

## My Turn

# There are better ways to 'pull together' for New Mexico's impoverished kids

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Back in 2013 when New Mexico fell to 50th in the nation for child well-being, advocates hoped that the state's policy-makers and administrators would finally rally together and take up the cause of improving child well-being in a concerted manner. We hoped the state would launch a comprehensive plan to ensure that our impoverished children have all of the opportunities, supports and protections that middle- and upper-income children have and that give them the best shot at becoming successful adults.

Nearly three years later the state has launched PullTogether — a campaign seeking to “make New Mexico the best place to be a kid.” The campaign — the crown jewel of which is a website — most definitely is not the comprehensive plan we had hoped for. What it appears to be is a \$2.7 million public relations campaign to deflect attention from the fact that things have not improved for New Mexico's low-income children.

There are several reasons PullTogether falls short as a plan to improve child well-being. A major one is that the campaign barely scratches the surface of what it means to live in poverty. The programs you can find out about on the website—namely home visiting services that help new parents navigate childrearing, and child care assistance for low-income parents who work or attend school — are certainly necessary and need to be made more available. But poverty is a complex issue with multiple causes that disadvantage families in many different ways.

Poverty and education are paired in a grim dance: Lower levels of education in adults lead to poverty, and poverty leads to lower levels of education for their kids. The less education you have the more likely you are to be unemployed or incarcerated, and the less likely you are to have safe housing, health insurance, access to affordable credit and countless other support systems that middle America takes for granted. What's more, the choices we make as individuals are limited by the options that are available to us. Many middle- class options for improving your lot in life are simply not available to low-income families.

Because poverty has multiple causes and tends to be generational, we must address it by meeting the needs of the family as a whole. This is called a two-generation approach, and it does more than ensure that children are fed and safe. It also gives parents the tools they need to better their own situations — whether that means access to job training and further education or health care to deal with substance abuse problems or chronic illness.

There are several programs to help families work their way out of poverty — food and health care benefits, job training and adult education, to name just a few. Unfortunately, programs

are housed in different agencies, eligibility is different for each one, and the application processes are unnecessarily complicated. Low-income families — especially those with low levels of education and literacy — may lack the skills needed to navigate these programs. What's more, the programs that are run on state money are grossly underfunded.

Take home visiting, for example. Home visiting is one of the most effective two-generation programs around, as it improves outcomes for children and their parents. It also prevents child abuse. It is one of the programs you can find out about on the PullTogether website, but just 4 percent of New Mexico's babies receive these state-funded services — despite the fact that more than 30 percent of them live in poverty. For years, advocates have pushed the Legislature to increase funding for home visiting by investing a tiny fraction of our \$14 billion Land Grant Permanent Fund, but to no avail. To its credit, the Legislature has appropriated money for home visiting in the Medicaid budget, which would have enabled the state to receive a big influx of federal dollars, but Gov. Susana Martinez has vetoed it.

Here's an idea: have Martinez pull together with her fellow New Mexicans by encouraging the Legislature to let the voters decide on the Permanent Fund initiative, allowing the state to draw down more federal funding for home visiting, and directing the non-functioning Children's Cabinet to better align services for struggling families. The Children's Cabinet has a flashy website too — and it even includes information about many more programs for families — but that website hasn't made New Mexico “the best place to be a kid” either.

*Garcia is the executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children — a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization advocating for policies to improve the health and well-being of New Mexico's children, families and communities.*



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