

# Raise minimum wage for city workers

Robert Cruz, For the Express-News

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Understandably, the community gushes with excitement when San Antonio is considered “cool” for college grads. As David Hendricks wrote in the Express News, a national survey indicates that our city’s “brain drain,” the loss of educated young professionals, is showing signs of reversal. San Antonio is reportedly now one of best big U.S. cities for new graduates.

Unfortunately, San Antonio ranks high in not-so-cool lists. We are the most income-segregated large city in the U.S. And despite sustained record-low unemployment, poverty is entrenched. The child poverty rate for Bexar County is 27 percent overall, and 32 percent for Hispanic and black children. And because Hispanic and black children are more likely to go to underfunded schools and experience more teacher instability, they may not become the professionals we are courting.

Cities require more than just professionals to prosper. Sure we want coders, but we also need janitors and receptionists. We want engineers, but we also need landscapers and security guards. We want doctors, but we also need nursing aides and bus drivers.

Leaders from COPS/Metro, a broad-based organization of local congregations, unions and schools, ask our elected officials to recognize the value of all workers and to pay them a living wage. Some officials eagerly defend the lavish compensation for public sector executives, such as City Manager Sheryl Sculley, SAWS President Robert Puente and the Alamo Colleges Chancellor Bruce Leslie, then turn around and argue that San Antonio’s low cost of living justifies low wages. Evidently, they still believe that some jobs are desirable and respectable, while others are ordinary and insignificant.

We support strategies for self-improvement and skill development so low-wage workers can move into higher-paying careers, such as the successful Project Quest. But we also recognize the value and dignity of so-called “low-skill workers.” Even if every single low-wage worker had the resources to pursue additional education and training—which is hard to fathom when juggling two or more jobs — it would be impossible, and undesirable, to vacate all those low-paying positions. We will always need people doing the less-glamorous jobs. But they don’t have to be bad jobs.

COPS/Metro organizes to transform our low-wage culture into one of shared prosperity, to ensure equal opportunities to pursue our dreams and to turn “bad jobs” into “good jobs” by raising the pay. Our living wage campaign is an organized response to the needs of thousands of workers who have shared their concerns and fears, as well as their hopes and dreams, in face-to-face conversations.

A majority of our council members pledged to chart a path to a new minimum wage of \$15 an hour for city employees, just above the food-stamp qualification cutoff for a family of four. They know it is the right thing to do for employees and for the city as a major employer. It is proven that a low-wage worker is not a low-cost worker. Higher wages tend to reduce turnover and increase productivity.

The City Council took the first step toward a living wage last year, raising the entry-level hourly wage from \$11.47 to \$13. According to city documents, that raise would cost less than \$3 million a year, or 0.3 percent of the general fund budget. We urge the council to keep its commitment by taking the next step when it approves the budget this week: raise the minimum wage for city employees to \$14 an hour.

*Robert Cruz is a member of St. Leo the Great Catholic Church and a leader with COPS/Metro.*