

## **Celebrating Improvements in Infant and Toddler Policy: Top 10 Policy Achievements of 2008**

To say the least, 2008 has been an eventful year! Amidst the many exciting events that our nation has witnessed, federal and state policymakers have not forgotten the importance of investing in the early years. Throughout the year, the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network kept you informed of important and innovative policy developments throughout the country. Both on the national and state levels, there have been impressive policy advancements for infants and toddlers, and as the year comes to an end, we celebrate these wonderful achievements. This feature article highlights examples of public policies which recognize that we all have a role to play in supporting children and families during the early years.

Infant-toddler professionals, like you, are contributing their experience and knowledge to help create innovative and meaningful ways to improve the early childhood field. You are working in partnership with policymakers and policy shapers to provide support and resources for the young children and families most in need. Most importantly, you are speaking as a BIG voice for little kids. Let these 2008 accomplishments serve as a reminder that there are great things we can do for babies, toddlers and their families when we work together. We celebrate 2008 and look forward to 2009, a new year of opportunities for us to continue to advocate for good health, strong families, and positive early learning experiences for our nation's infants and toddlers.

### **Farm Bill Reduces Food Insecurity and Improves Nutrition Programs**

More than 12.5 million American households lack adequate resources to meet basic food needs.<sup>i</sup> In June, the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 addressed this crisis by investing an additional \$10.4 billion over 10 years in nutrition programs, including Food Stamps (recently renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP). For the first time in 30 years, the minimum monthly benefit for Food Stamps/SNAP is increased from \$10 to \$14 per month and indexed for inflation. In addition, the law brings attention to nutrition education and prevention of obesity in low-income communities, creates a pilot project to encourage purchase of more fresh fruits and vegetables in Food Stamp/SNAP households, and expands the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program for free healthy foods in low-income schools. This legislation has significant impact for infants and toddlers suffering from food insecurity, who have increased risk for deficits in cognitive development as well as behavior and emotional problems.<sup>ii</sup> Infants and toddlers who participate in the Food Stamps/SNAP program are 26 percent less likely to be food insecure than eligible children who do not participate.<sup>iii</sup> This investment helps low-income families provide their young children with the nutritious diet necessary for healthy development.

### **Colorado Early Childhood Caucus Brings Attention to Infant-Toddler Issues**

Serving as a forum to educate legislators and policymakers on the needs of the state's young children, the newly-established Colorado Early Childhood Caucus held its first meeting in March. The caucus, convened by the Colorado Children's Campaign, brings together a group of bi-partisan state legislators to increase legislative focus on early childhood policies and heighten awareness of the importance of the early years. The caucus plans to identify and implement a research-based policy agenda to benefit children prenatal to eight and is working to bring attention to the importance of the early years and increase focus on early childhood policies for

the new legislative session. In 2009, the caucus will create policies that build upon practices that support physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development in the early years, drawing from research in early care and education, family support, health, and mental health.

### **Virginia Creates Office of Early Childhood Development for Children Birth to Five**

In April, Governor Timothy M. Kaine announced the creation of the state's new Office of Early Childhood Development (OECD), which is working to improve the quality, affordability, and accessibility of early childhood development programs in Virginia for children birth to age five, including the Virginia Preschool Initiative, Head Start, child care subsidies, and provider services. The office was created based on a recommendation by the state's Start Strong Council to develop a state-level office to coordinate existing early childhood programs. Housed under both the Department of Education and the Department of Social Services, the new office is examining the resources and programs housed within the agencies that impact young children and their families so that federal, state, and local funding streams can be better coordinated to maximize impact. The office also has a liaison to the Department of Health, linking the coordination of early childhood programs with the state's infant-toddler health-related programs. OECD became operational on July 1<sup>st</sup>.

### **Higher Education Act Reauthorization Makes Professional Development of the Early Care and Education Workforce a Priority**

Though it technically expired in 2004, the Higher Education Act was reauthorized in August with important changes for the early childhood field. Notably, it provides up to \$10,000 in loan forgiveness for graduates in high-need fields such as full-time early childhood educators, child welfare workers, speech-language pathologists/audiologists, children's mental health providers, Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutritionists, and children's physical and occupational therapists. The loan forgiveness program is subject to available appropriations so infant-toddler advocates will be key to ensuring that adequate funding is secured for this vital program. In addition, the reauthorization improves the quality of the early childhood workforce through five-year competitive grants to states to establish an Early Childhood Education Professional Development and Career Task Force, to be composed of state, higher education, and early childhood education representatives. The Task Force will develop a plan for a comprehensive statewide early childhood education professional development and career system that will provide postsecondary educational assistance to individuals who plan to work in the early childhood field.

