

May 25, 2023

Dear Members of Congress:

On behalf of the Southern Poverty Law Center and the SPLC Action Fund, we write to urge Congress to pass a debt ceiling or negotiated budget legislation that fully funds and protects key anti-poverty programs that assist low-income people and does not impose stringent requirements that would push people further into poverty.

As a public interest advocacy organization working in the Deep South, the Southern Poverty Law Center seeks to eliminate the systemic economic inequity and persistent racial wealth disparities that disproportionately impact Black, indigenous, and other people of color by expanding access to opportunity and eradicating racial economic inequality. Our focus states, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and Florida have some of the highest poverty rates, highest hunger rates, lowest literacy rate, and worst health outcomes in the country.<sup>1</sup> Access to critical federal assistance programs is essential as the South continues to recover from the devastating effects of the pandemic that exacerbated the existing racial inequities and disparities in health care, nutrition, education, housing, and other basic needs. In a country with significant wealth disparities, cutting benefits of those least able to afford the life sustaining necessities to survive is unconscionable.

We are deeply concerned by some of the recent proposed cuts, caps, and restrictions to safety net programs that would deprive people of basic human needs:

**SNAP:** Nationwide, approximately 12.6% of Americans participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In our focus states, SNAP participation is higher than the nation, with Louisiana having the second highest rate with 19.5% of Louisianians participating in SNAP.<sup>2</sup> Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana are among the five states with the highest child hunger rates, and Georgia and Florida are 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, respectively.<sup>3</sup> A plethora of evidence shows that SNAP reduces poverty and improves health outcomes and economic security, especially for children.<sup>4</sup> SNAP already limits people aged 18 to 49 to three months of assistance every three

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<sup>1</sup> FRIENDS COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL LEGISLATION, 10 Poorest States in the U.S.

<https://www.fcni.org/updates/2022-10/top-10-poorest-states-us>; INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION SCIENCES, Comparison Charts of State and County Estimates, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/src/PDF/STATE.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Gilligan, "States with the Highest Rates of SNAP Recipients," U.S. NEWS, Mar. 16, 2023, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/food-stamp-benefits-by-state>.

<sup>3</sup> CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND, The State of America's Children 2020, <https://www.childrensdefense.org/policy/resources/soac-2020-child-hunger-tables/>.

<sup>4</sup> CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES, "Chart Book: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table," Nov. 7, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-helps-struggling-families-put-food-on-the-table-0>.

years unless they are working, in a work training program, or qualify for limited exceptions.<sup>5</sup> Harsher requirements will not stop people from needing food, it would just force them to live without. Congress should fully fund nutrition assistance and reject any efforts to undermine access to SNAP, including additional time limits and restrictions.

**Medicaid:** The Medicaid program provides health care coverage for one in five Americans—allowing millions of people to have access to life-saving prescriptions, complex medical treatments, preventive services, long-term care, and other essential health care. Medicaid is also vital to maternal health since women make up a majority of adults covered by Medicaid and the program covers 40% of births in the U.S., including 65% of births among Black women.<sup>6</sup> Black women suffer more from pregnancy related deaths, preterm births, low birthweight or births for which they received late or no prenatal care compared to white women, leading to markedly higher mortality rates of their infants.<sup>7</sup>

Our Deep South states have some of the worst health outcome in the U.S. Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana are ranked the worst health care systems in the country, and Georgia and Florida are close behind ranking 43rd and 40th.<sup>8</sup> For maternal mortality rates, Alabama has the third highest state in country, Mississippi is 6th, Louisiana is 7th, Georgia is 8th, and Florida ranks 17th.<sup>9</sup> A huge number of people, especially people of color, in our focus states are unable to afford health care coverage, in part because the Deep South, with the exception of Louisiana, has not expanded Medicaid eligibility. More than two million adults are uninsured and in the coverage gap where their incomes are below the poverty line, but they cannot get coverage because their state has not adopted ACA Medicaid Expansion.<sup>10</sup> People of color make up about 60% of this coverage gap.

Failing to increase funding to Medicaid would further push low-income people into poverty and create sicker communities.<sup>11</sup> COVID-19 is still present and evolving. Considering the disparate impact infections and deaths have had on communities of color, cutting off access and funding to health care coverage when these communities need care would only increase existing health inequities. Furthermore, Medicaid work requirements that rely on false racist, sexist, and classist

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<sup>5</sup> Ladonna Pavetti et al., “Expanding Work Requirements Would Make it Harder for People to Meet Basic Needs,” CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES, Mar. 15, 2023, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/expanding-work-requirements-would-make-it-harder-for-people-to-meet>.

