

Federal Policy Priorities – 117th Congress

[Children's HealthWatch](#) is a network of pediatricians, public health researchers, and children's health and policy experts committed to advancing health equity and improving children's health by informing policies that alleviate economic hardships. We do this by conducting research on family economic hardships, health, and public policies from frontlines of pediatric care in Boston, Baltimore, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, and Little Rock. We use our research to inform policies that can give all children and their families equal opportunities for healthy, successful lives.

Promote racial health equity by closing income and wealth gaps

Racial health inequities rooted in income and wealth inequality persist and were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children's HealthWatch research consistently shows that when families are unable to afford basic needs, the health of children and parents suffer. Policies that reduce inequities and promote financial stability for families with children – particularly families of color and immigrant families – are urgently needed to promote health equity. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) are two of our country's most effective poverty alleviation tools and have been shown to improve health. Improvements to [EITC and CTC](#), along with efforts to establish guaranteed minimum income – especially during economic crises – increase the minimum wage, and examine reparation policies will increase racial equity and improve health among families and children across the U.S. Critical improvements include:

An inclusive, permanent, and accessible expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC)

The American Rescue Plan provided an important down payment toward promoting health and financial stability among families with children by expanding the CTC to ensure families with the lowest income benefit from the credit and boosting credit amounts, including an additional boost for young children who are at greatest risk of living in poverty. Congress should act now to ensure:

1. Permanent expansion of the fully refundable and expanded CTC passed in the American Rescue Plan. These improvements are expected to cut child poverty [nearly in half](#) in 2021 and reduce disparities.
2. Inclusive eligibility so the CTC reaches all children regardless of immigration status or involvement in the child welfare system. Re-instating CTC eligibility for the [1 million children](#) with Individual Tax Identification Numbers (ITINs) whose eligibility was revoked in 2017 is critical for ensuring a fair tax system that supports all children.
3. Accessibility for all families regardless of tax filing obligation and whether or not they have a formal bank account.
4. Monthly payments that work for families while ensuring families are held harmless for overpayment and that the credit is not subject to garnishment, all of which are critical for boosting family income throughout the year while reducing unintended consequences.

These priorities are included in the American Families Act filed by Reps. DeLauro and DelBene and Torres.

An expanded and inclusive EITC that broadens the definition of "work"

The American Rescue Plan expanded credits for workers not raising children and extended age eligibility to include workers 19-24 years old and workers over age 65 for one year. These changes provide [critical relief](#) for workers with low and moderate incomes – many working essential jobs during the pandemic. Making these changes permanent and further improving the EITC is necessary for long-term advancements in racial equity. These include:

1. Permanent expansion of the changes made in the American Rescue Plan will promote health and financial stability for workers not raising children, which include adults preparing for families and non-custodial parents.
2. Broadening the definition of "work" to include family caregiving recognizes the important role caregivers play in our society and would ensure they receive tax credits currently available to other workers.
3. Extending eligibility for the EITC to include immigrants and their families who work and pay taxes, yet are barred from tax credits, would ensure a fair tax system that promote the health of all workers and their families.

These priorities are included in the Worker Relief and Credit Reform Act filed by Rep. Moore.

Economic policies that rapidly respond to recessions through automatic stabilizers

The Great Recession and the recession created by the COVID-19 pandemic both demonstrated the ways in which economic downturns disproportionately affect Black and Latinx people, immigrants, women, and families with low incomes. While relief packages passed by Congress during both recessions mitigated hardships, delays in Congress and the premature sunset of several policies reduce their effectiveness and place families in precarious situations that threaten economic stability and health. Including automatic stabilizers that ensure critical relief through supports like the Economic Impact Payments, Unemployment Assistance, and the Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are necessary for reducing racial disparities that threaten health during economic downturns.

