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May 20, 2014

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20010

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

On behalf of Children's HealthWatch, a network of pediatricians and public health researchers, we write to express serious concern regarding Senate Appropriations Committee efforts to allow special interests, rather than science, to inform whether to add white potatoes to the approved food packages in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). We encourage you to stand behind the scientific process of determining authorized foods for WIC and continue to exclude fresh white potatoes, as recommended by the Institute of Medicine (IOM).

In 2009, the WIC food packages were updated according to recommendations from an Institute of Medicine panel of nutrition science and health experts. Fruits and vegetables have a prominent place in these revised WIC food packages. Many of the vitamins and minerals that infants and young children need to grow and develop, but are not receiving, come from low-calorie, nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables. Allowing families to use vouchers to buy white potatoes would mean less money for the fruits and vegetables their infants and young children need but frequently lack, such as dark-green leafy vegetables.

Since WIC's creation in 1972, policymakers of both parties have agreed that decisions on the foods to include in the WIC food packages should be left to independent experts, based on the best scientific evidence available. This longstanding precedent has served WIC and its participants well. WIC is one of our nation's most effective programs, resulting in fewer premature births, fewer infant deaths, preventing low birth weight, developmental delays and a host of other negative child health outcomes.

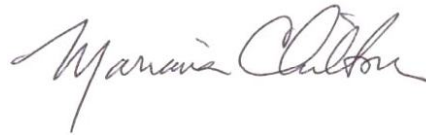
As Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we applaud your efforts to jumpstart the USDA's regular review of the WIC food package and encourage you to seek assistance from the IOM and continue to use the most current science available to inform the USDA's next course of action with respect to the food packages. If Congress begins to directly influence which foods to include and exclude in WIC in defiance of scientific research, the floodgates will be open in the years ahead for other legislators to demand including products that serve special interests and not the nutrition needs of women, infants and children.

Thank you for your leadership in providing a safe, sufficient and nutritious food supply for the American people, and we urge you to maintain the strength and integrity of our nation's food assistance programs.

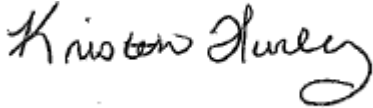
Sincerely,



Deborah A. Frank, MD
Principal Investigator and Founder
Children's HealthWatch
Boston, MA



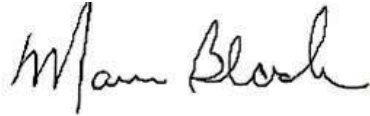
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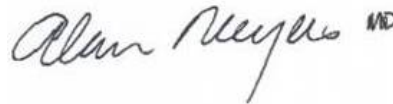
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[Children's HealthWatch](#) is a nonpartisan network of pediatricians, public health researchers, and policy and child health experts committed to improving children's health in America. Every day, in urban hospitals across the country, we collect data on children ages zero to four who are from families experiencing economic hardship. We analyze and release our findings to academics, legislators, and the public to inform public policies and practices that can give all children equal opportunities for healthy, successful lives.

For questions or further information, please contact Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, Children's HealthWatch Research and Policy Director, at sedc@bu.edu or 617-638-5850.