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Go and speak out for children

Henderson County is about to take a good hard look at what its children need. There is plenty of bad news when it comes to the state of children's health and well-being here. The good news is a new organization out to help wants community input. "Speak Out for Kids" will be held from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 20, at North Henderson High School to hear the public's ideas about the problems that children face and strategies for helping them. Political, educational and health leaders have banded together under the name United Agenda for Children to craft a comprehensive plan for improving children's health, safety and education. For a good plan, they need to hear from the public. Maureen Adams, project director of the United Agenda for Children and director of the Children and Family Resource Center, said the group would like to have 300 people at the meeting, representing all geographic areas and social, economic and age groups. "We need a unified plan, developed by the citizens of Henderson County, that they buy into, to direct our resources toward those needs," said County Commissioner Chuck McGrady. He said there's much work to be done. The statistics say he's right. Census figures show the percentage of children 18 and under living in poverty in Henderson County increased from 14.7 percent in 2000 to 22.6 percent in 2005. The federal government says the poverty line in 2005 for a family of four is \$19,350. The North Carolina Justice Center says the cost of providing basic minimum expenses in Henderson County is \$40,044 for a family of four. Although the county's economy remains steady, wages haven't improved much. Between the 2000 census and 2005, median family income dropped by \$800, from \$44,974 to \$44,157, while the median statewide income for the same period increased by \$3,000, from \$46,000 to \$49,000. No wonder the percentage of children living in poverty in Henderson County increased. Children in poor households are more likely to lack adequate food, clothing and housing. They are more likely to be victims of crime, violence and negligence. Many lack basic health care -- last year 2,340 children newborn to age 17 had no insurance. The problems they face outside school are reflected in the classroom through poor grades and behavior problems. These children are more likely to drop out, meaning they will lack marketable skills for the workplace. And they are more likely to end up living below the poverty line as adults. Helping them become self-sufficient improves the county's economy and causes fewer drains on tax dollars. Parents, grandparents and anyone with a concern ought to go to the meeting and speak out. The county's children need your help.