A minimum wage that ensures working families are able to afford basic needs

Increasing the federal minimum wage to at least \$15 per hour is necessary for supporting working families to make ends meet and improving health. Boosting the minimum wage while simultaneously ensuring smoothing off-ramps in federal assistance program as families increase their income would not only promote economic mobility, but also improve health across the life span.

This priority is included in the Raise the Wage Act filed by Senator Sanders and Rep. Bobby Scott

A commission to study reparations

For more than 400 years in the U.S., Black people have been subjected to slavery, lynching, state-sanctioned violence, marginalization, and discrimination. Establishing a commission to examine reparations, educate the public of its findings, and advance proposals including what form of compensation should be awarded in order to mitigate some of the harm perpetuated by the government is a critical step toward recognizing the long-term impacts of structural racism and implementing solutions that advance racial health equity.

This priority is in the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act filed by Senator Booker

Improve the health and well-being of immigrant families by removing barriers to assistance

Eligibility for federal nutrition, housing, and health insurance programs are complex and vary widely for immigrants across immigration statuses. These barriers to programs are rooted in systemic racism and xenophobia and impact the health of children in immigrant families. Removing barriers, including the 5-year bar on immigrants, to assistance programs and increasing [access to health insurance](#) are critical for promoting health equity among children and families.

In addition to swiftly passing legislation that increases access to public programs, members of Congress must work with the Administration to reverse the harm done to immigrants under previous administrations that – through hateful rhetoric and policy-making and enhanced immigration enforcement measures – increased fear among immigrant communities and threatened the health.

These priorities are included in the HEAL for Immigrant Families Act filed by Rep. Jayapal and the Lift the Bar Act.

Improve Black maternal health through comprehensive policies that reduce disparities

Adverse health outcomes among Black birthing and postpartum people – including mortality rates – are staggeringly prevalent. Reducing racial maternal health inequities is urgently necessary. Given the ways in which systemic racism across policies and structures impacts these persistent disparities, a comprehensive approach that addresses multiple dimensions of this crisis is necessary for promoting equity. The [Black Maternal Health Momnibus Act](#) seeks to achieve this goal through twelve standalone bills that together respond to drivers of maternal health disparities including

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addressing social determinants of health, health care coverage gaps, climate change, incarceration, and medical bias. Swift passage of this comprehensive package will promote the health for Black birthing and postpartum people.

The Black Maternal Health Momnibus Act was filed by Reps. Underwood and Adams and Senator Booker

Increase access to stable, affordable homes that promote family health

Our research consistently shows that a [stable home is the foundation for child and family health](#). That is why we are honored to partner with national organizations from across sectors as a member of the [Opportunity Starts at Home](#) Campaign Steering Committee. Through a multi-pronged policy approach that promotes equity, the campaign seeks to advance policies that increase housing stability and reduce homelessness across the country. Congress must take bold steps to reduce housing instability, racial segregation, and discrimination in housing in order to further promote health. These policies include:

Universal access to rental assistance for all eligible households

Today, only one in four households eligible for rental assistance receive it. Ensuring that all families who are eligible for [rental assistance](#) receive support is critical for promoting health. Specifically, supporting families with young children to access housing vouchers and live in neighborhoods connected to opportunities for thriving is important for ensuring children are able to reach their fullest potential.

An expansion of housing vouchers for families with young children is included in the Family Stability and Opportunity Voucher Act filed by Senators Van Hollen and Young.

Expansion and preservation of affordable housing stock that is equitably distributed across communities

An analysis by the National Low Income Housing Coalition shows a [lack of affordable, available homes](#) in every state across the country. Significant investment in [building and preserving homes that are affordable to people with the lowest incomes](#) and distributed across communities in order to reverse residential segregation is necessary for promoting housing stability and health equity for families and children.

These priorities are included in the Housing is Infrastructure Act filed by Rep. Waters.

