



February 11, 2009

Re: Conference on American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)

Dear Conferees:

The Friends of NCHS strongly urge you to preserve \$40 million for the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) included in the House-passed version of ARRA, as well as other funding provided for Prevention and Wellness activities (\$3 billion). We were extremely disappointed that the Senate's amended version of ARRA eliminated this critical public health funding in its entirety, especially the funding provided to NCHS to support states as they upgrade their primitive and vulnerable paper-based vital statistics systems.

Years of underinvestment have forced NCHS to undermine, eliminate, or further postpone the collection of critical health information to the point where key data users now question whether NCHS itself is in good health. The \$40 million in one-time, short-term funding provided by the House would help NCHS address critical needs for activities that have been on hold or curtailed because of budget constraints. Specifically, NCHS could modernize the national vital statistics infrastructure so that all states collect vital statistics data using the enhanced 2003 birth and death certificates, and all states collect these data electronically. Today only about half of the states and territories use the 2003 birth or death certificates to collect enhanced vital statistics; fewer jurisdictions collect both and only about half do so electronically.

Modernizing the national vital statistics system with this bolus funding will improve data quality, efficiency, and interoperability and create up to 200 "shovel ready" jobs in the states and private sector. Without this bolus funding, as many as 150 state public health professionals could lose their jobs, adding to the more than 11,000 public health jobs that were eliminated last year at the state and local level. States rely on the funding provided by NCHS to support and sustain the staff required to collect and validate vital statistics records. Without immediate relief, these jobs may be curtailed and critical data on American births and deaths may be compromised. These cuts would have serious implications for federal, state, and local health planning and service delivery and even homeland security.

At a time when both the new administration and Members of Congress are considering major health reform, the data NCHS collects are needed now more than ever to track Americans' health and evaluate our progress improving it. The \$40 million provided

through ARRA would ensure that NCHS is able to continue uninterrupted collection of vital statistics through the states, restore other important data collection and analysis initiatives, and modernize its infrastructure. Please know that the Friends of NCHS and our grassroots partners stand ready to support you in securing \$40 million for NCHS in ARRA.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Friends' representative, David Helms, President & CEO of the Coalition for Health Services Research (202.292.6700 or david.helms@academyhealth.org) if you have questions.

The Friends of the NCHS is a coalition of organizations of over 150 organizations that want to ensure the agency's continued vital role in monitoring our nation's health. For a complete list of our membership, please visit <http://www.chsr.org/friendsfnchslist.htm>.