

Editorial: IAF celebrates 40 years making Texas better

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Photos by Rudy Gutierrez

When the Industrial Areas Foundation first came to Texas four decades ago, the organization was met with derision and hostility in many quarters. That certainly was true with the creation of the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring organization in 1981.

But today, IAF Texas groups – including EPISO and Border Interfaith in El Paso – are viewed as powerful voices on issues like economic development, education, health care and social justice. The Network of Texas IAF Organizations will celebrate its 40-year anniversary on Saturday in San Antonio, but more importantly, will map out key strategies for the future.

While key issues may vary at different locations across the state, the IAF organizing approach is the same. “Local community members are trained to speak for themselves, participate in the democratic process, register and educate voters, hold elected officials accountable, and build power for social change,” EPISO and Border Interfaith say in a presentation.

One common issue for IAF Texas affiliates in the 1980s was the shameful condition in colonias, unregulated subdivisions home to hundreds of thousands of people that had sprouted across the

state, usually lacking water and sewerage. IAF led the way to the passage of a statewide bond issue and other reforms to address the issue.

In El Paso County, that brought drinking water to 70,000 residents.

EPISO and Border Interfaith are key players in the El Paso area's most effective workforce training program, Project ARRIBA. The program has helped move more than 1,200 families from poverty to living wage jobs, adding \$710 million in income to the El Paso economy.

The two local IAF affiliates also were key advocates for the expansion of clinics by University Medical Center. At City Council, EPISO and Project Arriba were among the leading groups that helped pass ordinances to curb payday lending abuses and provide more teeth in enforcement against wage theft.

In the 2015 state legislative session, IAF helped pass a bill providing for a \$5 million expansion of the Adult Career Education Training Programs, which included \$500,000 for Project ARRIBA.

At Saturday's gathering in San Antonio, the Network of Texas IAF Organizations will unveil a major initiative for the next few years. The network will expand its network from its traditional urban base to smaller communities in Texas, with a goal of promoting "a return to a culture of discourse" in the political process.

Simply put, the idea is to move away from the current polarized system in Texas (and the United States) to one that makes it more possible to elect people who are willing to engage in compromise.

It is an audacious goal, and one that's easy to cynically dismiss. But IAF groups in Texas have a four-decade history of powering past cynicism.

We congratulate the Network of Texas IAF Organizations on 40 years of improving Texas and its local communities. And we look forward to their continuing efforts aimed at empowering Texans to make their own lives better.