<sup>6</sup> Vina Smith-Ramakrishnan, “Working to Expand Doula Coverage This Black Maternal Health Week,” THE CENTURY FOUNDATION, Apr. 11, 2023, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/working-to-expand-doula-coverage-this-black-maternal-health-week/>.

<sup>7</sup> Latoya Hill et al., “Racial Disparities in Maternal and Infant Health: Current Status and Efforts to Address Them,” KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION, Nov. 1, 2022, <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/racial-disparities-in-maternal-and-infant-health-current-status-and-efforts-to-address-them/>.

<sup>8</sup> Zoya Wazir, “The Best and Worst States for Health Care Cost, Access and Outcomes,” U.S. NEWS, Aug. 4, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/the-best-and-worst-states-for-health-care>.

<sup>9</sup> WISE VOTER, Maternal Mortality Rate by State, <https://wisevoter.com/state-rankings/maternal-mortality-rate-by-state/#maternal-mortality-rate-by-state>.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Harker, “Closing the Coverage Gap a Critical Step to Advancing Health and Economic Justice,” CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES, Oct. 4, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/health/closing-the-coverage-gap-a-critical-step-for-advancing-health-and-economic-justice>.

<sup>11</sup> Karina Wagnerman, “Research Update: Medicaid Pulls American Out of Poverty, Updated Edition,” GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY HEALTH POLICY INSTITUTE: CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, Mar. 8, 2018, <https://ccf.georgetown.edu/2018/03/08/research-update-medicaid-pulls-americans-out-of-poverty-updated-edition/>.

assumptions that people receiving benefits do not work would simply eliminate coverage for a large population of people without any impact on the employment outcomes.<sup>12</sup> Instead, these cruel and unnecessary requirements would eliminate access to life-saving health care for the most vulnerable people, including people with disabilities and other serious health needs.<sup>13</sup> Congress must protect Medicaid funding and access, including blocking harmful Medicaid work requirements.

**TANF:** Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) provides cash support and services to families struggling to afford basic needs such as housing, clothing, and personal hygiene products such as diapers. Research shows that providing cash to families can positively impact children’s health and educational outcomes.<sup>14</sup> The TANF program is already severely limited with work requirements.<sup>15</sup> Increasing the administrative burdens created by paperwork and work requirements for families in need as proposed in the debt ceiling negotiations, could lead to 540,000 families with very low incomes, including approximately 1 million children, losing cash assistance.<sup>16</sup> And despite many eligible families living well below the poverty line needing this income support, the amount of TANF cash assistance provided is still not enough to meet the basic needs- with the average monthly cash benefit levels at or below 60% of the poverty line, and below 14% in Mississippi, for example.<sup>17</sup> The proposals to take away cash assistance from families living well below the poverty line would further place families at risk of hunger, homelessness, and involvement in the child welfare system.<sup>18</sup>

**NDD:** Non-defense discretionary (NDD) appropriations support a wide range of public services for low-income communities in the South, including housing, home energy assistance, education, childcare, health care food assistance, workforce training, rural development programs, and

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin D. Sommers *et al.*, “Medicaid Work Requirements – Results from the First Year in Arkansas,” *NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE*, Sept. 12, 2019, [https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMSr1901772?query=featured\\_home](https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMSr1901772?query=featured_home); Laura Harker, “Taking Medicaid Away for Not Meeting a Work-Reporting Requirement Would Keep People from Health Care,” *CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES*, Oct. 4, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/health/taking-medicaid-away-for-not-meeting-a-work-reporting-requirement-would-keep-people>.

<sup>13</sup> Ladonna Pavetti *et al.*, “Expanding Work Requirements Would Make it Harder for People to Meet Basic Needs,” *CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES*, Mar. 15, 2023, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/expanding-work-requirements-would-make-it-harder-for-people-to-meet>.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Barr *et al.*, Investing in Infants: the Lasting Effects of Cash Transfers to New Families, *THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ECONOMICS*, Nov. 2022, <https://academic.oup.com/qje/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/qje/qjac023/6571263?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>.

