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■ Voters care about kids

WHICH subject do you think West Virginia voters ranked as more deserving federal support — children or homeland security?

It's kids, according to a survey sponsored by Every Child Matters Education Fund. The economy and jobs ranked at the top, with 67 percent of residents saying it was either the most important or second most important issue.

"Health, education and protection of children" ranked second with 50 percent of people ranking it at the top. Homeland security was third at 25 percent.

These findings should tell West Virginia candidates something about voters. Even if aspirants for president, governor or other offices are not paying attention to families' struggles to provide for their children's health and well-being, those issues are very much on the minds of voters.

The survey also found that 72 percent of West Virginians are either very familiar or somewhat familiar with President Bush's stands on children's issues, while only 41 percent are familiar with Sen. John Kerry's. In the governor's race, 45 percent of people said they are familiar with Democrat Joe Manchin's positions on children's issues, while only 15 percent are familiar with those of Republican Monty Warner.

The direct connection between government and the well-being of children is not always obvious, said Dr. Pat Kelly, a Marshall University pediatrician who spoke at a recent event to announce the survey findings and a voter registration drive.

But the connection is there. State and federal money and decisions are involved in Medicaid, vaccinations, child abuse investigations and prevention, after-school programs and school and summer lunch offerings. State policies usually closely tied to federal policies and funding, so what happens in Washington makes a big difference in what happens across West Virginia.

The Washington-based nonprofit has run similar surveys in other states with similar results. "Here it was more decisive," said Michael Petit, director of Every Child Matters. "Here it was crystal clear: The public thinks a lot more should be done for kids."

Although West Virginia has many elders, the powerful senior voting bloc also ranked child well-being high in their priorities. "AARP members care more about their grandkids than they do about cheap airline tickets," Petit said. "Never discount seniors."

Issues of preventing terrorism, care for seniors, taxes, environment and crime are certainly important topics, too. But if this society does not take care of children while they are small, society's other problems will be that much worse when they become

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adults. Voters seem to understand this connection. In this year's election, if candidates aren't talking about what they're going to do to improve children's quality of life, they're missing the vote.

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