December 27, 2012

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20501

Dear Vice President Biden:

As organizations representing the nation's pediatricians, we write to respectfully offer recommendations in response to the tragic school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. Our members work on a daily basis to improve the lives of children by conducting pediatric research, treating children in the clinical setting, and educating the next generation of pediatricians. This unspeakable tragedy that resulted in the loss of twenty-six—twenty young children and six educators—must focus our nation more than ever on the need to protect the health and safety of children.

Perhaps the most important test of any society is how well it takes care of its youngest members. Not only did our nation fail the families of Newtown, Connecticut, but every day across the country we fail families who fall victim to gun violence. Firearm-related deaths are among the top three causes of death among youth in the United States. A concerted national effort is required to change this frightening statistic. We believe there are three primary areas of focus that must be prioritized in our national response: firearm safety, the culture of violence, and mental health care. In each of these important areas, both policy reforms and investments in research will be necessary components of any resulting action plan.

Pediatricians must continue their work to counsel parents about the importance of gun safety in the home, but broad policy change must accompany these efforts. Addressing the availability and ubiquity of guns in the United States, especially those that are capable of inflicting mass casualties, must be a central goal of the strategy to reduce firearm deaths. Our organizations support the American Academy of Pediatrics' 2012 policy statement on firearm-related injuries which concludes that "the absence of guns from children's homes and communities is the most reliable and effective measure to prevent firearm-related injuries in children and adolescents." There is no evidence to support, as some suggest, that the increased availability of guns would effectively reduce firearm deaths in schools or elsewhere in our communities. At a minimum, urgent action must be taken to eliminate the availability of assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition clips.

In addition, we must renew efforts to apply science to gun safety. Funding for firearms-related research at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have been subject to both budget cuts and legislative restrictions. It is time that we prioritize evidence-based strategies to prevent firearm deaths and invest federal funds in firearm research without political interference. We call on Congress to immediately reverse all existing statutory bans on firearm-related research and to embark on a wide-ranging effort to fund effective gun-related research, including the collection and publication of data on gun violence.

Our children grow up in a culture of violence. Since we know that youth ages 8-18 spend on average more than 6 hours per day viewing entertainment media, we can be left with no doubt that what they view matters. Children are exposed to violent images through films, television, the internet, and video games. This exposure can lead to desensitization to violence and aggressive behavior. We must reevaluate as a society how media

influences our children and take action to promote content that supports, rather than hinders, healthy social development. We also need to conduct more research to better understand precisely how media impacts the development and well-being of children and the role it plays in encouraging violent incidents like the Connecticut shooting.

Lastly, we can no longer avoid making mental health a top-tier public health priority. Numerous school shootings have been committed by adolescents suffering from mental health conditions. While we need to improve the identification of mental illness, too many adolescents with known mental health conditions do not receive appropriate mental health services, either because of the continuing stigma associated with mental health or other barriers to access and treatment. In many communities these services either do not exist or are in short supply. When services are available, inadequate insurance coverage and high out-of-pocket costs serve as a barrier to access. We as a nation must stop undervaluing mental health care by providing the necessary resources to improve utilization and increase research into the causes of and effective treatments for mental health conditions in childhood and adolescence.

We appreciate your work to address both this grave national tragedy and tragic consequences of gun violence across the United States. Thank you for your dedication to the safety and well-being of children. Our groups look forward to assisting in your efforts in any way we can. You can reach us in response to this letter by contacting Mark Del Monte at 202.347.8600.

Sincerely,

David Jaffe, MD
President
Academic Pediatric Association

Thomas K. McInerny, MD
President
American Academy of Pediatrics

David G. Nichols, MD
President
American Board of Pediatrics

Barbara J. Stoll, MD
President
American Pediatric Society

Joseph T. Flynn, MD
President
American Society of Pediatric Nephrology

Alan R. Cohen, MD
President
Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs

Patricia Hicks, MD
President
Association of Pediatric Program Directors

Richard Mink, MD
President
Council of Pediatric Subspecialties

Theodore C. Sectish, MD
Executive Director
Federation of Pediatric Organizations

R.L. Bucciarelli, MD
Chair
Public Policy Council

Howard Dubowitz, MD, MS
President
Ray Helfer Society

John Santelli, MD, MPH
President
Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine

Michelle M. Macias, MD
President
Society for Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics

David A. Ingram, MD
President
Society for Pediatric Research