

Commentary: Accountability key to workforce program

By Mike Phillips and Hector Garcia, For the Express-News Nov. 27, 2020



Passing Ready to Work SA is the latest in a series of victories in COPS/Metro's decades-long strategy to invest in human development. And Project QUEST is the right model for success. Here, COPS/Metro members rally on the steps of City Hall in 2017. *Photo: Kin Man Hui /Staff file photo*

On Nov. 3, 77 percent of San Antonio voters approved Proposition B, Ready to Work SA, and 73 percent approved Proposition A, Pre-K for SA. These outcomes clearly indicate San Antonio's desire to invest in its most important resource, its people.

COPS/Metro and our sister organizations in the Industrial Areas Foundation, or IAF, made it possible for both to be on the ballot by authoring the state's Better Jobs Act in 2001. This law allows cities to invest sales tax dollars in early childhood education and job training. Passing Ready to Work SA is the latest in a series of victories in COPS/Metro's decades-long strategy to invest in human development. Others include the creation of Project QUEST, Palo Alto College and the San Antonio Education Partnership.

Both propositions enjoyed significant financial support from the business community, a marked change from its stance in the 1970s. The Economic Development Foundation commissioned the infamous Fantus report in 1976 that said San Antonio's greatest asset was its "cheap labor" and that "development personnel must be careful not to attract industries that would upset the existing wage ladder." In other words, keep San Antonio poor.

San Antonio has come a long way since then; Ready to Work SA must deliver on its promise.

The infusion of potentially \$154 million over 4½ years must be managed wisely and carefully to ensure it reaches the people for whom it is intended. For this to happen, the organizations contracted to provide the requisite services must meet the goals set for their performance. It is called accountability.

The city of San Antonio must be laser-focused on how this money is spent. It must be invested in evidenced-based programs with a track record of moving people out of low-wage jobs into the middle class. It should not be used solely as a scholarship program or a fund for organizations that train people for low-wage jobs. This approach will miss the mark.

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Project QUEST was designed to address the needs of its participants instead of serving the same warmed-over offerings that have failed miserably in the past. This novel approach worked. The wraparound services, tutoring and counseling provided for every single participant produced remarkable results. On average, 90 percent of Project QUEST participants graduate and are placed in higher paying jobs with benefits. But Project QUEST will not be the only recipient of these funds.

Any organization wanting to participate in the Ready to Work SA program should be required to meet the same standards that have made Project QUEST so successful. While this may seem obvious, some organizations and institutions will need to rethink and redesign how they operate. To ensure high-level performance, the city of San Antonio must provide oversight and management with real consequences for those who fail to meet program goals. Aspirational goals are insufficient when spending taxpayer dollars.

COPS/Metro's leaders delivered more than 50,000 voters in support of Ready to Work SA because we believe in investing in people. This commitment has propelled the city of San Antonio into a national leadership role for COVID-19 recovery. Moody's, the bond rating agency, issued a "credit positive" report in recognition of San Antonio's commitment to investing in the future of its people. Recently, Houston Chronicle and Express-News business columnist Chris Tomlinson wrote, "San Antonians may have the lowest per capita incomes among America's 10 most populous cities, but its citizens have demonstrated they are among the wisest stewards of taxpayer's money."

With the eyes of the nation on us, we must invest wisely in evidence-based programs that will allow our neighbors to move up the economic ladder and build a strong, resilient economy for all of San Antonio.

Mike Phillips is a COPS/Metro leader and a member of First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Antonio. Hector Garcia is a COPS/Metro leader and a Project QUEST board member. He is a member of St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church.