



September 27, 2021

Dear Leaders of the United States Senate and House of Representatives:

On behalf of Nemours Children's Health, thank you for prioritizing the health of children in recent legislative efforts. As you advance a Build Back Better budget reconciliation package, we urge you to include the policies outlined below that support the health, well-being and economic security of children and families.

### **ABOUT NEMOURS CHILDREN'S HEALTH**

Nemours Children's Health is one of the nation's largest multistate pediatric health systems, including two free-standing children's hospitals and a network of nearly 75 primary and specialty care practices. Nemours Children's seeks to transform the health of children by adopting a holistic health model that utilizes innovative, safe, and high-quality care, while also caring for the health of the whole child beyond medicine. Nemours Children's also powers the world's most-visited website for information on the health of children and teens, KidsHealth.org.

The Nemours Foundation, established through the legacy and philanthropy of Alfred I. duPont, provides pediatric clinical care, research, education, advocacy, and prevention programs to the children, families and communities it serves.

### **LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS**

Nemours Children's supports inclusion of the following priorities in the Build Back Better budget reconciliation package. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many stressors for children and families, and the policy priorities below will help create a strong foundation for children and their families as we rebuild.

#### **Reducing Poverty and Supporting Families**

No other factor has a greater impact on the life trajectory of a child than poverty. Nationally, poverty affects more than 10 million, or 1 in 7, children according to the current poverty level (\$26,500 for a family of four in 2021).<sup>i</sup> Millions more live close to this line.

Children raised in low-income households are more likely to have poorer neurocognitive outcomes, less educational attainment and lower economic productivity in adulthood – all in turn contributing to the repeated potential for intergenerational poverty.<sup>ii</sup> The substantial evidence-base indicates that those who have faced challenges in their lives are more likely to not only

experience negative health outcomes, but also raise children who will start their lives already at a disadvantage.

The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported the poverty rate dropped from 11.8 percent in 2019 to 9.1 percent in 2020, reflecting the impact of the aid included in COVID relief bills.<sup>iii</sup> These actions lifted 8.5 million people out of poverty, demonstrating that anti-poverty policies can have a profound and nearly real-time impact on American families.

We have also seen the impact of policies that have not supported families during the pandemic. The lack of a national paid leave policy meant that vulnerable, yet essential workers faced the impossible choice of staying home and losing pay or going to work sick.<sup>iv</sup> The inability to take time off when sick, especially with COVID-19, not only threatens public health, but also threatens the financial security of already vulnerable families.<sup>v</sup>

Nemours Children's urges inclusion of the following policies that will help advance families' economic security in the final reconciliation package.

- Extension of the expanded version of the child tax credit through 2025 and making it permanently refundable
- Permanent extension of the American Rescue Plan improvements to the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit
- Universal Paid Family and Medical Leave

### **Increasing Access to Health Care Coverage**

According to data from early 2021, nearly 40 million children are enrolled in Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).<sup>vi</sup> Additionally, Medicaid covers 40-45 percent of births nationwide - more than four million children a year - and up to 70 percent in some states.<sup>vii</sup> Ensuring that children are able to keep their health care coverage each year represents a significant opportunity to positively impact the life trajectory of our nation's children and their long-term health care costs. There is also a strong correlation between the coverage status of parents or caretakers, and the coverage status of their children.<sup>viii,ix</sup> Access to health insurance coverage results in short- and long-term improvements in health, educational, and socioeconomic status.<sup>x</sup>

Nemours Children's urges inclusion of the following policies in the final reconciliation package.

- Permanent extension of CHIP
- 12-month continuous Medicaid and CHIP eligibility for eligible children, pregnant and postpartum women
- Establishment of a coverage program available to lower-income Americans in states that have not expanded their Medicaid programs

### **Supporting Health Care Providers and Public Health Activities**

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the effects of underfunded public health and health care infrastructure. Hospitals have experienced simultaneous cycles of over-capacity, staffing shortages, inability to perform elective procedures and revenue losses. Vaccine confidence has

challenged national efforts to combat COVID-19, which has, in turn, impacted routine vaccination rates. Supporting hospitals in developing capacity and strengthening the workforce pipeline, along with investments to increase vaccine confidence and strengthen vaccine programs for children, are critical.

To this end, Nemours Children's urges inclusion of the following policies in the final reconciliation package.

- Funding for hospital infrastructure to increase capacity and update hospitals and other medical facilities
- Funding for the Children's Hospital Graduate Medical Education Program to support the pediatric workforce pipeline
- Funding to strengthen vaccine confidence, strengthen routinely recommended vaccine programs, and improve vaccination rates

### **Addressing Pediatric Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Health**

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, children have experienced more stress from changes in their routines, breaks in the continuity of learning and health care, missed life events, and an overall loss of security and safety.<sup>xi</sup> Mental health-related emergency room (ER) visits have increased nationally by nearly 25% for children age 5-11 and by over 30% for those 12-17 years.<sup>xii</sup> Nemours Children's Hospital, Delaware, the only pediatric Level 1 Trauma Center in the state, expects to end 2021 with more than a 35 percent annual increase in the number of ER visits for children primarily reporting suicidality and intentional harm compared to 2020.

