

Cortez, Palacios, and Torres Commit to Valley Interfaith's Agenda

By Steve Taylor

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EDINBURG, RGV – Hidalgo County Judge candidate Richard Cortez, Hidalgo County Commissioner Joseph Palacios, and Palacios' opponent in the March primary, Ellie Torres, have all signed off on Valley Interfaith's agenda

The three candidates

attended a Valley Interfaith accountability session at Holy Family Church in Edinburg on Sunday. More than 250 parishioners attended. At the event the candidates were asked to commit their support to issues that emerged from conversations within member institutions and communities.



The issues included: raising the income eligibility to qualify for the Hidalgo County Indigent Health Care Program, restoring the county's investment in VIDA, a workforce development program, to \$250,000, and increasing funding for colonia infrastructure – namely lighting, streets, and drainage.

All three candidates said "yes," "yes" and "yes." A fourth candidate, Hidalgo County Judge candidate Eloy Pulido did not attend. Valley Interfaith leaders said Pulido was invited and confirmed he would attend.

“While the county has made modest gains in increasing healthcare coverage for the poorest of our residents, investing in colonias, and workforce training, there is more that needs to be done,” said Moses Robledo, a VIF leader from Holy Family Church.

“We are proposing concrete ideas to address chronic issues affecting our county and community. This plan is what we envision can begin to raise the quality of life for all residents of Hidalgo County.”

Robledo and Maricela Balderas of St. Francis Cabrini Church in Las Milpas were co-chairs of the accountability session. David Jackson, of St. John the Baptist Church in San Juan, and Blanca Sandoval of Holy Spirit briefed those in attendance about how the accountability session would proceed. The Rev. Thomas Luczak, pastor at Holy Family gave the welcome and opening prayer.



Healthcare

Estela Sosa-Garza and Adelina Alvarez, of Holy Spirit Church in McAllen, spoke about the need for more funding for indigent healthcare. The two questions posed to the candidates were:

* Do you commit to, if elected, work with Valley Interfaith to raise Hidalgo County’s investment in Indigent Health by \$5 million, for a total of \$10.5 million for primary medical care?

* Will you work with us to raise the eligibility for the program from 30 percent of the federal poverty level (for a family of four, that is \$7,500 a year) to 50 percent of the federal poverty line (for a family of four, that is \$12,600 a year); and will you work with Valley Interfaith to create a path to incrementally raise

eligibility to 100 percent of the federal poverty level (\$25,100 a year, for a family of four) over the next three years?

Torres said "yes," Cortez said "yes" and Palacios said "yes."

Education

Eddie Anaya of St. Francis Cabrini, and Marivel Tijerina and Laura Aguilar, VIDA graduates, spoke about the need for more funding for VIDA. The question posed to the candidates was:



* Do you commit, if elected, to support raising the county's investment in VIDA to the original amount of \$250,000?

Torres said "yes," Cortez said "yes" and Palacios said "yes."

Colonias

José Robledo, father of Moses, and Nahiyely Garcia, of Holy Family, spoke about the need for more funding for colonias. The question posed to the candidates was:

* Do you commit, if elected, to increase the county's investment in the infrastructure of the colonias, namely in repaving streets, lighting, and drainage?

Torres said "yes," Cortez said "yes" and Palacios said "yes."

After the questions were posed, the three candidates were given a minute and a half to address the audience. This is what they said:

Ellie Torres

“I think it is very important we have a healthy community. A healthy community means healthy families for all of us. As far as VIDA goes, I am an educator, a former educator, and I strongly believe that education is the key, especially for your success and a way out of poverty. On the issue of our colonias getting lighting, I second that. We definitely do need to do something on that, find ways to get that done. It’s long overdue. On the issue of healthcare, we do need to help with that more, in increments, and I do commit to that. Like I said, a healthy community means healthy progress for everybody and success for all of us. I do commit to the above and thank you so much.”



Richard Cortez

“As your county judge I will be representing a million people in Hidalgo County. Unfortunately, 35 percent of those million people are poor. So, of course, it is going to be a big challenge for me working along with the four commissioners for the four precincts to try to solve this problem of poverty. We are not going to be able to solve it by ourselves. That is why I am so glad that Valley Interfaith is here to help us make progress and find solutions to these problems. We cannot solve budgetary problems by cutting expenses. We have to solve our problems by growing revenues. That means that the people that the people that are unproductive, who are under-worked, or who are under-employed need to be employed better. What better success story than the two stories we heard today. What a wonderful thing that has happened. (Applause) If we are going to take people out of poverty we have got to invest in people and that is what I want to do as your county judge.”

Joseph Palacios

“Thank you Valley Interfaith. I always love these sessions. First and foremost, on indigent healthcare, I am going to get very specific and to the issue. The investment of \$5 million is critical, not just for indigent healthcare but for under-insured or non-insured. We need to start providing funds for our safety net clinics. This way we can reach the masses, beyond just the indigent, given the poverty level we do have. With regard to the poverty level, we have risen it during my time as county commissioner, up to 30 and I am committed to fighting the good fight to continue to raise that poverty level, so we can capture more indigent in these programs. With regard to VIDA, I am an advocate for economic development and human capital is part of that. To break the cycle of poverty we have to continue to invest in our human capital. That is what public service is. It is about you, it is not just about programs, it just about contracts, it is about community and it is about you. And I vow to continue to make that investment in our human capital. In regard to the colonias, infrastructure is critical. I have been a grant writer for 20 years. I have employed more than \$400 million into infrastructure and we are going to continue to build infrastructure. Just two days ago, we were awarded another \$2.1 million.”

After the meeting, the *Rio Grande Guardian* interviewed Moses Robledo.

Asked how the accountability session went, Robledo said: “We had over 250-plus supporters here. It went well. The candidates that were present responded great. I want to stress we did meet with all the candidates ahead of time. They all said they would be here. We do not know why candidate Eloy Pulido was not here. He did not contact us. As far as his commitment to our issues, it is probably up in the air right now.”

Asked how pleased he was that the candidates support Valley Interfaith’s agenda for Hidalgo County, Robledo said: “They all said ‘yes’ they are in support of our agenda. I really want to thank those that came and shared their stories today. There were heartfelt stories, of suffering, particularly with regard to healthcare and colonias. With regard to VIDA, we heard beautiful stories, how the program

helped lift these leaders out of poverty, so they can earn a livable wage and provide for their families.”

Robledo added: “One of the questions we did ask the candidates and they all responded ‘yes’ was that they would continue to work with us after and if they get elected. This is something we are going to follow up on. We are very serious about this. This is just the beginning. Everyone here filled out a commitment card to get out the vote, to take their families, their neighbors, everybody that they see each day, out to vote. We are going to make sure that that happens.”

Mission Statement

Valley Interfaith is a broad-based community organization with institutional members across the Rio Grande Valley. Its purpose is the development of community leaders who organize the people of their communities to develop effective strategies to deal with issues that affect the welfare of families. Issues include education, housing, job training, healthcare, and infrastructure, among others. The organization is nonpartisan and does not support candidates for public office, political parties or political philosophies. The group is part of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a network of organizations nationwide, 12 of which are in Texas.

“Our faith traditions inform us that we must take care of the least among us,” said Jackson, of St. John the Baptist. “This means we must participate in the democratic process to ensure that our candidates for elected office make the most vulnerable among us their priority too. By participating in democracy, we are living out our faith.”