those families and prevent re-abuse and reentry into foster care;
  - Comprehensive reforms, such as manageable workloads, quality professional preparation and training, loan forgiveness, and improved supervision and monitoring that will lead to improvements in the quality of the workforce responsible for caring for children and families where there is abuse or neglect or the risk of maltreatment; and
  - Enhanced accountability for improved outcomes for children and their families, and for the effective use of funds and evaluation of services.

#### **IV. Youth Development**

Millions of youth are dropping out of high school and disconnecting from the education and labor market mainstays, with many falling into harm's way. Addressing this challenge will require a significant, sustained effort to create pathways that will put disconnected youth back on track and build a system of support for in-school youth, especially those in areas of high youth distress.

This is a silent crisis affecting our nation and one where it is absolutely necessary that our political leaders think long term. If we are to secure the economic future of the baby boom generation and beyond, we must have a new vibrant, productive workforce ready to follow in the footsteps of the generation set to retire. We have to address the drop out crisis head on by making an investment in our youth that will begin securing our economic future now, before it's too late.

Our nation must start with:

A new investment of \$10 billion per year for 10 years to:

- Create a White House Office of National Youth Policy, modeled after the Office of National Drug Control Policy, to improve coordination of federal youth programs, support state coordination efforts, and give youth a voice in the policies that affect their lives;
- Improve youth services in communities with high poverty, high dropout rates, and high levels of juvenile crime, by investing in new grants for recreation,

mentoring for in-school youth and education and career preparation for out-of-school youth;

- Provide new federal grants that will incentivize business, labor, the workforce system, and the postsecondary system to establish industry-specific options for high-risk youth, including apprenticeships, internships, and on-the-job training;
- Expand existing youth programs that have proven successful and effective, including the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Service Corps, YouthBuild, Youth Opportunity grants, and Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention grants;
- Greatly expand work experience and service learning programs for youth, including activities through the Workforce Investment Act that impart employability skills and exposure to the work environment.

## **V. Economic Support for Children and Families**

Investing in assistance for families who need help with basic necessities is an investment in America's future. Strong and self-sufficient families produce children that are better prepared for school, work and life. These programs do not replace parents or do their work for them, they help make families stronger and provide the help parents need to become more self-sufficient when times are tight.

Our nation must start with:

- Expansion of refundable tax credits including:
  - Further reducing the minimum earnings for the Child Tax Credit, with the inflation adjustment eliminated, to provide families of millions of children with more income and lift hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty;
  - Guaranteeing fully refundable higher education tax credits that would help one in four high school students who are currently ineligible to benefit; and
  - Making the child and dependent care tax credit refundable which will allow 1.5 million more households with incomes below \$30,000 to claim the credit.
- Increasing the number of families receiving rental assistance by \$200,000 to help families stabilize their housing situations – reducing both the frequent moves that can disrupt schooling and the number of children who become homeless each year.
- Reversing the cuts in child support funding from P.L. 109-171, and adopting policies to allow children to receive all of the child support collected on their behalf, rather than permitting the government to hold back \$2 billion every year to reimburse welfare costs. We can also enhance support for children by making tailored services available to both parents.
- In response to the economic downturn and sharp increase in food prices, food stamp households should receive a temporary boost in benefits. Reauthorization of child nutrition programs should also improve access, meal quality and nutrition for

millions of children. Infants and toddlers in food insecure households are significantly more likely to be at developmental risk, making them more likely to fall behind in school and suffer lifelong limits to their work opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

We can't afford *not* to make investments in America's children and youth now. These types of effective investments in children proposed by the CLC provide taxpayers with a substantial return on their investment, both in greater future economic growth and reduced costs in areas such as healthcare, crime, and remedial education.

These investments will go a long way toward securing our future, providing real solutions to our short and long-term economic challenges, and strengthening America.

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