Nemours Children's urges inclusion of the following policies in the final reconciliation package.

- Funding for community-based infrastructure for awards to qualified teaching health centers, behavioral health care centers and pediatric mental health care providers. We urge inclusion of children's hospitals and pediatricians among the eligible recipients for these critical funds.
- Funding to reduce community violence and trauma, in addition to support for the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

### **Increasing Access to High Quality Child Care**

Early care and education (ECE) settings, such as child care centers, Head Start, pre-kindergarten, and family child care homes, can support children's healthy development, providing children with food and nutrition supports and building socio-emotional skills.<sup>ix</sup> Substantial evidence has demonstrated that enrollment in quality early childhood programs is associated with higher academic achievement, reduced risky behaviors, better mental and physical health, and can also reduce achievement gaps between low and higher income children.<sup>vi,vii,ix</sup>

Access to high quality child care is also an economic issue. One third of the U.S. workforce, or an estimated 50 million workers, has a child under 14 in their household.<sup>xiii</sup> Child care programs

play an essential role in enabling these parents to work. The pandemic has caused child care programs to temporarily or permanently close, leading to reduced access and enrollment, and increased operating costs to keep everyone safe.<sup>xiv</sup> A national panel survey found that nearly 20% of working parents had to leave work or reduce their work hours solely due to a lack of childcare. Furthermore, it found that only 30% of all working parents had any form of back-up childcare. The survey results highlighted significant disparities between low and high-income households.<sup>xv</sup> Increasing access to high quality child care is an important economic opportunity for our nation.

Nemours Children's urges inclusion of the following policy in the final reconciliation package.

- Funding for child care subsidies for eligible families and universal pre-K funding, including supports for a Child Care Wage Grant Program to support the child care providers who care for our nation's children during the critical early years of life

### **Supporting Maternal Health and Health Equity**

Decades of research demonstrate that substantially reducing disparities requires a multi-generational approach. Starting in the early years of a child's life, and even earlier with the health of the mother, provides substantive opportunities to build a foundation of strong health, education, and economic outcomes for future generations.<sup>xvi</sup> Evidence shows that factors like trauma and stress of a mother even before conception, during pregnancy, and throughout the early postnatal care period can impact the life course of her child.<sup>xvii</sup> Other research shows how the preconception diet of a mother, her lifestyle and health behaviors, and the overall health of both parents can all have long-lasting impacts on a child's health and well-being.<sup>xviii</sup> Further, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Black women are three times more likely to die from a pregnancy related cause than white women.<sup>xix</sup> Supporting healthy pregnant individuals before, during and after pregnancy helps to support the health, cognitive and behavioral development, and ultimate well-being of the child.

Nemours Children's urges inclusion of the following policies in the final reconciliation package.

- Funding for all reconciliation-eligible provisions from the "Momnibus" (S. 346/ H.R. 959) legislation that makes pivotal investments in promoting maternal health, health equity, and reducing disparities in maternal health outcomes. These policies would address the social determinants of maternal health, improve maternal mental health equity and ultimately improve maternal health outcomes.

### **Addressing Child Hunger and Increasing Access to Healthy Foods**

Access to healthy foods is an important overall driver of health, and federal nutrition programs play a critical role in addressing childhood hunger. Nearly 35 million children receive free or reduced-price meals through school and child care programs.<sup>xx</sup> These settings provide many with more than half of their daily caloric intake and a significant portion of recommended daily fruit and vegetable intake.<sup>xxi, xxii</sup> For many children, school meals are the healthiest they receive each

day. There is now an opportunity to ensure more children are able to access these important programs.

Nemours Children's urges inclusion of the following policies in the final reconciliation package.

- Enabling more schools to be eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows schools to provide free and reduced price meals to all students and allowing states to implement CEP statewide
- Allowing states to conduct Medicaid direct certification
- Extending Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) nationwide for students who receive free or reduced-price meals

## CONCLUSION

The foundation for lifelong health begins with the health of the mother and is reinforced during critical developmental periods, especially early childhood and adolescence. The Build Back Better budget reconciliation package offers a pivotal opportunity to strengthen investments in our nation's children and ultimately put them on a healthy trajectory. We urge you to include the above provisions that will meaningfully impact children's long-term health, well-being and economic security. If you have questions, please reach out to Daniella Gratale, Director of the Office of Child Health Policy and Advocacy, at 202-425-5805 or [daniella.gratale@nemours.org](mailto:daniella.gratale@nemours.org). Thank you for your attention to critical issues impacting children and families. Nemours Children's stands ready to assist you in advancing a shared goal of creating the healthiest generations of children.

Sincerely,



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Chief Population Health Officer  
Executive Vice President  
Nemours Children's Health

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<sup>i</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). *Income & Poverty Data Tables*. <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/data/tables.html>

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