

August 18, 2015

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Harry Reid
Democratic Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Democratic Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Democratic Leader Reid, Speaker Boehner, and Democratic Leader Pelosi:

As leading advocates for America's children, we urge you to build a fiscal year (FY) 2016 appropriations solution that prioritizes children.

According to First Focus's Children's Budget 2015, Congress is cutting funding for children's initiatives more than twice as fast as overall spending, and federal funding for children's initiatives has fallen below 8 percent of the federal budget. The analysis shows that inflation-adjusted spending on children is down about 9.4 percent from 2011 to 2015, while overall spending dropped by just 4 percent over the same period. On selected issues, the damage is much worse. The same analysis shows that, from 2011-2015, Congress cut K-12 education nearly five times faster than overall spending.

If we are to turn this alarming trend around, there are two overarching issues that Congress must address in the upcoming fiscal debate: non-defense discretionary budget caps that disproportionately restrict funding for federal children's initiatives and the tendency for continuing resolutions to shortchange critical investments in children.

This past spring, the Senate and the House passed a concurrent budget resolution with FY 2016 discretionary levels aligning with the sequestration-era defense and non-defense caps set by the Budget Control Act of 2011. This budget blueprint also provided additional FY 2016 resources for defense using the Overseas Contingency Operations account through FY 2021. While the same measure included an extra \$245 billion for defense over 10 years, it cut non-defense spending below sequester-reduced levels by \$496 billion, effectively budgeting for additional cuts to education, abuse and neglect prevention and response, health, nutrition, and other initiatives that help children.

Since then, the appropriations committees in both chambers have advanced FY 2016 appropriations and attempted to restore regular order to the appropriations process. The committees have had to make tough decisions because of the budget caps. While there have been some bright spots for children, the spending measures resulting from the budget caps have included troubling cuts, and even program eliminations, that could hinder the health and development of children.

The effect of sequestration has had and will have real world impact on the daily lives of children. For example, in early childhood, more than 57,000 children were unable to enroll in Head Start and Early Head Start in 2013, the lowest level since 2001. In nutrition, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) would see hundreds of thousands of participants who are found to be at nutritional risk cut from the program – low income pregnant women, mothers, and infants and children up to age 5. For housing, local housing authorities that distribute vouchers will suspend waiting lists and freed up vouchers will not be turned over to new applicants, including parents of children. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would be at less capacity to provide essential vaccines to children.

Thanks to a strong bipartisan agreement in 2013, there was some relief from sequestration in FY 2014 and 2015. We urge you pursue a comparable agreement for FY 2016. Without one, a vote for the current suite of appropriations bills is a vote to deepen cuts in funding for critical children's initiatives.

The other fiscal threat facing children in this year's appropriations process is a continuing resolution (CR). With time being of the essence to act, a CR may be a foregone conclusion to prevent a government shutdown. We are concerned that a long term CR would negate the few incremental funding increases included in this year's funding bills, resulting in continued cuts to key initiatives, particularly education.

As you consider next steps to address appropriations for FY 2016, we urge you to ensure that any year-end fiscal package protects the modest progress on children's initiatives reflected in appropriations bills passed to date. We also strongly urge you to raise non-defense discretionary budget caps to a level that is on balance with defense spending so that our nation's critical needs are met, including the health, education, and well-being of our children.

Sincerely,
First Focus
Public Advocacy for Kids
Children's Health Fund
American Federation of Teachers
American Academy of Pediatrics
Save the Children
Save the Children Action Network (SCAN)
MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership
MomsRising
National Education Association
National Head Start Association
United Way Worldwide
National Title I Association
National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

CC: The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations
The Honorable Barbara Mikulski, Ranking Member on the Senate Committee on Appropriations
The Honorable Hal Rogers, Chairman of the House Committee on Appropriations
The Honorable Nita Lowey, Ranking Member on the House Committee on Appropriations
The Honorable Mike Enzi, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Budget
The Honorable Bernie Sanders, Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Budget
The Honorable Tom Price, Chairman of the House Committee on Budget
The Honorable Chris Van Hollen, Ranking Member on the House Committee on Budget