

August 26, 2021

Dear Conference Committee Members,

On behalf of the Think Babies™ NC Alliance, we are writing to you today to urge your support for a strong final budget that invests in what all babies need to thrive: healthy beginnings, supported families, and quality early learning opportunities. When we Think Babies™ NC, we create stronger families, vibrant communities and a prosperous future for North Carolina.

The science is clear: our brains grow faster during the first three years than at any other time in life, developing one million neural connections every second. Early experiences matter. But the COVID-19 crisis has had a devastating impact on many of the support systems for our youngest children and has exacerbated the existing challenges and disparities faced by babies and families across the state. Their potential must be the top priority in our recovery, and beyond, in order to ensure that all babies have a strong foundation for success

We are thankful that both the House and Senate budgets recognize the importance of investing in our state's youngest citizens and their families. Each budget contains important priorities that we urge you to include in the final budget.

Invest in Healthy Beginnings

For babies, good physical and mental health provides the foundation to develop physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially. When children have good health in utero, good birth outcomes, and access to needed health services, they are more likely to have good physical health and on-track development during childhood and throughout life.

- **Extend postpartum coverage for new mothers.**

The postpartum period is one of the most essential in determining lifelong outcomes for both mothers and infants. Extending NC maternal Medicaid coverage for a full 12 months postpartum, as proposed in the Senate budget, can help prevent maternal and infant deaths by ensuring access to life-saving care and the services that help mom and baby thrive.

- **Close the health insurance coverage gap.**

Closing the health insurance coverage gap would provide parents and prospective parents the improved health and care they need to thrive, which in turn improves babies' health and development. North Carolina must develop a healthcare solution that meets the needs of over 100,000 parents and families who are uninsured by expanding access to affordable health insurance and closing the health insurance gap.

Invest in Supported Families

Young children develop in the context of their families and the connections they have with their communities. All families are stretched during this important time in their baby's development and many families don't have the necessary family and community support.

- **Expand access to home visiting and parent education services**

Home visiting and parent education programs strengthen the relationship between parents and children, improve health outcomes and children's development, and provide cost savings for the state on expensive social problems such as child abuse and maltreatment, unemployment, poverty and crime. Both the House and Senate Budgets

provide funding for Nurse-Family Partnership, the federal Maternal and Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, and Smart Start, so that local partnerships can support an array of home visiting and parenting education programs to meet community needs. Recurring funding is needed to ensure families are continuously supported through the most important time in young children's development

- **Include paid parental leave for K-12 employees**

Family-oriented workplace policies such as paid leave support parents in having the time needed to bond with their children and to care for themselves and their families. When parents don't have paid leave, they are often forced to choose between taking unpaid leave that they can't afford or leaving their employment to stay home to care for their babies. The House budget extends paid parental leave to K-12 public school employees, which is an excellent recruitment and retention strategy that supports babies and parents at the same time.

Invest in Early Learning Opportunities for Babies

Children's development and learning in the first few years lay the foundation for all of the years that follow. Children who attend high-quality early education programs are better prepared for success in school, but too many parents don't have access to affordable or available infant-toddler child care.

- **Expand child care subsidy assistance for working families.**

Of the nearly 20,000 children of working parents on the child care subsidy wait list, more than half are babies, ages 0 to 3. The House budget includes over \$200 million for Child Care Subsidy Assistance for working families and \$30 million to waive parent co-payment fees through December 2021. The Senate budget designates funding for child care subsidy assistance and family co-pays as well but doesn't specify specific amounts.

- **Invest in the early childhood workforce and expand Child Care WAGE\$ statewide.**

Child care programs are struggling to attract and retain qualified early education teachers, and low compensation is the number one reason why early educators are leaving to work in public education, retail, and the fast food industry, all of which pay higher wages. The House budget includes \$35 million for the Child Care WAGE\$ program to support the retention, education and compensation of qualified child care teachers. This investment will make this evidence-based program available in all 100 counties to help address the workforce crisis and increase access to infant-toddler child care across the state.

The Think Babies™ NC Alliance urges you to make infants and toddlers a top priority in the final budget. Babies can't wait, and neither can we. When we support our youngest children in having the opportunity to fulfill their potential, we create the best outcomes in health, education, and economic well-being for everyone in North Carolina.

For more information about Think Babies™ NC, please visit www.ThinkBabiesNC.org or contact Angela Burch-Octetree, Think Babies™ NC Project Manager, at info@thinkbabies.org.

Sincerely,
The Think Babies™ NC Alliance