

# PRESS RELEASE

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## **New Progress Report Says Progress Slow on Commitment to Improving Well-Being of New Mexico's Children**

One year after the election of Governor Bill Richardson and the entire state House of Representatives, New Mexico's children continue to suffer from a lack of commitment to improve their well being. According to a Progress Report released by the New Mexico Pediatric Society, the state's elected officials get low marks so far.

"As a Gubernatorial candidate," according to Dr. Larry Shandler, President of the New Mexico Pediatric Society, "Governor Richardson promised to prioritize action on the nine-point program we call the New Mexico Children's Agenda. While there has been some movement on the Agenda, we are very disappointed that our elected officials have failed to make the well being of our children a high priority."

The Children's Agenda was created to assure that New Mexico's elected officials make the well being of children a top priority. Recommended actions, developed by a diverse group of concerned citizens before the 2002 gubernatorial election, include steps to improve child poverty, health care coverage, children's services, responses to child abuse and neglect, and juvenile justice.

### ***Poverty's Destructive Impact on Child Well-Being***

Although a wide range of factors affects the well being of children, none is more destructive than poverty. New Mexico still has the nation's highest rate of child poverty. Poor children experience more chronic disease and violence; do less well in school and are more likely to drop out; have higher rates of teenage pregnancy; and have fewer educational opportunities, and, therefore, fewer opportunities to move out of poverty.

In New Mexico, the vast majority (84%) of poor children are Hispanic, Native American and Black. The largest percent (59%) of the state's poor children are Hispanic, according to a report released recently by New Mexico Voices for Children.

Dr. Shandler expressed frustration with the inaction of the Governor and other elected leaders, saying, "This Governor never mentions poverty as a critical problem in New Mexico; it's not a word in his political vocabulary. As the nation's only Hispanic Governor I would expect to see much more aggressive action on behalf of New Mexico's poor, predominantly Hispanic, children. I would expect him to be working closely with our Hispanic legislative leaders to absolutely prioritize improving the health and well-being of these children."

### ***Inaction on the Children's Agenda***

During the campaign, the Governor talked of establishing automatic enrollment of eligible families in Medicaid and Food Stamps by using their state tax returns to determine financial eligibility. Families would simply give their permission for enrollment and automatically be enrolled. Such a process would simplify the application process, greatly expand health care and reduce hunger throughout the state. This project has not been pursued by the Richardson administration.

The New Mexico Pediatric Society expressed support for the Governor's stated goal of expanding health care coverage to all New Mexicans in four years, but expressed grave concerns over proposed cuts to the state's largest insurer, Medicaid. "Our greatest disappointment with the Governor," says Dr. Shandler, "is his proposed cuts to Medicaid." While no cuts have yet been made, a long list of proposed cuts are being discussed many of which will reduce access to care. "You can't ask low income families to pay enrollment fees, annual premiums and copays and expect them to be able to access care every time they need it. They simply cannot afford it," according to Dr. Shandler.

Additional areas of concern are the slow progress on promised reforms to the Behavioral Health system, and to the state's child abuse and neglect program.

The good news is that reforms to the juvenile justice system have progressed faster than expected, and many juveniles in detention have been moved to more appropriate community corrections settings.

Expansion of childcare, after school programs and literacy programs was another goal of the Children's Agenda. While the Governor appears committed to education, money for these three education goals has been limited. Funding for childcare is short by about \$10 million of the Governor's goal of covering families to 200% of the federal poverty level. No new funds were passed by the legislature for after school programs, and a bill to establish a state goal of literacy by the third grade failed to pass the legislature.

While the Governor has created both a Children's Cabinet and a Youth Council, the members of the Youth Council have yet to be named. Progress of the Children's Cabinet looks more promising as Cabinet secretaries meet regularly to improve children's health across state agencies.

"We see the Children's Agenda Progress Report as an early warning signal. New Mexico's elected officials still have not prioritized our children's well being. We will be assessing their actions, not their rhetoric, and we will continue to keep the public informed on their action or inaction," said Dr. Shandler. "All 112 legislators are up for election one year from now. We want them to know that our children need to be a high priority, not just during their campaigns, but also when they vote on legislation."