

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

April 14, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy:

We urge you to include in the next federal COVID response direct funding to prevent, intervene, and treat child abuse and neglect; and to support the foster care system, relative caregivers, and older youth with child welfare experiences. The extraordinary economic, social, and health impacts of the pandemic has created a heightened risk of child abuse and neglect and massive disruptions to the child welfare system. The child welfare system is not designed to function remotely. The work of preventing and responding to child maltreatment is interpersonal at its core and the pandemic has utterly disrupted this vital work.

Prior to the pandemic, the child abuse prevention and child welfare systems were already struggling under the weight of the opioid crisis, which drove extraordinary numbers of children into the system. Just as the opioid crisis showed signs of improvement, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, leaving under resourced state and tribal child welfare systems to navigate overlapping public health crises.

Research is clear that increased family stress heightens the risk of child abuse. The risk of child abuse is greater during the COVID response because many children and families are sequestered at home and experiencing extraordinary levels of uncertainty, economic stress, and health concerns. It is even more difficult to identify when children are harmed because schools are closed, routine medical visits are on hold, and children are not out in the community. For these reasons, there is no contact with mandatory reporters of abuse and neglect. Under the COVID response conditions child abuse prevention is even more important, and more families need help. Calls to family helplines have skyrocketed and have long wait times. Service delivery must be adapted for social distancing. Child welfare prevention systems and services require emergency funding to continue operating and expand to meet the rising need.

Child welfare systems have been disrupted by the pandemic; severely impeding social workers' abilities to support families, investigate and intervene in child abuse cases, and ensure the wellbeing of children in foster care. Caseworkers are operating in unsafe conditions that threaten their health, as well as the health of the families and communities they serve. Courts across the country, which provide critical oversight and accountability have either closed or have significantly delayed family court hearings and decisions on children's placements.

Our nation's foster families also desperately need our help during the COVID response. Like all families, fostering families are experiencing significant changes to their economic stability. They also have limited access to therapies that help children cope with trauma, and practical support from child welfare agency staff. Fostering families have the additional difficulty of managing visits with biological parents that foster healthy attachments and bonding. Child welfare systems are the only resource available to meet the needs of fostering families.

During the COVID response the existing gaps in federal child welfare – like supports for older foster youth, kinship families and tribal child welfare- are exacerbated. Foster youth are fighting to gain independence without the safety net of trusted family. Relative caregivers need assistance navigating new needs and resources during the pandemic. And as tribes face slower and longer pandemic curves, tribal child welfare systems are critically underfunded and overburdened by administrative red tape.

Our nation has existing federal programs with infrastructure and expertise to address these challenges. They need additional funding and temporary flexibility. We urge you to provide emergency funding for the following programs:

- **Increase funding by \$1 billion for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) Grants.** Funding would be used by states and local organizations to meet the need for child abuse prevention programs and adapt services to account for social distancing. Funds could be used to establish satellite locations and mobile units for service delivery, hire more parent educators, home visitors, and parent coaches, create public awareness campaigns, develop and distribute parenting tip sheets, and hire staff to expand the reach of state help lines
- **Increase funding by \$20 million for Kinship Navigator Programs.** Increased funding would help respond to the skyrocketing demand for information and connections to resources among families where grandparents and other relatives are raising children. It is particularly important to provide supplies, information, and assistance for these families where caregivers are at high risk of death or severe illness if exposed to the virus.
- **Increase funding by \$1 billion for Title IV-B Part 2.** This funding would help child welfare agencies provide the services necessary to stabilize families and prevent a major influx of children into the foster care system. These funds can be used to keep children safely at home with interventions tailored to meet families' needs, help support family reunification, provide support services to adoptive families and to retain foster families.
- **Increase funding by \$500 million for CAPTA Title I.** These flexible funds would help ensure child welfare agencies' response, investigations, and interventions of child abuse and neglect are not dangerously upended. Funds could be spent on PPE, technological platforms, other measures to facilitate safe home visits, worker support, CASA volunteers, national helpline, and establishing new supports and services within the community.
- **Increase funding by \$30 million for the Court Improvement Program.** These funds will be used directly to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the functioning of child welfare

court cases. Funding would help address court shutdowns, reduced staffing, technological challenges and other issues that are compromising child safety and delaying family reunification and other critical support to child victims and their families.

- **Increase FMAP for Title IV-E Prevention Program.** If we don't commensurately increase the federal funding rate for IV-E prevention, it will incentivize unnecessary foster care placements at a time when disrupting families brings additional dangers and undo the progress Congress has made in recent years toward preventive care.
- **Increase funding to Title IV-E Chafee funds by \$500 million.** This funding will allow states to support young people in the transition from foster care to adulthood. States could ensure a flexible, rapid response to the emerging needs of transition-age youth and Chafee-eligible former foster youth, including financial assistance, housing, and employment services.

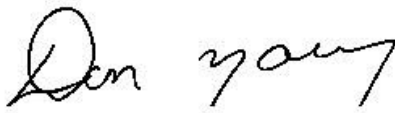
Furthermore, increases to the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) are needed to help states fill in gaps to critical services including child protective services, child abuse prevention supports, domestic violence services, and foster care. Additional SSBG investments should include a set-aside for Tribes.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We look forward to partnering with you to ensure that the most vulnerable children and families are not forgotten in the federal response to this pandemic.

Sincerely,



Kim Schrier, M.D.
Member of Congress



Don Young
Member of Congress



Karen Bass
Member of Congress

COVID-19 Child Welfare Letter Signatories
April 14, 2020

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