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February 16, 2021

The Honorable Ron Wyden
Chair, Senate Finance Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Crapo
Ranking Member, Senate Finance Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair, Senate HELP Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Richard Burr
Ranking Member, Senate HELP Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Crapo, Chairwoman Murray and Ranking Member Burr:

I am writing on behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal budget and policy decisions, to express our strong support for confirming California Attorney General Xavier Becerra for Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

As an organization dedicated to improving the health, economic security, child safety and protection, and overall well-being of America's children, we applaud Attorney General Becerra's long history of leadership in prioritizing children's needs, and have recognized him several times as a First Focus Champion for Children for his long-standing work across the full array of these issues. HHS is critical to the well-being of our nation's children and it is important that the Secretary of HHS be familiar with the full range of HHS programs that impacts children, and we believe Attorney General Becerra will be.

Now, more than ever, the full array of issues that HHS oversees are critical to children. The COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting economic crisis are falling hardest on the most vulnerable among us, including our nation's children. It is disrupting every facet of children's lives and we cannot yet know all of the negative and long-lasting implications it will have on children's healthy development and future success. The programs and services within HHS directly affect children's lives more than any other Department. Therefore, during this critical time, HHS needs a leader who not only has the ability to manage and direct the array of programs, but who also understands and cares about children and their health and well-being.

Clearly, HHS has a critical role in ensuring that this historic public health pandemic does not threaten our children's future outcomes. Moreover, after two decades of progress in reducing the uninsured rate of our nation's children, the uninsured rate has risen in each of the last four years. Attorney General Becerra has a strong knowledge of the health care programs run by HHS from his time in Congress and as Attorney General, and he would play a critical role in helping get our nation back on track to ensuring all children have health coverage in this country. HHS also houses the Maternal and Child Health Bureau that provides expertise and oversees programs dedicated to improving maternal and child health services at a time when infant and maternal mortality rates and child suicide rates all desperately need attention.

Although health care is a critical part of HHS, it is important to note that HHS is not just a health agency. HHS also manages an array of human services issues, including poverty and family supports. Due to the pandemic and economic recession, for example, we know that at least an additional 2.5 million children have fallen into poverty

since May 2020,¹ and through the administration of the cash assistance, child support, utility assistance, and other critical income supports for children and families, HHS leadership plays a key role in reducing child poverty and mitigating the impact of the pandemic on family economic security.

Through the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at HHS, early childhood programs are instrumental in positive outcomes in children and families' lives as well, and we look forward to Attorney General Becerra continuing to prioritize these at HHS. HHS administers programs vital in the lives of our youngest children and their families including the Child Care and Development Block Grant, Early Head Start and Head Start, and the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program. These programs and others at the department need a strong leader who recognizes the connections between programs and the children who participate in them.

ACF also oversees a number of other programs that Attorney General Becerra had oversight over while serving on the House Ways and Means Committee and that he was involved with as Attorney General, including those addressing the child welfare system and foster care and programs related to runaway youth and social services. The Children's Bureau funds and supports states as they provide case management to more than 670,000 children that are in the foster care system each year and the Runaway and Homeless Youth program supports outreach, shelter services, and transitional programming for the 1.6 million to 2.8 million youth who runaway or are "thrown away" annually. Coordination across HHS programs is essential for children and youth's time away from safe, supportive, and permanent families to be rare, brief, and non-recurring.

HHS also has a critical role in reaching out to all communities that use the federal assistance programs, including children of immigrants and their families. Many of these children and families, as a result of the prior administration's public charge rule, avoided health insurance and other life-sustaining programs² for which they were eligible, including during the pandemic when families need assistance most. HHS leadership is critical to ensure that the agency effectively communicates with children and their families, in partnership with local organizations, about eligibility for HHS programs and services, and supports them in enrolling in programs for which they are eligible. Attorney General Becerra's personal experience as a child of immigrants and experience as Attorney General of California make him well equipped to ensure consideration of the needs of children of immigrants and their families throughout HHS.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) Unaccompanied Children's Program within HHS is responsible for the short-term care of unaccompanied children who arrive at the border without a parent or legal guardian. Its mandate is to place children in the least restrictive setting in their best interests and facilitate the prompt and safe release of children to a sponsor, typically family. After many years of ORR's increased entanglement with immigration enforcement to the detriment of children's safety and well-being, we look forward to Attorney General Becerra's leadership to ensure that child well-being is central to all the agency's departments.

Attorney General Becerra is completely knowledgeable with respect to all of these programs that are in the jurisdiction of the Department of Health and Human Services from his time working on Capitol Hill and as California's Attorney General. We urge the Committees and the Senate to swiftly confirm him as Secretary of HHS.

Sincerely,



Bruce Lesley
President, First Focus on Children

¹ Jason DeParle, "8 Million Have Slipped into Poverty Since May as Federal Aid Has Dried Up," New York Times, October 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/15/us/politics/federal-aid-poverty-levels.html>.

² First Focus on Children, "Fact Sheet: The Public Charge Rule Harms Children," February 2020, https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FACT-SHEET-Public-Charge_2-20.pdf.