

May 27, 2021

The Honorable Patrick Leahy  
Chair, Committee on Appropriations  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby  
Vice Chair, Committee on Appropriations  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Chair, Subcommittee on Labor,  
Health and Human Services,  
Education and Related Agencies  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt  
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Labor,  
Health and Human Services,  
Education and Related Agencies  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Leahy, Vice Chair Shelby, Chair Murray, and Ranking Member Blunt:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations dedicated to the health and well-being of the nation's children, pregnant women, and mothers, we write to request at least \$180 million in funding for the Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) program in the Senate Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), Education and Related Agencies appropriations bill and to thank you for your longstanding commitment to this program over the last several years.

From conception through adulthood, children grow and develop rapidly. It is increasingly understood that the environment in which they live—with its physical, chemical, biological, and psychosocial influences—has a significant impact on this development, as well as overall health and well-being. Furthermore, the health and development of the child is linked closely with that of the mother, and environmental factors play a crucial role in this context as well. We know that children are not simply “little adults” but have very different physiological responses to environmental influences than adults.

The ECHO program at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is designed to understand the effects of a broad range of early environmental influences on maternal and child health and development. ECHO is dedicated to both learning what factors affect child health and to finding ways to enhance it through observational and interventional research that can inform health care practices, community health programs, and health policies. By answering crucial questions about the childhood antecedents of the costly diseases of adulthood, we can improve treatment, better prevent illness, and increase the health of the population across the lifespan.

The ECHO program employs a unique model that brings together successful longitudinal studies already in place. ECHO leverages more than 70 existing longitudinal cohort studies of children to allow researchers to study the impacts of environmental influences on a diverse array of children over time. Separately, the ECHO program's IDEa States Pediatric Clinical Trials Network provides children in rural and medically underserved locations the opportunity to participate in state-of-the-art clinical trials. The network has sites in 17 states and targets those states identified by the NIH Institutional Development Awards (IDEa) Program, which is designed to broaden the geographic distribution of biomedical and

behavioral research. In all, the ECHO program funds research activities in more than 40 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

Given its nimble design, ECHO has been able to move quickly to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children. To date, ECHO has awarded 6 supplemental awards to current grantees to support COVID-19 research. This includes studies examining the impact of school closures and remote learning on child well-being with an emphasis on racial and social inequities and the impact of SARS-CoV-2 stress, infection, and immunity on birth outcomes. The program has also developed a COVID-19 questionnaire to assess the impact of the pandemic across all study participants enrolled in ECHO cohorts. More than 10,000 questionnaires have been completed to date, which will help better elucidate the impact of the pandemic on a diverse array of children. ECHO has also employed innovative methods, like remote research tools for informed consent, interventions, and data and sample collection, to perform research in the face of lab closures and other challenges posed to research projects.

Despite the challenges of the last year, ECHO-funded researchers continue to advance our understanding of the ways that environmental influences impact maternal and child health and well-being. For instance, one ECHO-funded study of 255 pregnant women found study participants were exposed to 199 unique chemicals. Education and behaviors, such as nail polish use, helped predict levels of chemical exposures. Moving forward, the study will connect these chemical exposures to maternal and infant health outcomes to identify how chemicals influence human health and provide clues to prevent health problems. Another ECHO study evaluating the connection between sleep quality and children's life satisfaction found that children who sleep well have happier lives than those who do not sleep as well. The study offers findings to inform future studies that want to test specific ways to improve children's well-being through interventions to improve sleep quality.

We urge you to continue to support this important research initiative to improve the health of children and look forward to working with you to advance child health and well-being.

Sincerely,

Academic Pediatric Association  
Alliance for Black NICU Families  
Alstrom Syndrome International  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
American Pediatric Society  
American Thoracic Society  
Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs  
Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD)  
Autism Science Foundation and the Alliance for the Genetic Etiologies of Neurodevelopmental Disorders and Autism  
BPAN Warriors  
COMBINEDBrain  
Costello Syndrome Family Network

Endocrine Society  
Genetic Alliance  
Gould Syndrome Foundation  
Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI)  
International Foundation for CDKL5 Research  
International Pemphigus Pemphigoid Foundation  
March of Dimes  
MLD Foundation  
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health  
National Council on Family Relations  
National PKU Alliance, Inc.  
National Urea Cycle Disorders Foundation  
Nemours Children's Health System  
Organic Acidemia Association  
Pediatric Policy Council  
Phelan-McDermid Syndrome Foundation  
PremieWorld, LLC  
PXE International  
RASopathies Network  
Society for Birth Defects Research and Prevention  
Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine  
Society for Pediatric Research  
Society of Toxicology  
Sudden Arrhythmia Death Syndromes (SADS) Foundation  
The United Mitochondrial Disease Foundation  
University of Montana  
Wishes for Elliott