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Group addresses children's needs

From staff reports

Henderson County may be known as a top retirement destination, but the 65 and older crowd isn't the only growing segment of the population. Some 20,430 children live here, and one out of every five residents is younger than 18. And the population of children younger than 17 is rising -- almost 10 percent in five years, exceeding the growth rate of the adult population. These are among the facts released by the United Agenda for Children, as the community prepares for Saturday's Speak Out for Kids! event. The community is about to create a united action plan on steps to take so children can be healthy, safe and well educated, and the public is part of the process. The United Agenda for Children community meeting will be held from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday at North Henderson High School. About 350 people are expected to participate in the interactive, high-tech community meeting. Participants will be chosen to mirror the demographics of Henderson County, and that includes youth. Participation is free, and organizers say there is still time to register. "We expect a number of walk-ins on Saturday," said Shea Henson, co-chair of the recruitment committee. "We are prepared to handle additional participants and will not turn anyone away." The event, Speak Out For Kids!, needs people from every age group, background, income level and neighborhood, said Times-News Publisher Ruth Birge, co-chair of the United Agenda for Children. "That's key to making this community meeting work," she said. United Agenda for Children is a coalition of more than 40 community, government and business organizations that is sponsoring the community meeting. Seated at tables of 10 to 12, participants will use wireless laptop

computers to share the table's recommendations from each discussion period with the larger group. Additionally, each participant will use a wireless keypad to record individual votes on priorities and next steps. Decision-makers and participants will leave the daylong forum with a three-page united action plan featuring the group's top recommendations and priorities. The coalition will launch an intensive three-year process to make measurable improvements in children's lives in Henderson County. After Saturday, participants are urged to stay involved by volunteering for action teams.

The report released Wednesday is the basis for the guide that will be used in the "Speak Out for Kids" event. "It contains an overview of Henderson County and paints a revealing picture of how Henderson County is doing in the areas of children's health, safety and education issues compared to North Carolina and the U.S.," said Maureen Adams, UAC project manager. The report grew out of a request by the Henderson County Board of Commissioners to update a 2002 strategic plan generated by the Children and Family Resource Center on the state of the child in Henderson County. A team collected the data to determine where children stand today. The new report used markers of quality of life and life potential explored in the older report. It also used new markers. A design-content team of local citizens sorted through the massive information collected. The data was organized under five key questions concerning health, safety and education. The questions included:

- Are babies born healthy and do children stay healthy and well?
- Are children living in safe and stable homes?
- Are children living in a safe and supportive community?
- Are children ready for school and succeeding in school?
- Are youth prepared for adulthood?

Rick Stewart worked on the design content committee. Stewart is a new resident to Henderson County who was very active in his community in Mississippi before moving to the area. He is retired from Bellsouth and, in addition to various civic organizations, served on his county's school board. "It was a great opportunity for me to serve on this committee, being new to Henderson County," said Stewart. "The committee worked very hard to take all the data available and put it into a straightforward, easy to understand document that would be useful at the 'Speak Out for Kids' meeting." "I do think that the data shows how much Henderson County is

changing," Stewart said. "The image of the county that emerged showed we are doing well in some areas, and others need help." "That is why I hope people will take an interest in 'Speak Out for Kids,'" he said. "It is a good opportunity for people, who may not have lots of time, to give their opinions and make a big impact." A copy of the guide can be found at www.unitedagendaforchildrenhc.org.

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