A national housing stabilization fund to provide emergency assistance to families in crisis

Economic shocks such as a job loss or health-related emergencies often place families at risk of eviction, which is strongly associated with poor health outcomes. The creation of a [national housing stabilization fund](#) would buffer families from eviction by providing financial resources to avoid eviction and potentially support access to legal aid and other critical services.

This priority is included in the Eviction Crisis Act filed by Senators Bennet and Portman.

Strong renter protections and anti-discrimination laws

Our nation's long history of discriminatory policies in housing have resulted in an increased risk of eviction, housing instability, and homelessness for families of color and families with low-incomes. Enacting policies that strength protections for renters, eliminate discrimination of housing voucher holders, and expand fair housing laws are necessary for undoing longstanding harm created and perpetuated by housing systems.

Provide high-quality, affordable child care so all children thrive

High-quality, nurturing, and affordable child care is essential to support children and their parents. Unfortunately, many families across the country face significant barriers to accessing child care, which impacts their [financial stability and the health of children](#). By enacting comprehensive legislation that responds to the realities of families and making robust

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investments in the child care system, Congress can ensure every families has access to high-quality, affordable child care starting at birth and universal pre-K for 3 and 4 year-olds.

These priorities are in the Child Care for Working Families Act filed by Senator Murray and Rep. Bobby Scott and the Universal Child Care and Early Learning filed by Senator Warren and Rep. Mondaire Jones.

Strengthen nutrition assistance programs to address hunger and improve health

Decades of research, including from Children’s HealthWatch, shows food insecurity negatively impacts health across the lifespan. High-quality nutrition in the first years of life is critical for nourishing a child’s rapidly developing brain and body. Programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Special Supplemental Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program are evidence-based policies that support healthy growth among children. Strengthening these programs is critical for promoting health among young children during a critical window of development. These include:

Increased SNAP benefits and updated eligibility to adequately reflect the cost of living

While SNAP is our nation’s largest and most effective program for reducing food insecurity, key changes to the program are necessary to improve its ability to meet the nutritional needs of families. Children’s HealthWatch research shows [SNAP promotes health](#), but the benefits are too low to afford a healthy diet and many families lose benefits or have benefits cut before they are financially stable. To address these issues, Congress should:

1. Increase SNAP benefits by adopting at least the Low Cost Food Plan as the basis of benefit calculations
2. Increase income eligibility limits to reflect real costs of living and remove asset tests
3. Create a more gradual decline in benefits across assistance programs that avoid an abrupt reduction or loss of SNAP and provide a smooth off-ramp for families in the workforce.

Expansion of WIC to ensure all eligible post-partum people, infants, toddlers, and preschoolers access nutritious foods

WIC provides nutrition assistance and counseling, breastfeeding support, and health care referrals to pregnant and postpartum people and young children under age 5. Congress should strengthen WIC through efforts to:

1. Extend child age eligibility of WIC to age 6 (instead of current age 5) to ensure continuous nutrition support for children transitioning from WIC to school meals;
2. Extend post-partum eligibility to two years in order to support new parents; and
3. Extend infant certification periods to two years in order ensure continuous WIC eligibility during infancy.

These priorities are included in the Wise Investment in our Children Act filed by Reps. DeLauro, DeLauro, Sánchez, González-Cólon, Schrier, and Young and Senators Casey and Collins.

Improvements in CACFP to meet the nutritional needs of young children in child care settings

Every day [approximately 4.2 million children](#) in Early Head Start, Head Start, afterschool and child care programs are provided nutritious meals through CACFP. Congress should enable key improvements to CACFP including:

1. Provide an additional meal or snack for children in full-day child care
2. Evaluate the per meal cost necessary to meet USDA dietary guidelines and the degree of current shortfall for CACFP providers
3. Streamline administrative barriers including reducing the area eligibility requirement from 50% to 40% of children in the area qualifying for free or reduced-price school meals, encouraging bulk purchasing, and reducing administrative burden

These priorities are included in the Access to Healthy Foods for Young Children Act filed by Senator Casey.