

# San Antonio Express-News

## ‘Jobs committed up front’: COPS/ Metro presses mayor for greater Ready to Work accountability

By Molly Smith

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People attend a COPS/Metro Alliance issues forum in San Antonio on Sunday, April 30, 2023. The forum was also attended by San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg, Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar, San Antonio City Manager Erik Walsh, and San Antonio Chief of Police William McManus.

Mayor Ron Nirenberg pledged Sunday to convene a group of employers to discuss the skills and training they'll need from prospective employees over the next five years, a commitment that came at the urging of one of the biggest supporters of his slow-starting Ready to Work job training program.

Nirenberg also promised to seek stronger guarantees that San Antonio-area employers will hire Ready to Work graduates, and that leaders of local grassroots advocacy group COPS/Metro will be in the room when the meeting happens.

The mayor made the pledges during COPS/Metro's first forum on Ready to Work since the program launched last May. City Manager Erik Walsh also attended the session. They were put on the spot in front of a crowd of nearly 200 people and asked — yes or no — whether they would make specific commitments.

“One of the things that is imperative for a successful workforce development or job training program is you have the employer on board with the jobs committed up front,” Sister Pearl Ceasar, a COPS/Metro leader, said after the forum. “That’s how you know what to train for so that people don’t go through the training and then not have a job.”

Nirenberg said he would meet with employers within 30 days.

COPS/Metro has been one of the program's biggest champions, rallying voters to approve the November 2020 ballot measure that devotes a 1/8-cent sales tax to the program over a four-year period. It was the group's initial push for the city to put federal coronavirus relief dollars toward job training that laid the groundwork for Ready to Work.

Nirenberg, who is seeking a fourth and final term in the May 6 election, has largely pinned his legacy on this job training initiative, which he believes will help put an end to the generational poverty that has long defined the city.

Although about 300 employers have signed a pledge that they will look to hire Ready to Work graduates, that isn't sufficient to ensure the program's success — and ultimately that low-wage San Antonians have an opportunity to land a quality job, COPS/Metro leaders say.

“How do you market (the program) if you're not telling people, ‘There are jobs available at Rackspace to do this kind of AI technology. They're looking for health coders at Methodist Hospital,’” leader Sonia Rodriguez said. “It's like, ‘Well, you train for something and we'll see if we can find you

a job.’ That’s not an effective way of doing things — you’ve got to be really specific.”

This specificity might entice more people to enroll in the program, she said.

The city has struggled to meet its enrollment goals, which the Workforce Development Office revised in March in order to meet its first-year target by June 30. The new goal is to enroll close to 2,900 people by that date, down from 5,800.

The overall goal for the program — which city officials anticipate will run through 2028 — is to enroll 28,000 people in job training or associate’s or bachelor’s degree programs, and to place over 15,600 participants in jobs paying at least \$15 an hour.

To date, 107 people have finished their education or training courses and been hired at an average hourly wage of \$18.60, according to city data.

COPS/Metro has pushed for the city to raise the hourly wage floor to \$20 to entice more people to apply. While they didn’t seek such a commitment Sunday, it remains a goal and something they’ve discussed with the mayor, leaders said.

They were more concerned about getting a guarantee from city leadership that the program will provide greater emergency assistance to help participants with housing, food, transportation or child care beyond the current \$1,500 stipend.

“We saw a number of times where some folks just needed more (than \$1,500) and in those cases, we went above,” Walsh said. He pledged to work with Workforce Development, the mayor and the City Council to figure out “how we continue to broaden that support for those who need the most help.”

He received a round of applause from the crowd.

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The mayor sought to get a commitment of his own from the group, but they turned down his invitation to join the Ready to Work Advisory Board.

“We’ve attended, we’ve made recommendations, but we understand that the advisory board is not the decision-making board,” leader Rena Oden said. “So we don’t want to have our hands tied being on the board when we need to nudge you a little bit harder.”

Nirenberg took the rejection gracefully, but told them “the door is still open” were they to change their mind.

“We need COPS/Metro to continue to be at the table,” Nirenberg told the crowd. “You have continued to be the true north in this community on so many issues, and on the fight against poverty you will continue to be.”

Leaders say they hope the mayor and Walsh walked away from the forum with a clearer understanding of COPS/Metro’s commitment to making Ready to Work successful — both at lifting San Antonians out of poverty and serving as a workforce development model for cities nationwide.

“We’re not ready to walk away from it. We’re going to work and we’re going to work hard at it,” Rodriguez said. “We’re going to partner with them, but they need to step up their game.”