March 12, 2018

Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman
Senate Appropriations Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Patrick Leahy, Vice Chairman
Senate Appropriations Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Roy Blunt, Chairman
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Patty Murray, Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen Cochran and Blunt and Senators Leahy and Murray:

On behalf of the Big Cities Health Coalition (BCHC), I write to urge you to enact final, omnibus spending legislation for FY2018 that includes all spending bills, especially the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Bill (Labor-HHS).

As the largest of the nondefense discretionary spending bills, which touches so many Americans, the Labor-HHS bill should have an increase in its allocation proportional to its size and scope of impact, include all funding available through budgetary savings in mandatory programs, and be free of ideological policy riders that undermine efforts to protect and improve public health. BCHC is comprised of the health officials leading 30 of the nation’s largest metropolitan public health departments, which together represent more than 55 million—or one in six—Americans.

In particular, local health departments are anxious to see a continuation of funding for the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program (TPPP), which has shown impressive results in bringing down teen pregnancy rates. Since its inception, TPPP has been grounded in evidence-based research and provides important funding to diverse organizations working to prevent teen pregnancy in the U.S. It funds both the implementation and evaluation of new and innovative approaches to reduce teen pregnancy. While there has been a significant decline in these rates in the U.S. to about 20.3 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 in 2016, this rate is still substantially higher than other industrialized nations. Additionally, racial/ethnic and geographic disparities in teen birth rates persist and need to be addressed to make sure all teens have a chance for a healthy start to their adult lives. Ending what was intended to be five year TPPP grants two years early, the Administration abruptly disrupted ongoing work in localities across the country. Congress should reverse this action without delay and instruct the Administration to keep the program whole.

BCHC also calls on Congress to continue to address the ongoing public health emergency of the opioid epidemic, in particular, by funding those on the front lines—local public health departments. While the $6 billion for opioids included in the recent Bipartisan Budget Act is a big step forward, as you consider the appropriation of additional funding aimed at combatting the nation’s opioid epidemic, we ask you to support a comprehensive public health response by providing $500 million in FY2018 and the same or greater amount in FY2019 in additional funding to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for opioid overdose prevention efforts.
These funds would allow the CDC and state, local, territorial, and tribal health departments in communities across the country to: (1) Improve Monitoring and Surveillance of Opioid Use and Misuse; (2) Expand and Strengthen Evidence-Based Prevention and Education Strategies to Slow the Epidemic; and (2) Manage Appropriate Access to Opioids. Many BCHC health departments are already doing such activity without any dedicated funding, which is not sustainable or practical.

Finally, the longer HHS goes without clear policy direction from Congress about important public health priorities, the more concerned we become that ongoing funding to public health emergency preparedness, immunization, and other critical funding that is needed to protect communities will be at risk.

Please contact me (cjuliano@naccho.org) should you have any questions or wish to discuss these issues further.

Sincerely,

Chrissie Juliano, MPP
Director, Big Cities Health Coalition