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Connecting child safety and student success to a thriving economy

Kasandra Gandara Your turn

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We have one goal — that all New Mexican children should be safe, healthy and provided with an effective education. But to get there — and to end an epidemic of childhood trauma — we must collaborate. Governments must work with business people, innovators and entrepreneurs on this heavy lift.

As a city councilor and a long-term advocate for families, I understand I must reach out to school boards to understand their vision and goals for every student. I must talk to child welfare agencies to ensure that our system of child safety is comprehensive. I must fully understand how health care providers identify and treat mental-health challenges and substance misuse. I must work with the Chambers of Commerce to appreciate how business people see the impact of a traumatized workforce. I must reach across political aisles and bridge differences.

There are five tasks I have completed over the last year with support from a network of caring Doña Ana residents:

- 1.** I have sought to create the nation's first data-driven and cross-sector program focused on ending adverse childhood experiences — which include various forms of abuse, neglect and trauma.
- 2.** I have sponsored “great conversations” that bring together residents to share their experience with trauma and how best to heal communities.
- 3.** I have formed 10 task forces that meet monthly to use data, technology and collaboration to identify gaps in services and pitch new ways to address those gaps.
- 4.** I have advocated business and nonprofit leaders create solutions to long-standing challenges by working in alignment across disciplines, sharing data, research, strategies and evaluation.
- 5.** I have reached out to and found ongoing support and guidance by the authors of "Anna, Age Eight: the Data-driven Prevention of Childhood Trauma and Maltreatment," who

made their book free of charge to ensure every resident could have a copy.

The work has been exhilarating and exhausting. To date, our work has been mostly unfunded, relying on the compassion and courage of local residents.

To get our city and county to the next level, I am supporting the creation of the Anna, Age Eight Institute guided by the book of that name. This Institute, which will be a technical assistance center with substantial funding for Doña Ana County, is being sponsored by Sen. Bill Soules and Rep. Gail Armstrong in the form of Senate Bill 370. When funded, the vision of this first-of-its-kind Institute is to support every city mayor, city council member and county commissioner in creating cross-sector and systemic work that ensures all our children have the services they and their parents need to find success with family life, school and work.

It has been made clear to me and my collaborators that until we address adverse childhood experiences, we won't be achieving educational goals or economic development goals, such as reducing unemployment or underemployment. Far too many children, students and adults with untreated trauma will be left behind to suffer in silence.

We are poised to do even more inspiring work in Las Cruces and throughout Doña Ana County — and with your engagement, we can share our successes with the rest of New Mexico and the nation.

We are partnering with the Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce, where "Anna, Age Eight" co-author Dominic Cappello will speak on "Mental Health and Your Bottom Line" at the New Mexico Heritage Farm and Ranch Museum on Thursday, Feb. 21 from 11:30 a.m. to 1:15 p.m. Seats are limited, so contact Brandi Misquez, from the chamber of commerce at 575-524-1968 for information.

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Correction: Gail Armstrong is the co-sponsor of Senate Bill 370. This version corrects her first name.

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