

**Senate HELP Subcommittee on Children and Families
Hearing on the State of the American Child
June 8, 2010**

Context: On June 8, the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families held the first in a series of hearings regarding the "State of the American Child." The hearings will focus on the challenges facing children and families and the tools needed to succeed in today's society.

Testimony Summary: Witnesses for the hearing included: Alma Powell, Chair, America's Promise Alliance; Elaine Zimmerman, Executive Director, Connecticut Commission on Children; Jack Lund, President and CEO, YMCA of Greater New York; and Harry Holzer, Ph.D, Economist, Georgetown University and Urban Institute.

Chairman Dodd (D-CT) said the series of hearings will examine all aspects of children's lives, from birth through adulthood, and including issues such as health care, education, and family/community involvement. Sen. Dodd discussed the importance of focusing on all the factors that help children succeed, and said he intends to introduce legislation to establish a national commission on children to recommend strategies for improving the well being of children. Ranking Member Alexander (R-TN) noted Sen. Dodd's long standing leadership and commitment to children and families and the bi-partisan work they have accomplished together in the Senate. Sen. Alexander also remarked on the need to create environments both at home and at school where children can succeed.

Sen. Sanders (I-VT) and Sen. Casey (D-PA) also provided opening remarks. Sen. Sanders referred to a 2007 UNICEF report on children's poverty levels, and the need to gather the international perspective from leading nations, such as Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Belgium to learn more and infuse best practice into American policy. Sen. Casey discussed the necessity of better health care and nutrition policies, the challenges of protecting children and providing safe environments, and the need for a national commitment around early learning.

- In her testimony, Alma Powell discussed the five promises that young people need to lead successful lives: 1) a caring adult; 2) a safe place; 3) a healthy start; 4) an effective education; and 5) an opportunity to help others. She also discussed the America's Promise Alliance's new graduation initiative, Grad Nation Campaign, and the national imperative to improve graduation rates.
- Elaine Zimmerman's testimony focused on the recession's impact on middle class families and ultimately on outcomes for children. In particular, she commented on the critical nature of the unemployment gap, poverty, and homelessness, and the effect on children. She also commented on the need for coordinated leadership and better systems to alleviate these situations and improve outcomes. Ms. Zimmerman also discussed the work of a Connecticut task force that initiated a learning forum to examine leading research and what works in children and family policies.
- Jack Lund remarked on the various programs and initiatives that the YMCA implements to improve outcomes for children and youth, and in particular, leading the way in childcare and afterschool

services. Mr. Lund also commented on the challenges that children and families face, including health care, obesity, and parental training and assistance.

- Harry Holzer echoed Ms. Zimmerman's statement and also discussed the current economic situation and its impact on educational attainment and employment of young people. Dr. Holzer stated that policies should focus on bolstering employment and income for parents, and at the same time fund and implement direct service programs for children.

Discussion Focus: Following the opening testimony, members of the Subcommittee participated in a question and answer session with the witnesses.

- Sen. Sanders (I-VT) focused his questions on gathering the international perspective on better programming, services, and outcomes for children. Sen. Sanders was particularly interested in why more children are living in poverty in the United States than in other leading nations, such as Norway and Finland. Witnesses provided multiple explanations, including the comprehensive nature of social services in these countries, the low rates of immigration, a higher level of government spending on social programming, and the lower rates of inequality in the labor market.
- Sen. Casey (D-PA) was interested in learning how the federal government, states, and localities can prioritize the range of issues and needs facing children and families. Ms. Zimmerman discussed the Commission on Children in Connecticut in greater detail, a task force of experts that conducted an economic analysis to develop recommendations for priority areas for the State. Additionally, other witnesses commented that priorities are being narrowed as a result of the long-term budget crisis. Witnesses remarked that the problem lied with the large amount of funds that are directed toward entitlement programs and defense spending, causing a squeeze on discretionary spending.
- Sen. Dodd (D-CT) asked Ms. Zimmerman to provide additional information on the establishment of a Commission to examine issues facing children and families, and endorsed the idea of creating a federal commission to identify what works, collect, and disseminate information. Sen. Dodd questioned witnesses on how to do a better job of educating parents and communities. Witnesses mentioned the Harlem Children's Zone as an example of a comprehensive program that provides parenting training to help parents understand the needs of their children. Witnesses also supported home visiting as a great tool to break down barriers with parents. Other suggestions included creating a real role for the private sector in parental and community involvement initiatives, and treating parents as true partners by bringing them to the policy table.

Analysis: Members of the Committee displayed a strong interest in this new series of hearings and demonstrated a commitment to learning what works and developing better policies to help children succeed.