

NM needs a cabinet post for families

Coordination of agencies a must



BY SEN. PETE CAMPOS LAS VEGAS DEMOCRAT

In recent decades, the structure of the New Mexican family has changed significantly. For example, grandparents raise young children, and single parents struggle to make paychecks stretch for another month. Even the most idealized families must now watch as their children combat - and sometimes fall prey to - drugs and alcohol at increasingly younger ages. In these trying times, a village is not always enough. Sometimes, it takes a state to raise a child.

Our children face more challenges than ever. Youth homelessness is on the rise, creating feelings of abnormality, cynicism and skepticism for those in its grasp. Violence is ever present, making neighborhoods, streets and schools unsafe for our children. Fear, distrust and desperation reign, stifling kindness and compassion in our students. Technology - a great power for positive growth and development when used appropriately - can drown out all other voices, inappropriately exposing young children to adult behaviors and compounding peer pressure with economic pressure in the endless competition to have the newest and greatest gadget. The constant deluge of Instagram models and YouTube stars overwhelms our young people. Teenagers are ridiculed, ostracized and bullied for their weight and appearance; the ensuing negative emotions can lead to enduring insecurities that seem to drain vitality and purpose from their lives. We must encourage hope in place of depression, creativity instead of cruelty and aspirations instead of desperation.

Great strides have been made to encourage children and youth to stay in school, eat healthy and work for their goals, but today's pressures erode self-confidence, exacerbate violent tendencies and encourage suicidal ideation. A great number of young people are led astray by quick, short-term solutions that support unhealthy habits but are insufficient for long-term independence and self-reliance. New Mexico's safety net must be expanded to identify and assist discouraged, depressed and at-risk children and families before love and mentoring become ineffective.

Many great organizations, both state agencies and nonprofits, are hard at work addressing the major components of child development and care. Organizations such as New Mexico Kids, Farm

to Table New Mexico, the Brindle Foundation and New Mexico Voices for Children address a wide range of issues, such as early childhood education, food security and safe neighborhoods. State agencies, including the Department of Health's Families First program; the Children, Youth and Families Department; and the Public Education Department labor diligently to meet the safety, health and educational needs of our families and children, often on shoestring budgets.

The Legislature has the responsibility to understand the needs of these agencies and organizations, to fund appropriate programs and to foster a spirit of cooperation among all those involved in protecting and educating our children and their families. But the Legislature alone is not enough. All branches of government must work together for this common cause. We need a families Cabinet initiative that monitors family needs and builds upon family strengths to provide workable solutions for public agencies, nonprofit organizations and private enterprises. The state's master and strategic plans must be regularly updated to anticipate and reflect trends that might adversely affect the family structure. State agencies and nonprofit organizations would benefit from a unified, upgraded data analysis and reporting system that would provide evidence-based data and innovations, while allowing communication among stakeholders. Coordinating the missions of the many fine organizations and public agencies in New Mexico is crucial to providing a healthy environment for the statewide family fabric.

To meet the demands our modern world places on delicate family structures, progress is urgently needed. As the whole state works to strengthen and improve New Mexico families, those families will receive new hope. Our communities will be instilled with confidence and our youth will have a reinvigorated sense of purpose in life, creating a greater New Mexico for us all.