Ready to Work faces critical test as hundreds poised to graduate and seek jobs

by Tracy Idell Hamilton
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Alfred Pacheco is taking an online course through UTSA to become a medical coder, making him one of the more than 3,000 people enrolled in training through Ready to Work. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

Clayton Perry, sitting through his final City Council meeting, wanted to hear the numbers one last time.

It was May 18, and the city’s Ready to Work program needed council approval for $35 million to fund the second fiscal year of its ambitious, voter-approved workforce development effort, which begins July 1.
Among other questions, Perry asked Mike Ramsey, who leads the program, how many people Ready to Work will have placed in jobs by the end of fiscal 2024.

Ramsey’s answer of 2,000 people prompted Perry to opine again that the initial goals of Ready to Work had been drastically reduced since 77% of voters approved funding for the program in November 2020 with a one-eighth cent slice of the city’s sales tax.

“Back then we said ... it was 40,000 or ‘up to 40,000’ — for $150 million,” the District 10 councilman said.

By the time council approved the program’s first full fiscal year budget and $183 million in contracts in February 2022, the “up to 40,000” campaign language had been replaced with a series of targets: intake up to 39,000 applicants, enroll up to 28,000 and place 15,600 in jobs.

Critics express skepticism that even the scaled-back goal can be met, given the current numbers: As of June 21, 440 people have completed training, according to Ready to Work’s dashboard; of those, 162 have reported finding jobs.

However, the pipeline is filling. More than 3,000 people are currently in training or degree programs, and thousands more have completed the first step toward enrolling in one of Ready to Work’s dozens of courses. And those who have landed jobs have seen their median income rise from $13,000 to $37,000, fulfilling the program’s promise of meaningfully boosting graduate’s fortunes.

Defenders of Ready to Work say scaling a workforce development program of this magnitude is unprecedented, and the foundational work to make it a success has now largely been done, using data and feedback to adjust the program and shape marketing efforts.

Whether that work has been sufficient will soon become clear.

In the next six months, nearly 1,400 people will complete their training or degree and begin job hunting, putting the most critical part of the program to the test: making sure participants are able to secure good-paying jobs in high-demand fields that offer benefits and a career trajectory.
As of now, the organizations contracted to administer Ready to Work are not meeting the city’s target of moving 80% of graduates into jobs within six months — and that’s from helping dozens, not hundreds, of participants.

Ramsey is confident they’ll ultimately hit that target, and that Ready to Work will live up to its ultimate promise: to permanently disrupt the economic destiny of enough people’s lives to measurably reduce the generational poverty that plagues San Antonio.

“This is a transformational effort,” he said. “If we can help these partners get better and more efficient at helping people get through training and get placed in jobs, our community is going to be better off in the long run.”

Mike Ramsey, executive director of the city’s Workforce Development Office, leads Ready to Work, an education and job placement program funded by taxpayers. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report
A businessman’s concerns

The city created its Workforce Development Office to oversee Ready to Work, and in February 2022 awarded contracts to four outside organizations to administer what has grown to be, thanks to higher than expected sales tax revenue, at least a $200 million program:

- Workforce Solutions Alamo, $102,390,463
- Alamo Colleges District, $49,327,586
- Project Quest $26,413,832
- Restore Education $5,147,865

Those contractors have spent just under $11 million as of April, according to figures supplied by the Workforce Development Office.

By all accounts, the first several months of the program’s launch were rocky.

High early interest swamped some Ready to Work contractors, who scrambled to hire enough workers to process applicants. Almost 40% of those who applied were deemed ineligible, often because they lived outside city limits or earned too much money to qualify. Others misunderstood the program, thinking they would be offered a job, rather than job training. The intake process was taking weeks, causing some people to drop out before they even began.

Brad Beldon, CEO of Beldon Roofing Company and its affiliated home improvement companies, resigned in frustration from Ready to Work’s advisory board last August. In an email obtained by the San Antonio Report, Beldon laid out concerns over a lack of accountability from contractors and his inability to get timely information about the program’s workings from city staff.

“In the business world that I am familiar with, success or failure comes down to two (2) factors; it is either the system or the people,” wrote Beldon, who declined to comment for this article. “Yet, I do not have
adequate data to provide recommendations to the City without such information as to which needs to be tweaked.”

Beldon sought to review, among other data, the contracts signed by the four partners chosen by the city to administer the program and the mechanisms in place for holding them accountable. Without that information, he wrote, “I do not feel I can provide effective advice.”

He sent a second email days later to City Manager Erik Walsh, expanding on his concerns, to include whether the advisory board had been set up legally. He ultimately declined to meet with Walsh, however, and resigned before the next board meeting.

Doug McMurry, who retired in 2022 as executive vice president of the San Antonio chapter of the construction industry trade group Associated General Contractors, was one of the original advisory board members. He left the board when he retired, but remains a passionate advocate for Ready to Work.

He acknowledged Beldon’s concerns.

“I thought his perspective [was] very valuable. He was asking good questions and I think on the verge of getting good answers,” he said. But Beldon was also impatient, McMurry said, accustomed to the speed of the private sector.

“I think accountability is important when you’re spending taxpayer money,” McMurry said, “but when you’re building a national workforce model that’s never been done before, there needs to be some give and take.”

**Pay for performance**

Councilwoman Adriana Rocha Garcia (D4), who sits on the advisory board, remains dissatisfied with the program’s marketing, which she believes relies too heavily on social media and not enough direct contact with the target population. “The digital divide is real,” she told the San Antonio Report.
Ready to Work is hiring a manager to oversee the $2 million marketing contract held by Creative Noggin. “That tells me they still need help,” she said.

