

The Honorable Max Baucus
Chair, Senate Finance Committee
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

May 22, 2009

The Honorable Charles Grassley
Ranking Member, Senate Finance Committee
135 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Baucus and Ranking Member Grassley:

Infant mortality is a sentinel measure of how well a society assures the health of its people, particularly its women and youngest citizens. The U.S. currently ranks 29th in infant mortality rates among all industrialized nations and has not made significant progress in the last decade. Even more disturbing, infant mortality among African American babies is double, and in some places triple, the rate for whites. The undersigned organizations therefore join together in strong support of the proposed policy option to reduce infant mortality and improve maternal well-being included in your policy options paper on expanding health care coverage.

Despite decades of work to expand insurance coverage and early access to prenatal care, America's preterm birth rate has risen dramatically and progress in reducing infant mortality has stalled. Health reform offers the opportunity to renew progress on this vital measure of our nation's health, and we are tremendously grateful for the leadership you are providing on this issue.

America needs to invest in the health of women before, during, and in between pregnancies. One critical priority is quality, affordable health coverage for the 4 out of 10 low-income women who are currently uninsured (unless they become pregnant or disabled.) However, national data show that coverage for prenatal care and childbirth are necessary but not sufficient to achieve the improvements we seek. Beyond coverage, comprehensive public health interventions to reduce infant mortality will make a difference. Putting these two pieces together, it is reasonable to set a goal to reduce the U.S. infant mortality rate by half, and to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in birth outcomes by 2020.

To achieve this goal will require a balanced approach that builds upon the existing capacity of state and local Maternal and Child Health (MCH) programs supported by the Title V MCH Block Grant and other important public health programs. It will also require an investment of substantial resources that allow states to expand access to health services, enhance data and monitoring systems to improve program quality, expand education and awareness among those most at risk for poor birth outcomes, and expand training and support for providers and other health professionals. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues to further develop the policy option presented in your coverage paper and we wholeheartedly urge its inclusion in the final health reform bill we expect Congress to pass this year.

To discuss these issues further, please contact Brent Ewig, Director of Policy for the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs at 202-266-3041 or bewig@amchp.org.

Thank you again for your leadership.

Sincerely,

Association of Clinicians for the Underserved
Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs
Association of Public Health Laboratories
Association of SIDS and Infant Mortality Programs
Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors
Association of State and Territorial Directors of Nursing
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses
American Academy of Pediatrics
Campaign for Public Health
Child Welfare League of America
Children's Defense Fund
Children's Dental Health Project
Children's Health Fund
CityMatCH
Council of Women's and Infants' Specialty Hospitals
Family Voices
First Focus
Healthy Teen Network
The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
National Assembly on School-Based Health Care
National Association of County and City Health Officials
National Council of La Raza
National Initiative for Children's Healthcare Quality
National Health Law Program
National Healthy Start Association
National Partnership for Women & Families
National WIC Association
National Women's Law Center
National Women's Health Network
Nurse Family Partnership
Raising Women's Voices for the Health Care We Need
Trust for America's Health
United Way of America
ZERO TO THREE