

Hello everyone,

Alicia Manzano, Outreach Director of NM Voices for Children, asked the crowd in the Rotunda of the Roundhouse in Santa Fe, "When do we need to invest in children and youth?" "NOW!" was the resounding answer. It was loud in part because people, seated and standing, crowded the Rotunda on the first day of the legislative session today. Alicia, the emcee for a "Celebrating NM's Children and Youth Day" press conference, played off the youths against the parents in the Rotunda to see who could be loudest. The event, sponsored by many children and youth organizations, included tables displaying information about a great variety of children's programs.

The press conference included release of the 2011 KIDS COUNT report on the State of the Children in New Mexico. (Later in the day, Gov. Susana Martinez was scheduled to deliver her State of the State address to legislators and others.) Draped behind the podium was a large paper chain with parents and educators hopes and dreams for children written on them, demonstrating links to the future (and links with each other).

Christine Hollis, KIDS COUNT director at Voices, said the report takes a look at how kids in New Mexico are doing after what she called the nGreat Recession. "What is most disturbing to me is that national KIDS COUNT consistently ranks New Mexico in the bottom five of states in children's welfare The Great Recession has just made this worse."

More than half of the children in the state live in poverty or in low-income families, she said, and one in three children lives in a family in which no adult has had full-time, year-round employment. The number of homeless children has doubled since 2007, she said. New Mexico used to rank 49th among states in the percent of third-graders reading proficiently. "Guess where we are now? We are 50th," she said. Almost one-third of children in New Mexico don't graduate from high school.

Alicia called on four young people to tell stories about how children are doing in their own hometowns around the state:

--Shawnti Gonzalez of Espanola: "How can we have positive, healthy places if New Mexico is No. 3 in the column for the cost of underage drinking?" Her home county ranks as among the counties with the fewest resources for supporting children's well-being, she said. She called on legislators and community members to work together to tackle unplanned pregnancies, academic failure and underage drinking.

--Devante Watson, a senior at Volcano Vista in Albuquerque, called for more youth enrichment programs, drug and gang prevention programs, well-care education and other ways to interest young people in school. "By designing more challenging curriculum, more students will feel a need to apply themselves and prepare themselves for post-secondary work, whether academic or trade." He said when he started high school he was unaware of the importance of diet and exercise and weighed 210 pounds. Now he is a trim 135 pounds. "By applying myself to healthy activities, I am a visual example of what such (health) programs can do."

--Idalia Martinez of Vado, NM, in Dona Ana County called attention to the fact that only 76% of children graduate from high school in her county. "Hispanics have a lower graduation rate than whites," she said. Teen pregnancy is a matter of great concern, and New Mexico is No. 2 among states in teen pregnancy, she said. "Only 15% of babies (and their parents) get home visitor visits in our county," she said. When she talked about controversy over limiting birth control availability, she asked, "Shouldn't the state offer mandatory sex education at the sixth grade or earlier?" She added that it is also important for families to have access to quality child care programs.

--Richard Arkie of Laguna Middle School said that almost half of the third-graders in Cibola County cannot read at grade level. "That means they will not get good jobs in the future," he said. With only a high school degree or less, children will earn less money and face more unemployment, he said. "We need after-school programs to help with academic and social skills and behavioral health programs that are located nearby."

The KIDS COUNT report will be made available on the NM Voices for Children web site today, along with a report about home visiting in New Mexico, showing that there are 53 home visiting programs in the state, and that 16% of families with newborns are served. The report ranks the counties by their "child-raising vulnerability factors" such as extent of poverty and percent of single-parent families. The percent of newborns whose families are served by home visiting varies dramatically from 75% in San Juan County, for instance, to 4% in Bernalillo County, 1% in Valencia County, and 71% in Cibola County.

"More extensive, high-quality home visiting programs -- as part of a comprehensive Early Childhood Education system -- can contribute greatly to improving education, health, and economic outcomes of New Mexico's children," the report concludes. The report offers stories about particular visits to homes to show what the work involves, too.

Many parents, youths and early childhood educators were walking through the halls of the Roundhouse on Tuesday talking with legislators about the importance of increased support for school-based health programs, after-school programs, child care assistance, support for scholarships and other quality programs for child care and home visiting.

The Second Annual Public Policy and Parent Leadership Institute was held on Monday at United Church of Santa Fe to help people practice advocating for young children and to get clearer on the issues in this legislative session. The institute was sponsored by the NM Head Start Association, the NM Association for the Education of Young Children, the NM Early Care and Education Association, the NM Early Care and Learning Association. The large paper chain was made in part at the institute. Head Start programs also brought paper chains that children made from construction paper and those were draped over one side of the Rotunda as well.

PHOTOS BELOW (top row, left to right) Shawnti Martinez of Espanola; Devante Watson of Albuquerque; and Idalia Martinez of Vado. (second row, left to right) Richard Arkie of Laguna Pueblo; Jessica Fulton and Alicia Manzano, both of Voices, get ready for press conference.

(third row, left to right) crowd awaits start of press conference; Connie Sifuentes, who works as a family intervention specialist at Gadsden Independent School District, and Sha Marie Van Hecke, an NM PreK teacher at Helen Cordero Elementary at Albuquerque Public Schools, talk Monday at the Public Policy Institute as they create links for the paper chain in the Rotunda.





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