Ramsey said the agency has been responsive to the councilwoman’s suggestions, and he pushed back on the narrative that the marketing has been ineffective. “They’ve pulled 16,000 people into the pipeline,” he said of Creative Noggin.

Ready to Work — and its marketing — has evolved since Beldon’s resignation. Applicant eligibility now hovers around 90%, and the intake process has been streamlined. Eligibility has expanded to include Bexar County veterans and their family members, and household income requirements have been clarified.

But COPS/Metro Alliance, the longtime coalition that advocates for working families and is in many ways responsible for the program’s existence, continues to raise concerns.

The group’s main issue is making sure those who complete certifications or degrees are indeed hired by the 330 companies who have pledged to support Ready to Work. COPS/Metro leaders say the pledge is not sufficient and have pressed city leaders to extract something akin to job guarantees from those employers.

At a meeting with COPS/Metro in April, Mayor Ron Nirenberg pledged to continue meeting with employers to understand their hiring needs. Walsh, addressing accountability concerns, said the city pays Ready to Work’s contractors only when individuals are admitted into the program.

"We structured those contracts to not just pay for activity, but for actual performance," he said. "We meet with those contractors quarterly, to review their stats."

Walsh said his office had not seen any "systemic issues" that would lead it to terminate any of those contracts, although "we have had to make adjustments in terms of recruiting and marketing."

Rocha Garcia, McMurry and others interviewed for this story emphasized that Ramsey and his team have been responsive to recommendations for making the program more successful.
"I think the city is making some good-faith efforts," said Sonia Rodriguez, a COPS/Metro leader and chair of the board of directors for Project Quest. "We wish they were doing it a lot faster."

**Key role of case managers**

At the June 20 advisory board meeting, members got an update on the numbers, voted to add certified nursing assistants to the list of eligible occupations and heard from researchers at UTSA's Urban Education Institute, which was contracted to help strengthen the program's design and implementation.

The researchers are analyzing everything from drop-out patterns to training course selections; they've also been interviewing those going through the program, as well as those who've dropped out.

Many participants report feeling "highly stressed" about their financial situation, and the guidance and encouragement of the case managers assigned to each participant plays a critical role in their success, researchers have found. Those who've dropped out of Ready to Work report not having clarity about the cost — there are caps on how much tuition the program covers — or time commitment of training.

UTSA is just one of the organizations gathering data and offering program guidance to Ready to Work. For additional expertise, the program also is partnering with two national nonprofits that promote workforce development best practices.

Through those organizations' feedback, it has become clear how important Ready to Work's support services and encouragement are to participants. That support includes individualized case management and emergency funding; case managers also connect eligible participants to resources such as additional financial assistance, childcare and transportation.

**From disability to trainee**

Hispanic and Black women, many with children, make up a majority of program participants. Helping remove the barriers they face to join the workforce is done by caseworkers like Cinthia Cazares.
She works for the nonprofit Avance, which is part of the coalition stitched together by Workforce Solutions Alamo to serve Ready to Work participants. Cazares said the handholding caseworkers offer is "taxing" but absolutely critical to the population the program aims to serve. "We kind of cut it in chunks so it doesn't become too overwhelming," she said.

Alfred Pacheco, at 59, is older than most Ready to Work participants. On disability for the past six years, he is eager to get back into the workforce. He is taking an online course through UTSA to become a medical coder, making him one of more than 1,200 residents now in training for a position in health care.

"When I first started this, I was scared. I didn't believe in myself. I had never worked with computers or anything like that. I've always done physical work," he said. "So this is something different, and they believed in me."
His last day of class is Oct. 15, then he must pass a certification test before applying for jobs. "Cinthia is going to help me — she said they wouldn't let me go until they got me a job."

"Soft skills" training, like résumé writing and interview prep, is an integral part of Ready to Work, said Ramsey, to help participants succeed in that last step — securing a job.

But employers too, need training, he said. They may have historically passed over people who've been out of the workforce for years, who are older or who have a disability or a criminal record. The San Antonio metro area's 3.8% unemployment rate, which has shrunken the pool of job seekers, could help in this regard, Ramsey said, as it means employers can be less picky.

**Wider universe of jobs**

StandardAero, a nationwide aircraft engine maintenance company with a growing presence at Port San Antonio, is seeking to hire as many as 400 new employees over the next several years. It is using Ready to Work as one of several avenues to find those employees and has developed its own 16-week training program for entry-level mechanics, who earn $22 an hour.

In addition to the low unemployment rate, said Stephanie Gaines, StandardAero's human resources director, manufacturing's outdated reputation makes recruiting difficult. Many people simply don't know that manufacturing today offers well-paying, career-track, entry-level positions — in clean, air-conditioned spaces.

Despite "manufacturing and aerospace" being one of Ready to Work's target industries, only 41 participants are currently enrolled in those training programs, despite the participation of employers like StandardAero and Toyota suppliers like Avanzar Interior Technologies.

Adrian Lopez, CEO of Workforce Solutions Alamo, has seen how many people are unaware of the myriad career paths available to them. He said he'd like to see Ready to Work pivot its marketing efforts in year two from awareness of the program to education around the universe of jobs available in San Antonio.
"Consistently over the past three and a half years since I've been CEO, the No. 1 occupation [high school graduates choose] is customer service rep," he said. "Which is crazy, given the opportunities out there in IT, cybersecurity, health care, construction and manufacturing."