March 20, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Charles Schumer
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
U.S. House of Representatives

Re: Economic stimulus efforts related to novel coronavirus (COVID-19)

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, Majority Leader McConnell, and Minority Leader Schumer:

These are unprecedented times. Our nation faces both a pandemic and an economic recession which will exacerbate current inequities and have immediate and long-term impacts on family financial stability and health. We at Children’s HealthWatch call upon our country’s leaders to take immediate action that responds to the realities of families of young children living with low incomes. As a network of pediatricians and public health researchers with over two decades of experience documenting the ways in which economic conditions and policy changes impact the health and learning abilities of infants and toddlers and their families, we know it is critical for the health and well-being of our nation to implement policies that provide sustainable resources to ensure all families are able to meet basic needs.

Young children are vulnerable to even the most subtle policy shifts and changes. Economic distress and public policies have immediate and direct effects on their health, growth, and development often well before outcomes are documented in the broader population. Our research and that of others overwhelmingly demonstrates the ways in which inability to afford basic needs affects the health and well-being of young children and their families.\textsuperscript{1,2,3,4} We have also shown that improvements and expansions to federal programs that mitigate financial hardships, especially in times of crisis, including nutrition assistance, affordable housing, refundable tax credits, utility assistance, health care coverage, and quality, affordable child care can support the health of children and their families particularly during times of economic crisis.\textsuperscript{5,6,7,8}

Any stimulus package passed by Congress should both respond to the immediate needs of families during this crisis and include longer-term measures that recognize families with low incomes recover more slowly from economic downturns than those with higher incomes and assets, a trend that has been demonstrated through the Great Recession and other economic and environmental disasters.\textsuperscript{9}

Children’s HealthWatch commends efforts to respond to this crisis through paid family leave, expanded access to nutrition assistance, and public health funding. However, we recognize that more measures are necessary to reduce current and future threats to health. Children’s HealthWatch therefore recommends the following policy improvements be included in any package designed to mitigate the effects of this crisis:
• **Issuing direct cash transfers** until the economy recovers that are directed to families with the lowest incomes and provides equal or higher payments for children recognizing that families with children – particularly those with young children – are at greater risk of poverty than other households without children.\(^9\) Building upon the existing infrastructure of the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit to issue payments on a regular basis are necessary for supporting child and family health and stability. Families with low incomes that are disproportionately affected by a loss of income and other resources due to mass closures will need sustainable support for an extended period of time to ensure they are able to meet basic needs.

• **Establishing a national Emergency Assistance Fund** to provide rapid response funding for families with rent or utility arrearages is necessary to ensure families are not at risk of eviction or utility shutoffs as a result of the economic crisis.

• **Placing a nationwide moratorium on all evictions and foreclosures** during the national emergency will not only protect public health by closing housing courts, which are often crowded, but also keep families in their homes in order to avoid families needing to double up or access homeless shelters, both of which place people further at risk of COVID-19 transmission.

• **Increasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits** by at least 13.6% for all participants, as was done during the Great Recession, until the economy recovers to adequately meet the nutritional needs of families with low-incomes and reduce food insecurity.\(^1\) SNAP is a counter-cyclical program designed to respond to disasters and economic downturns. During the Great Recession the benefit boost for all participants effectively reduced food insecurity across the country and improved the health of young children and families.\(^1\)\(^2\)\(^3\)

• **Expanding access to affordable and adequate health insurance** options so all families, including children and adults regardless of immigration status, are able to access medical care, prescriptions, and vaccines when they need them without having to sacrifice other basic needs is critical during this national public health crisis as well as between epidemics.\(^1\)\(^4\) A healthier population is less likely to suffer consequences of an opportunistic virus such as the Coronavirus.

The most recent Great Recession demonstrated the ways in which families of young children with low incomes are not only disproportionately impacted by economic downturns, but also that it takes much longer for families currently facing financial hardships to recover from recession than others.\(^1\)\(^5\) For example, we have seen this clearly among trends in food insecurity for families with young children. While rates of food insecurity nationally have still not returned to pre-Recession levels in 2007, families interviewed by Children’s HealthWatch not only experienced alarmingly high rates increases in food insecurity that remained elevated well after the economy as a whole recovered.\(^1\)\(^6\) Efforts to increase SNAP benefits and make enhancements to the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit among other policy improvements in response to the last recession effectively mitigated the effect of the recession on families,\(^1\)\(^7\) but longer term solutions are needed. Taking quick and long-term measures to reduce food insecurity, along with other family financial hardships that impact health, is critical for the current and future health of our nation’s children and families.
Children’s HealthWatch is 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, many of whom are from families experiencing financial hardship including an inability to afford food, rent, utilities, medical care, prescription medicines, and child care. Over the past 21 years, we have surveyed more than 70,000 caregivers and consistently found that these hardships are linked with child and family health.

As those who care for the health of America’s children, we understand the vitally important role public policies and programs play for the health of children, particularly the youngest. We believe there is an urgent need to respond to the threat of COVID-19, and implore you to consider these measures that rapidly respond to the needs families with low incomes.

Sincerely,

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