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Private sector must help solve border poverty

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Editorial

The report issued last by the group New Mexico Voices for Children confirmed what most of us already knew — poverty is greater among Hispanic families living in border communities than it is among Anglo families, and is more rampant in border counties than in the rest of the state.

The report, based on census figures, showed that 40 percent of Hispanic children in Doña Ana County are living in poverty, as compared to just 16 percent of white children in the county. More than half the Hispanic children in Luna County (52 percent) are below the poverty level. In Grant County, the disparity is not as great — 29 percent for Hispanics as compared to 20 percent for whites — but it still exists.

The poverty rate for Hispanic children in all border counties is 40 percent, while it is just 17 percent for those living in all other counties.

While the report does a good job of laying out the problems, it is short of solutions.

Most of the suggestions for improvement are vague and nonspecific, things such as "improving basic infrastructure and addressing preventable health risks" or "developing systems that improve the ability of parents to obtain and advance in good jobs."

While there are a few specific recommendations — full funding for Medicaid or greater support for the earned income tax credit — they all tend to rely on government to solve the problem.

Certainly, government has a role to play, but so should private industry. That's why we were encouraged to hear a proposal by Rep. Jeff Steinborn, D-Las Cruces, to challenge local businesses to establish as many as 1,000 new business internships, targeting low-income students.

These internships should be available to low-income students of all races. They would not only provide young people with a little spending cash, but would also give them an entry into the business world. They could potentially learn both skills and work habits that could last a lifetime.

There is no one magic solution to our poverty problem. But, for any long-term resolution to be successful, it must include the participation and support of our local business community.