

July 1, 2022

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 \$180 million in funding for the Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) program in the Senate Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 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 was able to move quickly to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children. Leveraging existing research infrastructure, ECHO has funded multiple awards to support COVID-19 research. Key studies have examined 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 also developed a COVID-19 questionnaire to assess the impact of the pandemic across all study participants enrolled in ECHO cohorts to 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.

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 found that pregnant individuals who had attained a college degree had lower levels of oxidative stress than those who had not completed high school, indicating that lower educational attainment may be associated with poorer prenatal health outcomes. 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 Pediatric Society
Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs
Autism Science Foundation
COMBINEDBrain
Cystinosis Research Network
Endocrine Society
Genetic Alliance
GLO Premies
International Foundation for CDKL5 Research
March of Dimes
MLD Foundation
National Council on Family Relations
National PKU Alliance

National PKU News
Organic Acidemia Association
Pediatric Policy Council
PremieWorld, LLC
PXE International
RASopathies Network
Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine
Society for Pediatric Research
Society of Toxicology (SOT)
Sophie's Neighborhood
SPAN Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)
University of Montana
Wilson Disease Association