<sup>15</sup> Ladonna Pavetti, “TANF Studies Show Work Requirement Proposals for Other Programs Would Harm Millions, Do Little to Increase Work,” *CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES*, Nov. 13, 2018, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/tanf-studies-show-work-requirement-proposals-for-other-programs>.

<sup>16</sup> Aditi Shrivastava and Urvi Patel, TANF Provisions in House Republican Bill Could Increase Families’ Risk of Child Welfare Involvement, *CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES*, May 12, 2023, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/tanf-provisions-in-house-republican-bill-could-increase-families-risk-of-child-welfare>.

<sup>17</sup> Aditi Shrivastava and Gina Azito Thompson, “Mississippi Should Use TANF to Improve Financial Stability for Families Experiencing Poverty,” *CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES*, Oct. 7, 2022, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/mississippi-should-use-tanf-to-improve-financial-stability-for-families-experiencing-poverty>. In Mississippi a single-parent family of three with no other income receives \$260 a month in TANF assistance.

<sup>18</sup> Child and Family Well-being System: Economic & Concrete Supports as a Core Component, *CHAPIN HALL*, Mar. 2023, <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Economic-Supports-deck.pdf>.

more. For example, proposed cuts to Housing Choice Vouchers would raise housing costs for the estimated 16 million low-income households that rely on rental assistance programs. These programs help reduce homelessness and helps families move out of poverty and improve social determinants for health.<sup>19</sup> Nationwide, there is a severe shortage in affordable homes for renters with extremely low incomes, and Florida has the second highest number of extreme low-income renter households with severe cost burdens.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the attempts to slash Head Start and child care supports could jeopardize the education of approximately 200,000 children from low-income families and make it more difficult for parents to retain employment.<sup>21</sup> About one third of Head Start children attend programs located in Southern states.<sup>22</sup> And a higher percentage of Head start children in southern states are Black and in families with lower incomes than Head Start children nationwide. Also, the latest appropriation bill proposed a 12 percent to funding for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) would be devastating to the 5 million pregnant and postpartum participants and young children under 5 who need these funds to purchase food.<sup>23</sup> Four of our five focus states already have coverage rates below the state average, with Louisiana and Georgia having rates significantly lower.<sup>24</sup> Any cuts or caps to NDD on appropriations would cause significant harm to communities in the South already struggling to make ends meet.

Lastly, as Congress considers budget and debt ceiling legislation, it should maintain support to the COVID relief funds already promised to States that are still attempting to deliver much needed relief to individuals recovering from the devastating impacts of the pandemic.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns. We urge you to finalize a debt ceiling proposal that does not add new restrictions and does not renege on this country's commitments. Instead, it should bolster funding to critical federal income security programs that protect people from plunging deeper into poverty and reject cruel efforts to take away necessary support or impose harsh burdens on people who need assistance. Please contact our federal policy eradicating poverty team if you have any questions.

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<sup>19</sup> Will Fischer et al., "Research Shows Rental Assistance Reduces Hardship and Provides Platform to Expand Opportunities for Low-Income Families," CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES, Dec. 5, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/research-shows-rental-assistance-reduces-hardship-and-provides-platform-to-expand>.

<sup>20</sup> NATIONAL LOW INCOME HOUSING COALITION, The Gap, No State Has an Adequate Supply of Affordable Rental Housing for the Lowest Income Renters, <https://nlihc.org/gap>.

<sup>21</sup> Jordan Eizenga, "Failing to Raise the Debt Limit Would Harm the Poor and People of Color," CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS, Jul. 26, 2011, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/failing-to-raise-the-debt-limit-would-harm-the-poor-and-people-of-color/>.

<sup>22</sup> Christina A. Samuels, "Taking Stock of Head Start in Southern States," Education Week, Nov. 8, 2016, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/taking-stock-of-head-start-in-southern-states/2016/11>.

<sup>23</sup> Katie Bergh and Zoe Neuberger, "House Republicans' Agriculture Appropriations Bill Would Cut WIC Benefits for 5 Million Participants, Put SNAP Benefits at Risk for 1 Million Older Adults," CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES, May 23, 2023, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/house-republicans-agriculture-appropriations-bill-would-cut-wic-benefits>.

<sup>24</sup> USDA FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE, National and State Level Estimates of WIC Eligibility and Program Reach in 2020, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/eligibility-and-program-reach-estimates-2020>.

**SP ACTION  
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