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February 22, 2024

President Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

I write to you today from First Focus on Children, to stress that our children are living in a state of crisis. Millions of children in the United States and around the world are suffering and deserve our commitment to creating better outcomes for their now and future. We urge you to use your State of the Union address to commit additional efforts to improving the well-being of children across our country and the world.

These are just a few examples of the challenges, and increasingly poor outcomes, our children are experiencing:

- **Child and Teen Mortality:** Child and teen mortality increased by 20% between 2019 and 2021, the largest increase in 50 years. These tragic figures come after a previous study found U.S. children had a 70% greater chance of dying in childhood than kids born in other wealthy countries.
- **Infant Mortality:** The U.S. infant mortality rate, which was already much higher than in other wealthy nations, increased for the first time in two decades between 2021 and 2022.
- **Child Hunger:** 10% of all U.S. children (7.3 million kids) did not have enough food to keep them healthy in 2022. That is a nearly 7% increase of children over the previous year. Rates of food insecurity were significantly higher for households with children that included a Black or Hispanic adult.
- **Child Poverty:** Child poverty more than doubled in 2022 compared to 2021, with the rate of children living in poverty increasing from 5.2% to 12.4%. This increase represents more than 5 million children we allowed to backslide into poverty within a single year.
- **Children's Mental Health:** We are in the midst of a mental health crisis, where more than 60% of children who experience a severe depressive episode do not receive treatment. Tragically, in 2021, suicide was the second most common cause of death among children aged 10-14. Firearm deaths ranked first.
- **Children's Health Coverage:** As states have restarted Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) redeterminations following the phase out of COVID-19 continuous coverage protections, children are falling through the cracks and losing their health care coverage. At least 4 million children have been disenrolled in the few states that

track child disenrollments, with 4-in-10 of total disenrollments being children. Many of these disenrollments have occurred as a result of administrative issues, not because the children are ineligible. In the midst of a child and infant mortality crisis, these administrative issues are causing many thousands of eligible children to unnecessarily lose their health care coverage.

***On behalf of children, First Focus on Children asks that you use your State of the Union address to highlight the realities our children face and to reaffirm your Administration's commitment to creating a world in which all children can lead healthy, safe, and happy lives that offer them the opportunity to thrive.***

We are grateful to the leadership of your Administration for children:

- The American Rescue Plan Act made historic investments that helped struggling families deal with both the global pandemic and the economic recession. Because of ARPA, child poverty in the United States was cut to a record low of 5.2% in the midst of this dual crisis. The *Children's Budget 2023* finds that these investments, along with other child and family funding shepherded by your Administration, pushed the share of federal spending dedicated to kids from a record low of 7.56% in 2020 (the last year of the previous Administration) to 11.93% in 2022.
- Your Administration has also made numerous strides in protecting children's health: Fixing the "family glitch" so that more than 5 million people can now afford health insurance coverage, proposing a rule that would remove barriers to coverage through Medicaid, CHIP, and the Health Insurance Marketplace for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, and efforts to enforce the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act so that families with private health insurance or Medicaid have access to mental health and substance use disorder services.
- The Biden-Harris Administration continues to explore creative ways to solve the child care crisis in this country, by not only requesting additional funding from Congress but proposing rules such as the one by the Department of Health and Human Services to improve the affordability and accessibility of child care for families as well as compensation for child care professionals.
- Your Administration has also sought improved economic stability and health for children and families. For example, the new proposed Temporary Assistance for Needy Families regulations would require states to better direct funding to poor children and families, and agency frameworks such as the Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program Health-Related Social Needs Framework provide states with guidance on using funds to address housing and nutritional insecurity for youth.
- Your Administration's efforts to protect children from lead exposure both in the United States and around the world are exemplary. Efforts funded under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and investments announced by USAID will help mitigate lead levels for the most vulnerable children so they can safely live in their communities without the harmful effects of lead exposure.

