



THE MONITOR

COMMENTARY:

Funding future Texas workers in the RGV

DAVID JACKSON | MONITOR BOARD OF CONTRIBUTOR

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Kristina Gaytan, a single mother of three, is about to graduate with an associate degree from South Texas College in business management. She was among several VIDA students who traveled to Austin on March 21 to meet with Texas lawmakers from the Rio Grande Valley. These students were part of a group of 27 members of Valley Interfaith who joined other IAF groups totaling more than 200 at the Texas Capitol.

What would motivate these young people to catch a 4 a.m. ride to Austin for this all-day excursion? To tell lawmakers about the tremendous success of the VIDA program in assisting and motivating students to achieve education and good-paying jobs after they graduate and to advocate for the need for increased funding for the Texas Innovative Adult Career Education Fund.

This is the fund which, through a competitive grant process, provides matching state money for the VIDA program and five other sister workforce programs in Texas.

These needed funds would provide state matching dollars for the local workforce projects, like VIDA. Per biennium, VIDA and sister organizations receive \$500,000. This is money that goes to tuition at the local colleges, helps to provide basic supplies for students, and ensures they have the necessary support to graduate and get good jobs. To receive this money, VIDA and other organizations must provide matching local money, dollar for dollar. Statewide, these workforce projects have graduated over 12,000 people who were earning poverty wages and are now earning over \$20 per hour. This is one of the brightest stars as far as workforce development projects in Texas. And we need our legislators to fund what works.

Texas and the Rio Grande Valley have seen enormous growth. As new jobs are created, the question remains, who will benefit from these new positions? Will we continue to import travel nurses from abroad while there are many who live in McAllen, Edinburg, Weslaco, or Pharr, who, with the necessary training would be capable of filling those positions and being longterm contributors to our property tax base? Do we want to fund what amounts to a hand up, and takes people off of government assistance? That is the decision our law makers face this legislative session.

We feel optimistic. At a press conference on the Capitol steps, state Sen. Jose Menendez and state Reps. Eddie Rodriguez, Eddie Lucio III, Rene Oliveira and Terry Canales joined us and pledged their support and commitment to increase funding for these programs. We will continue to lobby and we hope others from the Valley will join us in this effort.

David Jackson is a volunteer with Valley Interfaith from St. John the Baptist parish. He writes for The Monitor's Board of Contributors.