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It's Time to Reestablish the White House Conference on Children and Youth

By Linda S. Spears and Timothy F. Briceland-Betts

Four decades have passed since the last White House Conference on Children and Youth focused the nation's attention on our most vulnerable citizens. Prior to that, the conference took place roughly every ten years and helped establish a new vision and agenda for addressing the needs of children and youth. The time has come to reestablish this tradition and for President Obama to once again put the needs of children front and center on the nation's agenda.

Much has changed in America over the past 40 years, and for many children there have been significant improvements. Unfortunately, for our most vulnerable children, we continue to see alarming levels of unaddressed need. For example, the percentage of children living in poverty is stubbornly high and has increased from 16.1 percent in 2000¹ to 19.0 percent in 2008.² In 2008, we also saw more reports of child abuse and neglect. There were 3.3 million allegations of child abuse and neglect representing approximately 6 million children. Of the children substantiated as abused and neglected, only 63 percent received follow-up services, and of those not substantiated, just 28 percent received follow-up services – down three percent from 2007.³

In many respects, there has not been a more critical time in our nation, as so many children and families face new and historic hardships. Layoffs and pay cuts force many families to devote ever increasing vigilance and intensity just to stay one step ahead of disaster. Sadly, many children suffer serious and sometimes tragic consequences when families are not able to cope with financial hardships that can lead to homelessness, food insecurity, substance abuse, emotional distress, and other problems.

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At the same time, child welfare and related service systems must deal with pressures to serve that they have not seen in decades – even as resources to support their work decline. State budgets are crumbling at the fastest rate since the Great Depression, which in turn exerts enormous demands to slash spending for services just as the recession demands an increased response. In this harsh economic climate, children's programs face the real possibilities of closing down or sharply reducing operations. Services aimed at preventing child abuse and those providing health and mental healthcare for vulnerable children are in particular jeopardy.

With draconian governmental cuts in programs, and economic conditions that limit the flow of charitable dollars, our nation's most fragile families are disproportionately impacted. Children who experience deprivation, are exposed to violence, or have mental health problems should not be further victimized by a fiscal environment that is not so friendly to their needs.

What we lack is a national agenda for protecting and serving our nation's most vulnerable families. Reestablishing a White House Conference on Children and Youth would help redirect our current trajectory and set a comprehensive road map for how our nation can focus on, and better serve, children and families. It would help fulfill the nation's need for an overall vision in child welfare, further an inspired commitment to leadership, and set in motion the necessary steps to fundamental reform of child welfare services.

Senators Mary Landrieu (D-LA) and Richard Burr (R-NC) and Representatives Chaka Fattah (D-PA) and Todd Platts (R-PA) have introduced legislation (S. 938/H.R. 618) to hold a White House Conference on Children and Youth. And President Obama co-sponsored the bill when he was in the Senate.

The legislation is similar to previous bills proposing to hold a White House Conference on Children and Youth, and other White House conferences on aging and other issues. It establishes a policy committee with members selected by the president and leaders from both parties and both houses of Congress. The policy committee would oversee the creation of a plan for the actual event, including the agenda, and a series of regional and national meetings leading up to the convening in Washington. The legislation focuses on an array of issues that fall under child welfare, including prevention of and intervention in abuse and neglect, and finding permanent families for children in foster care through kinship care, adoptions, and reunification. It also addresses crosscutting issues such as poverty and substance abuse, access to healthcare and mental healthcare, and the overrepresentation of many minority populations in the child- and youth-serving systems, access and support for tribal governments and communities, and the role of key partners such as the courts and state and local child welfare systems.

Previous conferences made significant contributions to establishing priorities for protecting and supporting children in need. The initial conference in 1909 is credited with leading to the formation of the Children's Bureau within the federal

government and establishing for the first time regular inspections for foster care homes, and education and medical care for foster children. Beyond these federal policy initiatives, President Theodore Roosevelt also called on all state governors to follow up on Conference recommendations, including establishing state child welfare commissions. In 1911, Ohio was the first state to establish such a commission; most of the other states followed.

The 1919 White House Conference on Standards of Child Welfare produced the first significant report on child health and welfare standards. The standards developed by the attendees provided the basis for a large body of state child welfare legislation. The conference led to the enactment of the Sheppard-Towner bill in 1921, which gave the federal government the task of overseeing and helping to finance the development of facilities dedicated to improving the health of pregnant women and infant children.

The next Conference, in 1929, created the most comprehensive report on the needs of children ever written, and resulted in the issuance of a national Children's Charter. The 1939 Conference on Children in a Democracy led to the establishment of the 1943 Emergency, Maternity, and Infant Care Program, the largest medical care program instituted by the United States up to that time. The program provided free medical, nursing, and hospital services for mothers during their prenatal and delivery periods, as well as six weeks postpartum.

The Mid-Century White House Conference, held in 1950, focused on the physical, emotional, and social conditions necessary for healthy personality development. As a result of this conference, a research department was formed at the Children's Bureau to collect and analyze data on the welfare of children. It also resulted in the formation of a national organizing and advocacy effort on behalf of people with mental illness.

The Golden Anniversary White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1960 expanded upon the healthy development theme and for the first time in such a conference underscored the needs of young people. Numerous bills were passed in the aftermath of that conference that drew heavily upon its testimony and recommendations, including the Food Stamp Act, the Vocational Assistance Act, and the National Mental Health Act. The last conference, the 1970 White House Conference on Children and Youth, led to the establishment of what is now the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families and was instrumental in the formation of the U.S. Department of Education.

If this conference follows the more recent Conferences on Aging (1994–95 and 2004–05), the actual White House event will be preceded by a series of regional, state, and local meetings. Some of these meetings may actually receive federal support and be an official part of the Conference activities, while others may be independent gatherings of interested parties and partners. These meetings usually result in recommendations on the issues that are then given to the policy

committee. Past Conferences on Aging have resulted in hundreds of such local gatherings. For each conference, delegates are allotted based on population and are selected by state governors. In addition, each member of Congress selects a delegate. Delegates would be sent to the White House event representing all states, including the tribes, territories, and Washington, D.C. The policy committee also selects representatives from national organizations to participate and attend the conference.

There is great transformative potential through such a series of events. This would be especially important if Congress can be moved to make improvements in the current financing of child welfare services, and would in fact help with the implementation of any such reforms.

As the most industrialized and progressive nation in the world, the United States cannot afford to neglect the importance of raising healthy children and families in our communities. We urge Congress and the White House to support this conference and put the power of the White House to work to establish national goals that will improve the welfare of our children – and finally children will once again be a national priority.

Notes:

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Age, Sex, Household Relationship, Race, and Hispanic Origin – Poverty Status of People by Selected Characteristics in 2000,” 2001, http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/03201/pov/new01_001.htm.

² U.S. Census Bureau, “Age and Sex of All People, Family Members and Unrelated Individuals, Iterated by Income-to-Poverty Ratio and Race: 2008,” 2009, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032009/pov/new01_100_01.htm.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, “Child Maltreatment 2008,” 2010, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#can.