Unfortunately, the realities of Congress have prevented additional solutions from coming to fruition. The State of the Union address is an outstanding opportunity to speak directly to Congress,

the American people, and world leaders on our nation's principles and priorities for children everywhere. **Specifically, we ask that you use this address to announce further actions your Administration will take for kids, as well as to call on Congress to come together on behalf of children.**

Children offer an inherently unifying issue. Polling consistently shows that Americans — regardless of party, gender, race, or other demographics — want a positive children's agenda. Unfortunately, while many politicians readily tout children to evoke emotions in speeches or to fan the flames of hysteria around controversial policies, few lawmakers actually make good-faith efforts on behalf of children. We are grateful to the Champions for Children in Congress who continue to push forward on behalf of kids, but more is needed.

In fact, the United States lags behind many of its peer nations in the supports we provide children and families. As you frequently reference Dr. Biden saying, "Any nation that out-educates us, will out-compete us." We strongly agree with this sentiment, and would broaden it to argue that any country that invests more and provides stronger support for child nutrition, economic mobility, child health care, paid family leave, and other child services will raise a next generation that will out compete us.

Child-centered policy is good for our country and is good for our kids. The immediate relief and stability of a positive pro-child agenda can strengthen families, communities, and the nation's future. This agenda also would allow children to think beyond their immediate circumstances and dream of what they will become.

**We ask that you use the State of the Union address to reiterate the need for positive child policies. Specifically, we urge you to call for:**

- **An End to Child Poverty**
  - Announce a Child Poverty Reduction Target issued through Executive Order that will help maintain our nation's accountability to children and families. As highlighted in a November 2021 letter sent by 20 members of Congress to your office, many countries and states have seen success through implementing poverty reduction targets. As recently seen, the most effective way to reach this goal and end child poverty is through an expanded Child Tax Credit that prioritizes children most in need.
  
- **A Prioritization of Children in Federal Funding**
  - As Congress works to pass the FY 2024 annual spending bills and starts the FY 2025 Appropriations process, we ask that you highlight the critical importance of investing in our children's health, safety, and well-being.
  - Across the federal government several highly successful programs need to be fully funded, such as the WIC program, which supports infant health and nutrition, and IDEA and Title I grants, which ensure low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities receive their fair share of education spending. An increase

in funding for children globally is also needed, as only 9 cents of every dollar of foreign assistance funding benefits children internationally.

- No poison pill policy riders should delay resources needed for federal programs to reach children and families.
- **Protection of Child Health**
  - Protect the Children’s Health Insurance Program from future risks by endorsing the CHIP Act. CHIP is currently the only federal health insurance program that is not permanently funded and is frequently put in jeopardy during funding disputes leading many children to have lapses in coverage.
  - Reverse some of the ill effects of the unwinding by asking Congress to pass legislation that would expand the 12-month continuous eligibility requirement for kids enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP to ensure that kids can have continuous eligibility until they turn six years old.
  - Address the youth mental health crisis by committing to significantly increase the number of pediatric behavioral health professionals in the pipeline who are trained in child and adolescent mental health and highlight the Biden Administration’s recent commitment to creating 14,000 additional mental health professionals in schools.
  - Share priorities of the newly created White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention and actions the White House has taken to end community violence and specifically gun violence against children.
  - Continue efforts to remove barriers to health care coverage and other public benefits for immigrants by urging Congress to pass the LIFT the Bar Act or HEAL Act.
- **True Family First Policies and a Rejection of Policies that Limit Child Rights**
  - Speak out against policies that would eliminate child rights and create detrimental effects for child privacy, mental health, book bans, and acceptance of others under the guise of ‘parental rights.’
  - Embrace true family support policies such as a federal paid leave program that centers the health, safety, and development of children.

In closing, I echo your own words:

*Our nation’s children are the kite strings that keep our national ambitions aloft — they are the dreamers and doers, who will determine the course of our future.*

*President Biden, National Children’s Day Proclamation 2023*

Thank you for your continued commitment to children.

Sincerely,



Bruce Lesley  
President, First Focus on Children