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Children need advocates in Congress

The problems plaguing the area's most vulnerable children could be lifelong if we don't address them now. Research shows children pushed into poverty during a recession are likely to remain poor for years after recovery starts.

By MARY DUNNESTEWART

THE CHILDREN of southeastern Virginia are hurting.

Families across the area are struggling to feed, clothe and shelter their children. Poverty rates have reached record levels, as an astounding 11 percent of families slipped into poverty during the last two years.

New government data released last month show that since the recession began approximately 25,000 additional children in Virginia are growing up in poverty, bringing the total number of poor children in the commonwealth to about 256,000.

The problems plaguing the area's most vulnerable children could be lifelong if we don't address them now. Research shows children pushed into poverty during a recession are likely to remain poor for years after recovery starts. Children who spend significant time in poverty are more likely to develop chronic health problems and less likely to succeed in school and graduate. And this hurts everyone in Virginia.

These latest data underscore that the winners of the midterm elections will face a serious challenge to help the

region's children. That is just one reason child advocates at the nonpartisan Voices for Virginia's Children are watching this election so closely.

We understand that the winners of this election have a chance to give the most vulnerable families a voice in Washington. And that voice should support effective and proven efforts that help children. The priorities include:

Continuing to take steps to keep kids healthy. While many questions remain about federal health care reform, children clearly benefited from changes made this year. Numerous new provisions and coverage expansions will greatly benefit kids and their families.

Changes under the new law allow for pediatric preventive care services to be offered to families with no co-pay, no matter what type of insur-

ance they have. Also, health plans are prohibited from denying coverage to kids based on a pre-existing condition. In the past, children have been denied the care they need because of a variety of pre-existing conditions ranging from asthma to hemophilia to even acne.

Maintaining federal assistance for child care for working parents. Parents who can't afford quality child care often can't keep a job. Funding for child care assistance to states through the Child Care Development Block Grant ensures that parents can work and raise their family out of poverty. Access to child care can mean the difference between continued destitution and dependence on the government and true financial independence.

Investing in programs that

feed hungry kids. Approximately 80,000 children in southeastern Virginia are at risk for hunger. Studies show that kids who come to school hungry cannot perform to the best of their abilities. Programs such as the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast program help feed children so they can focus on learning, rather than their empty stomachs. For some kids, these programs are their only source of nutritious food.

While one voice may not seem strong enough to rise above the clamor of Congress, remember — that voice will have the power of Virginia's 2 million children behind it.

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