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**Speaker: Invest early in children**  
BY CHRISTINA M. WOODS

Bertice Berry got some knowing nods after saying Thursday that working with children is a job that some have tried to quit but can't.

Just when you're about to give in, Berry said, a child comes up to you and thanks you for changing his or her life.

Then, in her flair for comedy that sent people into laughing fits throughout her presentation, Berry said, you just want to tell the kid, "Shut up."

"You have been called," she told about 200 leaders from across Kansas who were selected to attend the Kansas Health Foundation's Leadership Conference, which continues today.

Berry's topic, "Giving Kids a Good Start," kicked off the 13th annual conference, which is promoting early childhood education as one of its goals of making Kansas the best state in the nation to raise a child.

"Investing early in childhood education is essential if the future of your community is going to be vibrant and vital," said Marni Vliet, president and chief executive of the Kansas Health Foundation.

Berry told those leaders gathered Thursday that they need to find their purpose.

"We do so much for so many that sometimes we need to stop and breathe," she said.

They need to rediscover laughter, she said, which "will give you the energy and the joy that will retrieve your sanity."

She told them to figure out how to leave footprints so deep that children will be able to find them along the path to a better Kansas.

Berry, a former television talk show host who is with Bertice Berry Productions of Savannah, Ga., advocated the power of living with purpose.

"When you walk with purpose you collide with destiny," Berry said.

She shared her journey through poverty, abuse and attitude.

She came from a single-parent household where "we didn't have what we wanted, but we had what we needed if we figured out how to put it together," Berry said.

She talked about teachers who ignored her bad attitude and pushed her to pursue higher education. Berry received a bachelor's degree from Jacksonville University and a doctorate in

sociology from Kent State University.

"Take care of children," she said. "Even if they don't come from you, doesn't mean they aren't yours."

When it comes to a child, Berry said, even five minutes of joy from an adult can have an effect that lasts for years.

She talked about staying the course but also recognizing when it's time to pause and reflect on activities to avoid burnout.

Her presentation evoked tears, laughter and a standing ovation.

"She made me think about all the stuff we do unselfishly," said Michele Blackmon, who traveled from Hutchinson to attend the conference.

Cindy Flores, also from Hutchinson, said the presentation reminded her "to never give up."

Vicki Finchman said Berry's presentation reminded her that "success is not what you have, but it's the footsteps you leave."