Written by By Veronica C. García, Ed.D., executive director, New Mexico Voices for Children
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New Mexico has a long history of forging innovative solutions to a whole host of problems. Our knowhow and ingenuity have influenced everything from the creation of the personal computer to the exploration of the moon, Mars, and beyond. Surely we can come up with workable solutions for the myriad problems we face here at home.

One long-term problem—child poverty—has worsened and recently released Census numbers drop New Mexico to the very bottom in the nation, with 30 percent of our children living at or below the poverty level (just $24,250 for a family of four). Poverty is a complex issue, but one that we ignore at our peril. Brain science and biology show us that the damaging effects of poverty on a young child's development are irreversible. In other words, if we do not counteract the effect of poverty during childhood, we have little hope of abating it at all. States like New Mexico, with small populations, cannot afford to allow nearly a third of its children to fail to meet their full potential. Our future depends too much upon it.

Access to water, particularly in the more agrarian areas of our state, is also a long-term problem and an issue upon which our future depends. Unfortunately, there are some in New Mexico who seem bent on one particularly expensive and ineffectual solution—the Gila River diversion. The diversion of the river, via a series of reservoirs and pipelines, will cost the state an estimated $1 billion. Even at that price tag, it will only allow New Mexico to purchase water from the state of Arizona during those rare times when the river is at or above peak flow. Any water diverted from the Gila during high spring runoff and in wet years would be held in reservoirs, where some would be lost to seepage and evaporation, before being piped over the continental divide for use in Deming.

Over the last decade, local stakeholders and water experts have proposed numerous sustainable alternatives to the diversion project that would help meet the region's water needs and put people to work, while protecting both taxpayers and the river ecosystem. These alternatives could include forest and watershed restoration projects, irrigation efficiency

upgrades, improvements to existing public water systems, and groundwater protection projects, to name a few.

While the estimated cost of the Gila diversion has risen exponentially—from around $300 million, to $600 million and, finally, the current $1 billion—the amount of funding for the project that New Mexico would receive from the federal government has dropped from $128 million to just $100 million. New Mexico would still be eligible to receive about $66 million in federal funds for the alternative projects.

To embark on a $1 billion project at a time when the state faces shrinking revenues seems fiscally irresponsible at best. Add to that the fact that the state still underfunds the anti-poverty programs for young children that have been shown to have the best long-term results—programs like home visiting, high-quality child care, and pre-kindergarten—and the idea is downright incomprehensible. Some of our lawmakers are taking a wait-and-see approach to expanding these early childhood programs even though they are proven to be effective. It's unfortunate that those making decisions about the Gila River diversion are not being similarly cautious.

Water is a precious resource, but there are better, smarter and more cost-effective ways of meeting the state's water needs. Our children are also a precious resource, yet we continue to allow them to rank at the bottom of the nation in well-being. That we would divert taxpayer dollars that could be used to improve their outcomes in order to build a questionable and fiscally irresponsible boondoggle is unacceptable.

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