### **Kansas Creates Early Childhood Block Grant for High-Quality Programs**

The Kansas Legislature passed a child-friendly Fiscal Year (FY) 2009 state budget in May, providing \$11.1 million to establish the Kansas Early Childhood Block Grant, which was first proposed by Governor Kathleen Sebelius in January. Administered by the Kansas Children's Cabinet & Trust Fund, the block grant will be used to support high quality, research-based programs for children birth to age five, with a focus on at-risk children and underserved areas. Research has shown that high-quality early childhood programs promote positive cognitive and language development,<sup>iv</sup> social and emotional development,<sup>v</sup> and contribute to later school success.<sup>vi</sup> Notably, at least 30 percent of the grant is set aside for infant-toddler programs, such as Early Head Start. The funds are administered through a Request for Proposals (RFP) process for programs that are research-based and have accountability measures. In November, the

Children's Cabinet approved the first round of funding, providing \$11 million in grants ranging from \$85,000 to \$6,015,040 to fourteen programs in Kansas.

### **New Jersey Passes Family Leave Law to Support Working Parents**

Approved in May 2008 and taking effect in January 2009, New Jersey's new family leave law recognizes that forming early connections between parents and their newborns is critical to healthy social and emotional development.<sup>vii</sup> Research shows that dedicated time at home with newborns promotes good health by allowing parents to facilitate breastfeeding and ensure that children receive the necessary immunizations and medical check-ups.<sup>viii</sup> The new law offers paid leave to all workers in the state, regardless of company size, to care for sick relatives and newborn or adopted children. Workers will now be able to receive two-thirds of their salaries for six weeks, for up to \$524 a week. All workers in the state will pay up to 64 cents a week, or up to \$33 a year, to fund the program. Companies with more than 50 employees must hold workers' jobs while they are on leave, providing parents with economic security while they care for their infants. Small businesses with fewer than 50 employees, however, are not required to hold jobs open. The New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development estimates that 38,000 individuals, or about 1 percent of New Jersey's workforce, will collect benefits annually.

### **Child Welfare Reform Provides Support for Children in Foster Care**

This past October, President Bush signed into law the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, the most significant child welfare reform in over a decade. The reform improves outcomes for children in foster care and promotes more permanent and stable families. This legislation includes numerous provisions to support relative caregivers and maintain family ties, encourage and provide incentives for more adoptions, create connections to health care and educational services, improve the quality of the staff who work with children in the child welfare system, and expand access to federal funding and technical assistance for American Indian and Native Alaskan tribal groups. This landmark reform has significant implications for infants and toddlers, who comprise the single largest group of children entering foster care.<sup>ix</sup> Because a baby's healthy development is interrupted by a lack of security and attachment from a primary caregiver, creating more permanent and stable families early in an infant's or toddler's life is essential. Without nurturing relationships, babies are at greater risk of compromised health and development and are less likely to receive appropriate care and services. This reform is a big step in improving outcomes for the most vulnerable babies.

### **New York Advocates Launch Infancy Policy Leadership Circle**

In June 2008, infant-toddler advocates in New York launched the state's first Infancy Policy Leadership Circle to be a statewide advocacy voice specifically focused on babies and their families. Building on the work of the New York Zero-to-Three Network, based in New York City, the Policy Circle brings together early childhood professionals, leaders, and advocates from across the state, drawing on diverse fields such as health, early education, and early intervention to create a more powerful voice for young children and their families. The Policy Circle is currently working to create a comprehensive agenda to improve public policy and expand state investment for infants and toddlers. Once the agenda is articulated, the Policy Circle will work with existing state coalitions such as Winning Beginning NY and NY Children's Action

Network to ensure that infant-toddler issues are included in state advocacy efforts on behalf of young children.

