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Poverty in N.M. Backdrop for Debate

By Barry Massey

The Associated Press

POJOAQUE PUEBLO— As a self-described "struggling single mom," Barbara Berger offered some advice to Democratic presidential candidates who debated Thursday in New Mexico: Focus on school kids and health care. "For as rich as a country it is, it's really sad that there are so many people that have to struggle," says Berger, 51, a Democrat who backed Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader in 2000.

Berger isn't the only New Mexican likely to be paying special attention to the candidates' ideas on domestic issues.

New Mexico, in fact, offers a fitting backdrop for such discussion: By many social and economic indicators, the state is among the most troubled places in the nation.

Consider the fact that New Mexico ranks:

- As the nation's poorest state, with 19 percent of its population living below the poverty level in 1999-2001, according to the Census Bureau. The rate of child poverty is even higher, with one in four New Mexicans 18 and under living in poverty in 2000.

- Second highest in the share of population without health insurance. One in five residents were uninsured in 2000-2001, according to the Census Bureau.

- Second worst nationally in the rate of teenage deaths by accident, suicide and murder. There were 88 deaths in 2000 for every 100,000 New Mexicans ages 15-19, according to the latest Kids Count report.

- Seventh highest in the rate of high school dropouts. Slightly more than 12 percent of those 16-19 were dropouts, according to the 2000 Census.

Despite those numbers, Democratic Gov. Bill Richardson, who lobbied the Democratic National Committee to bring the debate to New Mexico, hopes the national attention will reflect positively on New Mexico and the West.

Richardson has been mentioned as a possible vice presidential contender, although he maintains he's not interested in national office.

"This debate should highlight the challenges we face on issues of water, energy, economic development, education and health care," says Richardson, a former congressman and Cabinet member in the Clinton administration.

Berger, as the mother of a 7-year-old, wants the next president to place a priority on improving education and expanding access to affordable health care. She recently moved to a mobile home on the pueblo because she considers the public schools better than in a neighboring community where she lived.

Health care for her daughter is provided through Medicaid, a federally and state financed program that covers children in New Mexico in families earning up to 235 percent of the federal poverty

level— about \$28,000 for a family of two.

Berger is shopping for medical insurance for herself. Coverage from a previous employer will expire in November, and Berger is finding it difficult to get affordable insurance because she has a history of skin cancer. She works 32 hours a week as director of an adult literacy center in Española. She's the only full-time employee.

Kelly O'Donnell, research director of an Albuquerque-based advocacy group, **New Mexico Voices for Children**, says the candidates and elected officials should concentrate on reducing poverty.

"You can try and insure kids. You can try and do public health outreach and you can try and do interventions in the schools to reduce dropouts and violence. But until you address the underlying issue, which in my opinion is poverty, you're not going to make any lasting impact," says O'Donnell. "You may have a short-time improvement, but it's going to fall back to that really low baseline."