

Commentary: Improving economy of city, lives of its residents within grasp

By Sonia Rodriguez and Virginia Mata, For the Express-News Aug. 10, 2020

The San Antonio City Council this week will consider approving a ballot initiative that would dedicate a portion of sales tax dollars to workforce development.

COPS/Metro and the 37 organizations it represents encourage city leaders to approve this measure as the next step in not just the economic recovery of the city but as an important opportunity to

address the economic segregation that continues to plague our communities generation after generation.

Having settled a dispute with VIA Metropolitan Transit for access to a 1/8-cent sales tax for workforce development, Mayor Ron Nirenberg has opened the door to the next major step toward building a good jobs economy. City leaders can present voters with a strong and viable framework to expand the recently adopted CARES workforce program over four years with a potential investment of \$154 million. With this investment, another 40,000 high-wage earners could be added to our economy. Working closely with employers such as Brooks City Base, Port San Antonio and other businesses willing to pay a living wage with benefits, the city will place highly skilled workers with certificates earned through the Alamo Colleges into jobs that will rebuild our economy and transform their families.

Since the onset of the pandemic, COPS/Metro with our allies, Project QUEST and the Alamo Colleges, have led the way to ensure San Antonians whose lives have been shattered by the economic free fall can re-enter the workforce equipped with new skills and good salaries. This month, the workforce development program supported by CARES and the city of San Antonio



began accepting applicants whose jobs went on hiatus or completely disappeared. These applicants are supported with critical wraparound services that include a stipend, child care, transportation, tutoring and counseling, like the highly successful services provided by Project QUEST, which is recognized nationally for its high graduation and job placement rates. The Alamo Colleges will play a vital role in this program, using Project QUEST's model along with partnerships that will strengthen and expand its capacity to serve displaced workers.

To be successful, the new Education and Workforce Program will need to adhere to a set of standards like the CARES recovery program, whose primary focus is meeting the needs of the participants. Addressing those needs must be the focal point of decision-making, not business as usual. This means providing quality wraparound services, including a 1-to-100 ratio of counselors to participants, ensuring job placement upon program completion and connecting graduates with jobs that pay a living wage with benefits. And the overall policy direction and management of the program must reside within city government, along with participants, educators and community members who can offer insight into program implementation.

Approximately 160,000 workers have been displaced due to the pandemic. The lion's share of the funding should be directed toward them. While the majority of tax dollars will be dedicated to workforce development, funds could also go to participants with some college credits who want to complete their degrees. If the higher education institutions adequately address their needs, it is possible a fair number of college graduates could result from a small investment into this pathway. However, using public dollars to offer the same programs and services that previously failed these same students will not do. This is not a scholarship program; it is a jobs program.

City leaders have the opportunity to change the economic trajectory of San Antonio for generations to come. Don't squander this opportunity.

Sonia Rodriguez and Virginia Mata are leaders with COPS/Metro Alliance.