### **Nebraska Rewards Quality Programming with Early Childhood Endowment Grants**

In July 2008, the Nebraska Early Childhood Education Endowment awarded its first grants to eleven school districts throughout the state to promote success later in life for the state's youngest at-risk infants and toddlers. Established in 2006 through legislation, the public-private endowment includes \$40 million from the state and an additional \$20 million to be raised from the private sector within five years. The Endowment Board of Trustees designed the grant process with the goal to both increase access to high quality services for infants and toddlers and to enhance the quality of existing programs. Programs serving groups of children and family engagement programs and services are eligible to apply for grants. The first round of grants focused mainly on expanding access to quality programs and allowing more infants and toddlers to benefit from these programs' services. A total of \$1.7 million was awarded in July, with each grant ranging between \$75,000 and \$150,000, with the expectation of a one-on-one local match at the community level. The next round of applications is likely to be available in January 2009.

### **Congress Aids Low-income Children and Families by Expanding the Child Tax Credit**

As part of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 passed in October, Congress lowered the 2008 income threshold for eligibility for the Child Tax Credit from \$12,050 to \$8,500, benefiting the families of 13 million children. As a result, families of 2.9 million children will receive the credit for the first time while families of 10.1 million children will see an increase in their credit. The expansion aids millions of families with full-time working parents in low-paying jobs by providing critical income supplements. Research shows that the expansion of the Child Tax Credit can effectively reduce the tax burden for low-income families.<sup>x</sup> In 2007, over 30 percent of qualifying children under age two lived in working families with earnings too low to qualify for the full Child Tax Credit.<sup>xi</sup> With this expansion, more of these families with young children are able to close the gap between their earnings and what they need to meet basic needs. While this is a step in the right direction, these new provisions only govern 2008 income, and infant-toddler advocates will have a role to play in ensuring that this expansion continues beyond 2008.

### **Conclusion: Moving Forward in 2009**

The policies presented here are only a few of the many achievements of this year, demonstrating that together we have the ability to bring about powerful and meaningful change. As advocates for young children, we have made great accomplishments and have much to celebrate. However, we cannot forget that there is still much work to be done. With a new president, a new Congress, and many new elected officials in state governments, there are great opportunities ahead for us to ensure that policymakers understand the importance of the earliest years for healthy development and a healthy country. We must keep building on the momentum of this year by continuing to develop and foster strong relationships with policymakers so that we can work together to improve outcomes for our youngest children. We hope you will join us in embracing the coming year as a new opportunity to actively use your voice to advocate on behalf of infants, toddlers, and families!

*This article was written by Ashley Chu, ZERO TO THREE Public Policy Intern, with contributions from Debbie Rappaport and Elizabeth DiLauro, ZERO TO THREE Policy Center.*

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<sup>i</sup> Mark Nord and Mark Prell, “Struggling to Feed the Family: What Does it Mean to be Food Insecure?” in *Amber Waves: The Economics of Food, Farming, Natural Resources, and Rural America*, June 2007, United States Department of Agriculture, available from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Avi Perry, Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, John Cook, and Deborah A. Frank, “Food Stamps as Medicine: A New Perspective on Children’s Health,” Children’s Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, 2007, available from <http://www.c-snap.org>.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ronald J. Lally, Abbey Griffin, Emily Fenichel, Marilyn Segal, et al., *Caring For Infants and Toddlers in Groups: Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE, 2003).

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> United States General Accounting Office, *Child Care: States Have Undertaken a Variety of Quality Improvement Initiatives, but More Evaluations of Effectiveness are Needed* (Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office (GAO-02-897), 2002), <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02897.pdf> (accessed May 12, 2008).

<sup>vii</sup> Jack Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000).

<sup>viii</sup> Sheila B. Kamerman, “Parental Leave Policies: The Impact on Child Well-Being,” in *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research 2006*, edited by Peter Moss and Margaret O’Brien (London, UK: Department of Trade and Industry, 2006), 16–21, available from [www.berr.gov.uk](http://www.berr.gov.uk).

<sup>ix</sup> Jack Shonkoff, *Helping Babies from the Bench: Using the Science of Early Childhood Development in Court* (Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE, 2007).

<sup>x</sup> Robertson Williams, “Refundable Credits Have Cut Taxes for Low-Income Households,” The Tax Policy Center, available from <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org>.

<sup>xi</sup> Leonard E. Burman and Laura Wheaton, “Eligibility for Child Tax Credit by Age of Child,” Tax Policy Center, 2007, available from <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org>.