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Gov's husband pushing for literacy funding

SANDRA BALTAZAR MARTINEZ, Santa Fe New Mexican
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FILE - In this Nov. 4, 2010 photo, New Mexico's first-ever "first gentleman" Chuck Franco talks to supporters at the campaign headquarters of his wife, Gov.-elect Susana Martinez, in Albuquerque, N.M.,. With about 46 percent of New Mexico's native English speakers reading at a sixth-grade level or below, the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy is pushing the Legislature for more funding. And helping drive their efforts is first gentleman Chuck Franco. The husband of Gov. Susana Martinez spoke at a news conference this week about his support for expanding such services and the goal of eradicating illiteracy in New Mexico. (Susan Montoya Bryan / AP)

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SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — With about 46 percent of New Mexico's native English speakers reading at a sixth-grade level or below, the [New Mexico Coalition for Literacy](#) is pushing the Legislature for more funding.

And helping drive their efforts is first gentleman [Chuck Franco](#).

The husband of Gov. [Susana Martinez](#) spoke at a news conference earlier this week about his support for expanding such services and the goal of eradicating illiteracy in New Mexico.

"My interest in adult literacy came to me when I was in law enforcement," Franco told a small crowd gathered at St. Francis Hotel in downtown Santa Fe.

Adult literacy is one of three causes Franco has decided to take on. The others are [Horses for Heroes](#) and the [Youth](#)

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Franco said that when he started working with troubled youth, he realized that their issues ran beyond behavioral problems. Having parents at home who couldn't read was one of them.

Having a well-educated population is important for New Mexico's economic advancement, Franco said. Companies interested in coming to New Mexico want to know that there is a prepared workforce.

Supporting the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy also complements Gov. Susana Martinez' push to improve K-12 education in the state, Franco said.

"I think we all need to participate in order to give New Mexico the workforce we need," Franco said. "If we wait for another generation to slip through the cracks, we are going to be in bad shape."

The coalition, which has been in Santa Fe for 25 years, is one way to help improve adults' reading skills, Franco said.

Funded by the [Department of Cultural Affairs](#) through the [New Mexico State Library](#), the coalition currently operates on a \$325,000 budget, down from the \$755,000 budget it had before the economy tanked. The coalition funds 23 literacy programs throughout the state, including Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe.

Executive Director [Heather Heunermund](#) said funding cuts reduced services across the state. During the Legislature's current 30-day session, the organization will ask for an additional \$347,200, she said. To help ease the strain, [Public Service Co. of New Mexico's Resources Foundation](#) awarded the literacy coalition a \$20,000 grant on Wednesday.

The number of illiterate or functionally literate adults in New Mexico derives from various sources: [U.S. Census Bureau](#) data and a 1993 National Assessment of Adult Literacy Survey (the most recent survey available). In the near future, the coalition plans to work with [New Mexico State University](#) to create a localized literacy survey.

Some New Mexico residents might feel ashamed to admit they don't know how to read, said [Donna Aragon](#), the coalition's state volunteer training coordinator.

"The hardest population to reach is the native English speakers," Aragon said. "English learners come looking for the service."

Information from: The Santa Fe New Mexican, <http://www.sfnwmexican.com>

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