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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

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**Statement of Congressman Chaka Fattah before the Income Security
and Family Support Subcommittee**

Wednesday, February 27, 2008

Chairman McDermott, Congressman Weller and Members of the Subcommittee: I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today about an issue that has been near and dear to my heart for a long time. I also want to commend you for focusing the attention of this important committee on those children who are most often forgotten and most in need of remembering.

While our children have always been the most vulnerable members of our society, those who have suffered abuse or neglect or who, for other reasons, lack the protection and security of parents, are truly the most vulnerable of us all.

Growing up in West Philadelphia, my mother instilled in me an unshakeable belief in the ability of children to rise of above their circumstances and of adults to help them reach their potential. In 1969, Philadelphia was known not as the City of Brotherly Love, but as the gang capital of the United States. Outraged at violence and chaos that claimed the lives of our family and friends, my mother and father sought answers. In the course of their investigation, they discovered that their own child, my brother, had taken up this

disastrous way of life. Knowing they had no choice but to save the life of their child, they did what few parents would do.

Taking a bold step, they invited the gang to become a part of their family. This one action grew into a larger cause. With a promise to keep these boys alive and out of jail, the Fattah home became the House of UMOJA Boys Town, a foster home for young men in Philadelphia who had no where else to go.

My first experience as a foster brother to so many children increased my resolve to fight on behalf of my brothers and sisters in Philadelphia, Harrisburg and now Washington, DC. I commend the work of this committee and the legislation currently under consideration for recognizing that every child deserves a family, and that we all benefit when the system works.

Last fall I was approached by Christine James-Brown of the Child Welfare League of America. A friend of mine from her days with United Way in Philadelphia, she asked me to take up of the cause of reconvening the White House Conference on Children and Youth.

This conference, first held in 1909 at the call of President Theodore Roosevelt under the title “White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children,” was designed to raise public awareness and address children’s issues applicable to the time, including the deleterious effects of institutionalizing dependent and neglected children. In addition to

the creation of the Children's Bureau, the Conference also led to the establishment of a foster care program, regular state inspections of foster care homes, and education and medical services for children in foster care.

Subsequent conferences held in 1919, 1930, and 1939 stimulated improvements in state regulation of child labor and health standards for the treatment of pregnant women.

Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1950 and 1960 articulated the need for a stronger, long-term educational program for children that developed well-rounded citizens, and the 1970 conference sought to “enhance and cherish the individuality and identity of each American child through the recognition and encouragement of his or her own development.” Since then, while Presidents have arranged small, limited conferences held in Washington and around the country, no large-scale, formal conferences on children have been held. We now have the opportunity to continue the work begun in the first seven decades of the last century.

Together with your colleague, Congressman Jon Porter, I have introduced a bill, H.R. 5461, calling for a White House Conference on Children and Youth in 2010. As with previous White House Conferences on Children and the recent White House Conference on Aging, this conference would be the culmination of small events and conferences held throughout the states.

In order to guide the work of the conference, the next President, the House and the Senate will share responsibility for appointing members to a Policy Committee. This Policy Committee will work with the next Secretary of Health and Human Services to create an agenda for the conference, establish a method for selecting delegates and develop any needed advisory committees. Delegates will include state and tribal directors of child welfare systems, members of state and local judicial systems, state and local elected officials, providers, advocates, experts in the field and children and families involved in the child welfare system.

Following the conference, the Secretary, along with the Policy Committee, will prepare a final report including a statement of comprehensive coherent national policy on State child and welfare systems, including the courts, and offer recommendations for the implementation of the policy. This report will be submitted to the public and state officials for their views.

The next President will face many challenges. The beginning of a new administration, however, provides a unique opportunity to direct the attention of the nation towards promoting proven solutions and refining those that have not worked to ensure that our children are being well served. While every child represents the future of the country and deserves the support and security of a caring family, we know that this basic need is uncertain for almost a million children.

This committee currently has legislation under consideration that would address many of the issues troubling our current child welfare system, including the necessity of strengthening families and reducing the need for foster care, ensuring that all children are covered by necessary funding and healthcare, improving the child welfare workforce, supporting kinship guardianship, and promoting permanency. Our colleagues have also undertaken important work on children's health insurance, college education and Head Start.

Last spring, Speaker Pelosi recognized the important role our youngest citizens play when she convened a National Summit on America's Children. I was honored to join Chairman George Miller and Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro in co-chairing that event. We heard from many excellent speakers who demonstrated the crucial role that a child's earliest experiences play in brain development and forming future adults.

Surely we as a Congress have demonstrated both our interest and intent where children are concerned. This White House Conference on Children and Youth would provide an opportunity for us to come together as a nation to direct that interest and intent, fueled by knowledge and experience in the field, towards a comprehensive agenda focused on children and the future of America.

I appreciate the opportunity to come before you this morning, and look forward to the work ahead.