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March 5, 2025

Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.,

Following your confirmation by the Senate and your swearing in as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the Children's Hospital Association (CHA) looks forward to collaborating with you on areas of shared interest. On behalf of more than 200 children's hospitals and the children and families we serve, we anticipate working together on policies that will address the rise of chronic childhood illnesses, improve children's physical and mental health, cut red tape to ensure children get the quality care they need when they need it, guarantee children's hospitals and providers have resources to take care of their patients, and enhance health outcomes for children by advancing transformational research and leveraging cutting-edge technology. In light of the President's recent executive order creating the "Make America Health Again" commission, we would like to offer our support and input as you pursue the goal of eradicating chronic childhood illnesses.

Every American child is entitled to a safe and healthy childhood. Achieving this means ensuring access to nutritious food, preventive care, and specialized treatment when necessary. As part of this vision, we support a food-as-medicine approach, guaranteeing that all children have access to the nutrient-dense food they need to thrive and lead healthy lives. Medicaid is the foundation for providing various types of preventive and specialty care and offers essential health care coverage to 37 million children, including coverage for almost half of all U.S. children with special health care needs and three million children in military-connected families. In 2023, 40.6% of children in small towns and rural areas were enrolled in Medicaid. On average, Medicaid covers over half of all inpatient days and emergency visits at children's hospitals. Medicaid support is vital to children's hospitals' ability to provide care to every child who needs it and helps kids grow into healthy and productive adults. We look forward to working with you to strengthen and improve the program while preserving access to care for children.

While mental and behavioral health conditions can and do occur at any age, children and youth are uniquely vulnerable. As America's children face a surge in mental health crises, children's hospitals are seeing the impact every day through a steep rise in the number of emergency department and inpatient visits for suicidal thoughts or self-harm, and many of these children wait long periods of time to access needed mental health care. In the last year, 29% of adolescents reported poor mental health, and one in five reported having seriously contemplated suicide. The kids' mental health crisis has also caused an increase in boarding in children's hospitals. Compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, 84% of hospitals are boarding more youth patients and 75% report longer boarding stays.

We hope to join forces to reverse this trend, expand access to pediatric mental health treatment, and invest in prevention, treatment, safety, and quality improvements to ensure children grow up healthier and develop the skills they need to have successful and fulfilling lives. Ensuring optimal nutrition for neurodevelopment and lifelong mental health is essential. Additionally, extending telehealth flexibilities and supporting mental health crisis services and suicide prevention are crucial to addressing the unique needs of children and teens to reach them where they are. States must be given more opportunities to create early intervention and prevention resources while increasing grants for health care providers to improve integration and coordination of pediatric behavioral health and substance use disorder treatment for children with more intense needs.

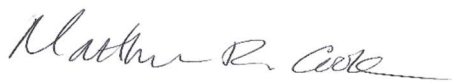
Champions for Children's Health

Children's hospitals are at the core of the health care delivery system, bringing together teams of specialists to provide care not available in any other setting. For children with complex medical needs, this highly specialized care is regionalized and not necessarily available in every state or community, necessitating families to travel from home, sometimes long distances, to seek care for their children. In pediatrics, provider shortages are more prevalent among those who provide specialized care, such as neurologists, rheumatologists, developmental pediatricians, pediatric advanced practice nurses, acute care nurses, and pediatric medical tech professionals. Supporting robust federal programs like the Children's Hospital Graduate Medical Education Program (CHGME), which focuses on training pediatricians and pediatric specialists, is critical to providing care to children, including those in rural and underserved communities. We urge your department to invest in the pipeline of hospital-based pediatric nurses and other clinicians, as well as recruitment, training, and retraining programs.

Furthermore, children's hospitals across the United States are using emerging technology and artificial intelligence (AI) tools to improve health outcomes and patient experiences. AI has the potential to help providers produce better health outcomes and deliver more efficient care delivery for pediatric patients. Various AI tools can streamline administrative tasks, improve diagnostic accuracy, and support personalized treatments. However, AI in health care poses unique considerations for children as it relates to the lack of data availability, data use consent, and data complexity. We ask you to carefully consider the implications of emerging technology in the health care space and ensure children's hospitals can leverage our expertise and efforts to ensure that AI can improve patient care for children.

We look forward to partnering with you to advance children's health, implement policies that enhance the well-being of children across the United States, and support the providers who care for them. Thank you for your attention to these vital issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew R. Cook". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Matthew Cook
President and Chief Executive Officer
Children's Hospital Association