

# Foreword

## The State of America's Children: We *Must* Keep Moving Forward

This is a *very* challenging and scary time for children and all of us as a half century of struggle for a more inclusive and just nation is at great risk. We know how to make progress for children and have seen important gains. Government programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and others have lifted millions of children out of poverty. Thanks in large part to Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and the Affordable Care Act (ACA) more than 95 percent of all children have health coverage today—a record high. Total state funding for preschool has increased and 80 percent of 5-year-olds in kindergarten are now enrolled in full-day programs ensuring they do not miss a half step as they start school. Child arrests, youth detention, solitary confinement of youths, and confinement of children in adult prisons have declined and in 2016 the U.S. Supreme Court held that its 2012 *Miller v. Alabama* decision banning mandatory juvenile life sentences without the possibility of parole must be applied retroactively in all states.

We must hold and build on to these gains always keeping in sight that we have much further to go. In 2017 the state of America's children is under attack by an onslaught of new policies that would massacre the hopes, dreams and basic survival and development needs of millions of babies, children and youths.

The following chapters outline the facts: millions of America's children today are still suffering from hunger, homelessness and hopelessness. More than 13.2 million children are poor—nearly 1 in 5. About 70 percent of them are children of color who will be a majority of our children by 2020. More than 1.2 million homeless children are enrolled in public schools. About 14.8 million children struggle against hunger in food-insecure households. Despite great progress 3.9 million children lack the health coverage they need to survive and thrive. Millions of young children need quality early childhood programs during their critical years of early brain development, yet only 5 percent of eligible infants and toddlers are enrolled in Early Head Start and only 54 percent of eligible 3- and 4-year-olds are served by Head Start. The majority of all public school fourth and eighth graders cannot read at grade level, including more than 75 percent of Black, Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native children. Every 47 seconds a child is abused or neglected and the number of children in foster care is increasing rapidly in some parts of our country as the opioid crisis spins out of control.

How are the leaders of our wealthy nation addressing these grim child survival needs? Making them worse. Rather than moving forward, the laboriously woven child and family safety net created over decades and not yet completed is on the brink of obliteration with the administration and its congressional allies seeking to destroy the government's role and responsibility at all levels to protect those in need, not just the powerful and privileged. Personal, family, community and professional responsibility are essential, but without fair government policies at all levels the widening gaps millions of children face cannot be fully addressed. In so many sectors children lack access to the opportunities they need to succeed—as CDF's forthcoming report *Portrait of Inequality* will review—and steps are being taken right now to dismantle ladders of hope and make the gaps even worse.

The 2018 budget proposed by President Trump and the budget approved by the Senate and House in 2017 provide a multilane highway roadmap to eviscerate the basic survival and development needs of millions of babies, children and youths hungering for hope. There is an ongoing assault on our children's

health care coverage and Medicaid as we know it, despite the fact that Medicaid's safety net has been in place for 50 years under presidents of both parties and serves as a lifeline for 37 million children, covering almost half of all births and more than 40 percent of children with special health care needs. Massive and morally obscene tax cuts would require huge budget cuts in safety net programs for vulnerable children and adults because of the enormous deficits they create. Medicaid, SNAP, child care, Head Start, education, Pell grants, and other crucial child investments will be slashed to pay for welfare for non-needy millionaires, billionaires and corporations.

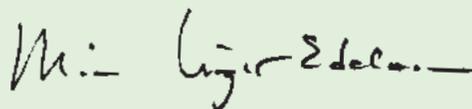
So what do we do when our children need so much yet are offered so little? What do we do when our elected leaders refuse to give up on politically motivated plans to dismantle and tear asunder the health, nutrition and other safety nets for millions of children? We most certainly must continue to move forward with the good work many are doing in communities and states across the country for children, note lessons learned and work to bring these to scale at a better time. And people of conscience and common sense and all who care about children and the future must fight back nonviolently with all our might against the pressure to move us backwards.

Fifty years ago, in what would be his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here?*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared a story about the need to commit to difficult struggles for the long haul. Dr. King described a flight he took from New York to London years earlier in an old propeller airplane. The trip took nine and a half hours, but on the way home, the crew announced the flight from London to New York would take twelve and a half. When the pilot came out to visit the cabin, Dr. King asked him why. "You must understand about the winds,' he said. 'When we leave New York, a strong tail wind is in our favor, but when we return, a strong head wind is against us.' Then he added, 'Don't worry. These four engines are capable of battling the winds.'" Dr. King concluded: "In any social revolution there are times when the tail winds of triumph and fulfillment favor us, and other times when strong head winds of disappointment and setbacks beat against us relentlessly. We must not permit adverse winds to overwhelm us as we journey across life's mighty Atlantic; we must be sustained by our engines of courage in spite of the winds. This refusal to be stopped, this 'courage to be,' this determination to go on 'in spite of' is the hallmark of any great movement."

No matter the political climate, we need to remain steadfast in our stewardship of future generations and our determination to shield children from harm. Data in *The State of America's Children*® 2017 show us where we are today. We need to rev up our engines of courage and keep moving forward with persistence to protect the future of our nation and world.

We must *never* give up.

In faith and hope,



Marian Wright Edelman