

The Children's Health Fund
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BY ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

Secretary Kathleen Sebelius
Department of Health and Human Services

Re: Request for Comments Regarding Input for a Strategic Plan for Federal Youth Policy (December 21st, 2010)

The Children's Health Fund (CHF) is submitting the following comments in response to the Request for Comments issued on December 21st, pertaining to input for a strategic plan for federal youth policy.

CHF is a non-profit organization and designated as a 501(c)(3) by the Internal Revenue Service. Since its inception in 1987, CHF has supported the delivery of comprehensive health care to medically underserved children and families in rural and urban areas. Our programs provide care under the medical home model, meaning that care is accessible, continuous, comprehensive, family-centered, coordinated, compassionate, and culturally effective, serving the overall needs of the child.

As part of the Omnibus Appropriations Act signed into law in March 2009, Congress directed the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs to solicit input from young people, state children's cabinet directors, and non-profit organizations regarding federal youth programs and policies. It also required the workgroup to develop an overarching strategic plan for federal youth policy and prepare recommendations to improve the coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency of public programs affecting youth. The following comments are in reference to the overall federal approach to planning programs and services for children and youth. We strongly encourage that our input be carefully considered in the deliberative process as the federal government moves forward in efforts to improve policies and outcomes for children.

Need for an Overarching National Strategic Plan for Children and Youth

There has never been a more compelling time than now to ensure that all of America's children reach their optimum potential. And with the budget challenges currently being faced at the federal and state level, there has never been a more critical time to ensure that expenditures on child focused programs and services are coordinated, efficient, and focused on measureable outcomes.

For millions of children burdened with issues such as poverty, homelessness and reduced access to appropriate health care and quality education, there are substantial challenges to achieving short-term well-being and long-term success. The statistics are alarming. One in five kids is born into poverty, thirty percent of students fail to graduate from high

school and 9 million children lack health insurance. These figures underscore the urgent necessity for action to improve outcomes for our nation's children.

Currently, responsibility for programs that educate, support and play an important part in shaping children's lives are distributed across many government agencies. The vast majority of these efforts are essential and effective; however, they are generally disconnected, semi-autonomous and lack coordination. Because so many agencies operate as independent silos, there is often diminished opportunity to create major cross-sector initiatives with far-reaching, long-term goals for children. For example, it would be nearly impossible to undertake a comprehensive national effort that links health, education and anti-poverty programs for children. There is no established locus for the needed dialogue and high-level planning of a national framework for kids to take place. Further, no existing agency is tasked with over-arching responsibility for planning, strategizing and monitoring policies and outcomes for children.

For these reasons, CHF strongly encourages the adoption of an overarching national strategy for children, in conjunction with the establishment of a high level coordinating body to oversee and monitor implementation of that strategy. This is not an untested idea, as currently twenty states across the country have realized the benefits of having a body dedicated to creating, coordinating and monitoring a state-level strategy for children. Over the past years, children's cabinets and councils have been established to change the fragmented way that states normally approach their programs and services for children. These cross-agency coordinating bodies vary in structure but are generally housed in the governor's office and comprised of heads of government agencies with programs that serve children. Their purpose is typically to coordinate services, create implementation plans, and develop outcome measure. A growing number are also being tasked with developing comprehensive strategic plans to implement state level child and youth policies and programs.

The new landscape of tight budgets and fiscal restraint mandates that policy makers, government staff and advocates begin thinking of innovative ways to stretch dollars and justify spending. A nationally coordinated approach to child-focused efforts is essential, not only to eliminate redundancy and improve efficiency in programs and services but also to increase the success of these efforts and thus ensure that all kids have the chance to reach their maximum potential.

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