

September 11, 2024

The Honorable Vivek Murthy
Surgeon General
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Surgeon General Murthy:

I read your office's recent public advisory on parental wellbeing with great interest.¹ The advisory correctly warns that today's American parents are facing alarming levels of stress as they seek to balance a growing list of demands at home and in the workplace. However, I am concerned that the advisory mischaracterizes and ignores the root causes of the obstacles facing today's parents and promotes "solutions" that could actually worsen parental stress. I write to remind you of a few time-tested principles that must anchor any successful strategy for policymakers to bring meaningful support and relief to American families.

First, policymakers across the political spectrum agree that federal support for families should increase, but what your public advisory woefully misses is that parents strongly desire *flexible* support, particularly as they navigate the difficult choice between spending more time with their children at home versus more hours at work. Rather than helping parents and families flourish in the unique work-parenting arrangement that works best for their family unit, your advisory promotes one-size-fits-all federal solutions that could *increase* parental stress, such as a universal childcare program run by Federal bureaucrats.

Parents are in a difficult spot. On the one hand, the erosion of community institutions means that many parents lack the strong social networks that past generations relied on to share the work of raising children. At the same time, inflation and stagnating wages have made it more difficult for families to cover the essentials with one paycheck,² and a culture of "careerism" pressures many parents to prioritize career advancement over spending additional time with their children. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to help families navigate growing demands on their time from employers. That's why policymakers must focus on delivering *flexible* relief to families. Unfortunately, the left's go-to policy solutions woefully miss the mark. The Biden-Harris Administration has advocated massive subsidies for professional center-based childcare, while offering no support to parents who prefer other arrangements. This places substantial pressure on families to place their children in formal, third-party daycare centers,

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/parents/index.html>

² <https://americancompass.org/2023-cost-of-thriving-index/>

despite the fact that polling shows most working families prefer informal childcare arrangements.³

There is a better approach to supporting families. It starts with tackling the runaway costs of essentials—housing, groceries, energy, and healthcare—that were created by the Biden-Harris Administration’s reckless spending agenda. Delivering significant tax relief to working families will build on this effort and further ease the cost of essentials. For years, I have fought to dramatically increase the child tax credit, from \$2,000 per child to at least \$3,500 per child, and \$4,500 for young children. Lastly, federal policymakers shouldn’t just lower childcare prices by increasing federal funding for childcare, we must also reform Federal childcare programs—notably, the Child Care and Development Block Grant—to increase families’ childcare options and respect the childcare choices of parents. Your advisory correctly notes that the work of raising a child is a “sacred work.” A policy agenda to help parents should be respectful of that sacred role.

Second, your advisory is almost completely silent on one of the most consequential factors leading to higher levels of parental stress and adversity today: family instability. We should support all families, but policymakers shouldn’t be shy about recognizing that, time and time again, research shows that both children and parents are far more likely to thrive when a family is anchored by two married parents.⁴ Sadly, over the past fifty years, a diminishing share of American families is anchored in marriage, increasing the risk of stress, financial instability, health complications, and many other challenges.⁵

It is common sense for federal policymakers to incentivize and reward two-parent homes instead of punishing them through higher taxes and marriage penalties in our means-tested welfare programs. It is also common sense for policymakers to stop the generational challenge of family instability by sharing factual data with young people that describes how different family formation decisions will influence outcomes later in life. Yet, for some bizarre reason, your advisory minimizes the important role family structure plays in family wellbeing, and it completely ignores important policy implications, such as educational strategies to help young people form strong and stable families.

Finally, rising levels of parental stress are deeply concerning, but we should not allow the work of supporting parents to contribute to a pervasive—and inaccurate—narrative that parenthood isn’t worth it. Parents are dealing with unique and serious challenges, but it is also true that parents, particularly married parents, report much higher levels of happiness, meaning, and social connection than other adults. In fact, according to the 2023 General Social Survey, married parents were nearly twice as likely to say they were “very happy” compared to unmarried adults without children.⁶ This is an important distinction—many young people are

³ https://americancompass.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/American-Compass_2021-Home-Building-Survey_Final.pdf

⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rebalancing-children-first/>;
<https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/10/family-structure-matters-w-bradford-wilcox/>

⁵ <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-resurgence-of-the-two-parent-family#:~:text=The%20latest%20readings%20from%20the,slightly%20to%20under%204%20percent.>

⁶ <https://ifstudies.org/blog/who-is-happiest-married-mothers-and-fathers-per-the-latest-general-social-survey>

delaying crucial steps of family formation because they read news headlines that shout the difficulties of parenting without doing justice to the deep wells of meaning and fulfillment that come with shepherding a child into the world. As we work diligently to support parents in their vital work raising the next generation, it is equally important that we share a holistic view of parenting with the public—both its challenges and rewards.

Family is the cornerstone of every culture and society. Strong families made it possible for America to grow into the freest, most prosperous, and most influential nation in all of human history. Years of negligence have caused policymakers to pass laws and regulations that discourage family formation, penalize healthy families, heighten challenges related to work-life balance, and make it harder for working parents to provide the necessities for their children's wellbeing. I have argued that policymakers need to pay more attention to how the laws and regulations we create in Washington impact the everyday lives of families in this country.

As you work to address the alarming levels of stress American parents are experiencing today, I urge you to refocus on efforts that will deliver meaningful and flexible supports to families, illuminate the important role family structure plays in mediating family wellbeing, and offer a complete picture of parenthood to the public.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. Rubio', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator