

Michele Corey: Make candidates accountable to vulnerable Michigan children and families

By Michele Corey Detroit Free Press guest writer Filed Under Opinion Commentary
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As the election blitz begins in Michigan, amid the stump speeches, attack ads and debates we'll see in upcoming months, it's unlikely you'll hear much about our most pressing issue: the future of children and families in Michigan.

Most voters agree that children's lives are worse today than they were 10 years ago, and that our own children will face more challenges ahead. Child poverty is up 34% since 2005, while the families of nearly 207,000 children — the highest number in 22 years — were investigated for abuse and neglect in 2012.

In Detroit, more than half of all kids were living in poverty while 70% of kids ages 0-5 were eligible for federal food assistance in 2012. More than 3,000 kids suffered abuse or neglect in 2012, according to the latest Kids Count in Michigan Data Book.

Southeast Michigan saw nearly 30% of kids living in poverty, nearly 40% of kids under age 5 eligible for federal food assistance and nearly 8,000 confirmed victims of abuse and neglect.

Here's the good news: Voters want to help. Even those who believe government provides too much want the federal budget to prioritize investments in children. But while voters are deeply concerned about our children, families and communities, candidates will not talk about it — unless you ask, and ask you must.

Among issues facing those we elect this November:

Congress will decide whether the federal Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which lifts 5 million children out of poverty every year, will shelter more children or fewer from poverty's reach.

With more than one-third of Michigan children in homes affected by hunger, and nearly half of food stamp funds going to children, Congress will decide which children get fed and which go hungry.

Congress also could advance a proposed federal-state preschool partnership that would have immediate and lasting educational benefits for our youngest and most vulnerable children.

State leaders must look to advance infant and toddler programming to close literacy and other gaps that appear as early as nine months.

Legislators also could raise Michigan's subsidized child care rates to help parents keep working and supporting their families.

And lawmakers could better target workforce development and educational resources toward the most challenged young people and families.

These decisions can change our trajectory and help families regain economic footing. But you must speak up. Too often, parties and candidates revert to the themes that pollsters and campaign operatives know best: character attacks, distorted legislative records, and vague, unverifiable promises. They need to know you care about these issues and want to know what they will do about them.

Children and families don't have high-priced lobbyists, superPACs, or nationwide ads. They do have us. And in a democracy, that's still enough to make a real difference.

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