

**BUSINESS & DEVELOPMENT**

# With workforce measure on ballot, Project Quest ready to help mend economic wounds

by *Shari Biediger* August 14, 2020

Melissa Rivas was working at a dermatology clinic – supporting her family on \$16 an hour and simultaneously earning her associate’s degree – when she was furloughed in May.

Then her aunt passed away from COVID-19 complications. With financial aid drying up and her family increasingly affected by the virus, the mother of three worried that her dream to get her nursing degree was out of reach.



“I wanted to go to school and I wanted to make the salary that I deserve,” said Rivas, 37. Determined to find support, Rivas contacted the workforce development nonprofit **Project Quest** at the suggestion of an administrator at San Antonio College. Now she’s back at work, enrolled in school, and on track to graduate from the nursing program in the spring of 2022.

After the coronavirus pandemic wiped out thousands of jobs in San Antonio, a four-year, \$154 million proposal aims to put people like Rivas back to work and includes funding for Project Quest.

City Council on Thursday agreed to let voters decide in November whether revenue from a one-eighth-cent sales tax should go toward creating a pipeline of skilled workers for a post-pandemic economy.

The plan calls for spending \$38.5 million a year through several local job placement and training and education agencies, including Project Quest.

Founded by community organizers in 1992, Project Quest is a job training and workforce development organization that enrolls about 400 people a year in [Alamo Colleges](#) or other professional training programs and supports them while they earn degrees or certifications that will lead to better-paying jobs.

Participants receive both financial support to pay tuition and emergency financial assistance to pay bills when needed. The third element of Project Quest's approach to workforce development, and the most costly, is what it refers to as "wraparound services."

"What Project Quest has learned in its 28 years is that you cannot just help people financially navigate a training system – it takes a hands-on approach," said David Zammiello, executive director at Project Quest. The goal of wraparound services is to help participants navigate challenges that could get in the way of completing school as well as to help get them the services, such as tutoring or financial support, they need.

For Rivas, that means support from career coach Maria Salazar, these days via Zoom meetings. "I try to provide those extra resources so the students don't have those challenges, and if there is a challenge, then we can work through it together," Salazar said. "Their success is my success."

But those services come at a cost. Of the \$11,000 Project Quest usually spends per participant, more than 85 percent goes toward these coaching and counseling services. Each coach supports between 100 and 250 participants at any one time, a ratio that Zammiello said contributes to the organization's low attrition rate of about 10 to 12 percent.

"Once they're in and our coaches work with them, they will complete whatever respective training program they have 90 percent of the time," he said.

In contrast to training programs across the nation that have delivered disappointing results, Project Quest has been called a "[striking exception](#)." A [recent study](#) showed that over a 10-year period, Quest graduates earned \$5,000 more annually than peers in other workforce programs.

Quest relies on a fairly steady mix of public and private dollars, including grants, to meet its \$5 million annual budget. The City has been a foundational funder of the organization since the beginning and recently funneled additional federal relief aid to Project Quest.

Zammiello said he "pushes back gently" when he hears criticism that workforce development is too costly because of the dividends it pays in the local economy. "If you invest in people,

they're going to return that investment, and in my three brief years [here], I've seen that firsthand," he said. "It can work. It's not easy, and it's not inexpensive."

Last year, Project Quest was awarded a \$1 million grant from [The Rockefeller Foundation](#) and the [Chan Zuckerberg Initiative](#). The grant helped fund systems upgrades that kept the program going virtually starting in March. If the pandemic had occurred 18 months ago, "we would have been shut down," Zammiello said.

The founding of Project Quest goes back to the early 1990s when a shift was occurring away from manufacturing and toward technology- and service-oriented jobs. The citizen advocacy group COPS/Metro established Project Quest with the goal of developing a workforce of the future, especially in the health care and tech sectors.

Today, with jobless numbers at an all-time high and the economy headed for a recession, workforce development in San Antonio might be more important now than it ever was, Zammiello said. The pandemic is presenting the city with an opportunity to address issues that lead to persistent poverty head-on and change the trajectory for years to come.

"San Antonio continues to still struggle [with] economic segregation. The trend lines and poverty are continuing to not trend in the right direction," Zammiello said. "That's not necessarily, in my opinion, a lack of interest in trying to correct those trends. It's not because there haven't been successful programs. It maybe hasn't built the critical mass that's needed to have an impact."

In June, the City Council directed \$75 million of a total \$191 million federal relief package toward workforce development benefitting 10,000 participants in various programs. Of that total, Quest received \$17.6 million from the City to support 2,000 participants with \$450 weekly stipends, wraparound services, case management, and job placement through September 2021. County commissioners approved another \$2.4 million to serve 500 people.

Officials fast-tracked approval of the relief plan, saying time is of the essence, and the City began signing contracts in July with partner agencies such as Quest and [Workforce Solutions Alamo](#).

If the ballot initiative is approved by voters on Nov. 3, the proposed workforce initiative program is set to kick off in fall 2021.

Zammiello said Quest is prepared to respond to this economic emergency for two reasons. First, the organization has been working for the past three months toward greater efficiency, he said, adding more resources and redefining some processes.

In addition, “Quest is not being asked to solve the problem by itself – we’re a small cog in a much bigger [machine],” Zammiello said. “Our goal as a collective community is to make sure the individuals who are dislocated are put into the appropriate relationship with the appropriate partner.”

Thus, he added, some residents will be better served by Workforce Solutions Alamo, Goodwill, or Alamo Colleges, and others through Project Quest.

Another integral partner in the plan is [SA Works](#), the workforce development arm of the San Antonio Economic Development Foundation.

“If you think about what we’re trying to accomplish here, if there are not jobs, then this obviously doesn’t end super well in terms of people getting trained but then we can’t place them in jobs,” Zammiello said, adding that will be especially important as the job market reacts and evolves with the pandemic.

For now, Rivas is thankful for the financial support she’s receiving from Project Quest. Besides paying for her upcoming semester at school, it’s also helping her family feel more financially secure, especially a 19-year-old daughter who is attending UTSA.

Without Project Quest, Rivas said, “I would have struggled more than learned. That’s just a mixture for failure.”