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April 25, 2013

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Leahy:

On behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), a non-profit organization of 60,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults, I write to thank you for your recent attention to the need to reform our nation's immigration system. As children's health experts and advocates, we are concerned about the multiple barriers to accessing comprehensive, affordable, and culturally and linguistically effective health care services many children in immigrant communities face.

Immigrant children represent the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population; one in every four children lives in an immigrant family. Children of immigrant families, regardless of their own immigrant status, face a variety of challenges to their health and well-being, including poverty, lack of health insurance, low educational attainment, substandard housing, and language barriers. Since immigrant children represent a considerable part of our economic and social future, it is in our best interest to ensure they grow up to be physically and developmentally healthy.

Every individual, including and especially every child, living in the United States should have health insurance coverage. A lack of health insurance coverage for any family member can have negative impacts on the health of the entire family, so ensuring individual coverage will protect the health of our nation's children. As immigration reform is considered, it is critical that barriers to children's enrollment be addressed; policies that impose waiting periods, restrict eligibility, or impede enrollment should be eliminated. Immigrant children should have access to all public health insurance programs including Medicaid, CHIP, and programs within state health insurance exchanges. In order to best address the needs of immigrant children and their families, it is essential that enrollment processes be simple.

All children, regardless of immigrant status, should have access to a comprehensive, coordinated, culturally and linguistically responsive, and continuous health services provided in a quality medical home. In the health care setting, qualified interpretation services should be universally available and covered by health insurance in order to ensure that families receive the interpretation services required by law. This is especially important for children with chronic health care needs and emotional or behavioral problems.

The health, well-being, and safety of children should be prioritized in all immigration proceedings. Whenever possible, the separation of a child from his or her family and home should be prevented, and family reunions should be facilitated as quickly as possible. Furthermore, a child should not be expected to represent himself or herself in an immigration proceeding. Health care facilities should be seen as a safe space for children and their families; to accomplish this, neither health care facilities nor medical records should be used in any immigration enforcement action.

As you continue your important work to reform the nation's immigration system, I urge you to ensure that the health and well-being of children of immigrant families remains a top priority. If you have any additional questions or wish to discuss this matter further, please do not hesitate to contact Mark Del Monte at 202-347-8600 or mdelmonte@aap.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Thomas K. McInerney, MD, FAAP".

Thomas K. McInerney, MD, FAAP
President

TKM/aam