

Policy Brief

Establishment of a White House Office on 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. This means making sure that every child is healthy, nurtured and effectively educated. But for millions of children, entrenched social and economic issues, such as poverty, homelessness, reduced access to appropriate health care and education inequities, pose substantial challenges to the short-term well-being and long-term opportunities for success. While there is an urgent need to meet the challenges affecting children, there is also significant opportunity to enact change and create a new generation that will be ready and able to take responsibility for assuring America's leadership in the decades to come.

Currently, responsibility for programs that educate, support and play an important part in children's lives are scattered and piecemeal across many government agencies. These programs and initiatives 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 to link health, education and nutrition programs for children, because there is

no established locus for the needed dialogue and planning to take place; no existing agency is tasked with overarching responsibility. For these reasons, the establishment of a White House Office on Children and Youth (OCY) is greatly needed.

Purpose and Function

The OCY would provide leadership, strategic planning, oversight and coordination to support successful program implementation. These are some of the specific functions of the new office:

1. Assess effectiveness of child focused programs and initiatives.

Data and information are critical to the functioning of the OCY. The Office would work with all departments and agencies to determine where government programs for children are located, identify the goals of each program, and assess how successful they are in meeting a basic national agenda for children.

2. Coordinate and oversee efforts to identify and eliminate overlap and redundancy.

The Office would not implement programs, but rather oversee, coordinate, strategize and monitor efforts to identify and eliminate overlap and redundancy. In assessing programs, the OCY will consider how new efficiencies can be instituted and determine if there is sufficient communication among the various agencies to do so.

The establishment of an Office on Children and Youth (OCY) in the White House would provide the mechanism necessary to ensure cross-departmental coordination and accountability among the agencies and programs that serve America's children and function as the President's high-level, empowered locus of action for children's issues.



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Office on Children and Youth

3. Develop and fine-tune national strategies.

The OCY would help develop and fine-tune the over-arching national children's strategies through a series of special working groups such as:

- A Working Group on Children and Poverty would function to ensure that the inequities in health, education and social stability among disadvantaged child populations be addressed forcefully and definitively.
- A Working Group on International Children's Program Models would be responsible for accumulating and incorporating models used in other countries that have been successful. Many concerns have been addressed with varying degrees of success elsewhere and it would be beneficial to have the capacity to learn from others, so that we may apply and modify proven solutions to our own national agenda.
- A Working Group on the Impact of National Health Reform on Children would monitor how proposals to reform health care will affect children and how current efforts are working.
- A Working Group on Pediatric Disaster Preparedness would examine the nation's readiness from the perspective of children. Since 9/11, concern about protecting children during and after large-scale disasters has become a major issue. This workgroup would be supported by the congressionally-established National Commission on Children and Disasters.

4. Institutionalize programs and initiatives that work.

The OCY would develop mechanisms to sustain and enhance the scope of effective programs through a Working Group on Best Practices for Children and Families. This group would function to ensure the institutionalization and proliferation of health, education and social programs that have proven to be effective at the community level.

Structure and Agenda

The OCY would be headed by a Director who is based in the executive offices and would report to the President, but work closely with the Domestic Policy Council. Other staff include: central staff, regional staff and "need-based" local response teams that would function on an ad hoc basis and would operate in states determined to be in crisis around children's issues.

The specific areas of focus for the OCY would be developed by listening to children, families, communities and experts. Issues such as access to comprehensive health care for children, early childhood education, infant mortality, child abuse prevention, educational standards, adolescent pregnancy, and nutrition, would all be areas of potential focus.

Recommendations

The Children's Health Fund believes that an OCY should be established for three principal reasons: first, to create an opportunity to assess and coordinate federal efforts on behalf of children across multiple departments and programs; secondly, to ensure that these departments and programs are held accountable—directly to the president—for their efficacy both as individual efforts and as parts of a larger effort; and, lastly, to deliver a clear public message that the success of America's children is the President's highest priority.

There has never been a more opportune moment, in terms of need as well as potential for real success, to secure an appropriate place for children's issues in the national agenda. The establishment of an OCY in the White House would solidify a meaningful and powerful commitment to the well-being of children.