

COPS, Metro Alliance, and Project QUEST

"If we can educate Shamu, we can educate the people! If we can educate Shamu, we can educate the people!" chanted the several hundred San Antonio residents massed in front of city hall. SeaWorld had recently opened, bringing Shamu the killer whale along with hundreds of low-wage jobs. These residents, however, were advocating for local investment in skills training that would enable people to get better-paying jobs.

Inside city hall, Mayor Nelson Wolff was informing community leaders that he didn't have the \$2 million for Project QUEST he had promised during his campaign. "Go out and tell them that we don't have the money," Wolfe said to the group. "No," responded one of the leaders, Pat Ozuna. "*You* go out there and you tell them." So everyone marched to the front of city hall, where a big ceremonial check was awaiting the mayor's signature. "Well," said Ms. Ozuna, "will you invest in us?" The mayor took a moment to look out at the crowd, then said yes and signed the check.¹

For years COPS and Metro Alliance had focused primarily on infrastructure issues because many streets in San Antonio's less prosperous communities were unpaved and had serious drainage problems. Hundreds of millions of dollars were invested to address those concerns as a result of their advocacy. When Levi-Strauss closed its San Antonio plant in 1990, laying off 1,100 low-skill workers, COPS and Metro shifted their focus to jobs. At the time, San Antonio was marketing itself as a major tourist and convention destination featuring the Alamo and the city's famed Riverwalk. San Antonio's hotel, restaurant, and retail sectors were booming, but typically offered low-wage opportunities.

COPS and Metro leaders held dozens of meetings with business leaders, educational institutions, and elected officials. They found that there were good paying jobs, particularly in health care, that employers were having a hard time filling. In fact, many were recruiting staff from outside the metropolitan area and, in some cases, from overseas. QUEST was created to connect residents of San Antonio's low-income communities to the training that would enable them to compete for these opportunities. Employers committed to hiring San Antonio residents once they were trained, and Governor Ann Richards and Mayor Wolff agreed to provide the capital needed to support QUEST.

COPS' and Metro's involvement didn't end at the check signing outside city hall, however. Their team held more than 30 meetings in the community to finalize QUEST's design. They concluded that prospective participants would have to have a high school degree and at least 20 working years ahead of them. They also decided that recruitment would take place mainly through parishes and churches. As one COPS leader explained:

We just told people at the parishes that this new job training was established and that we'd be recruiting for candidates. We were quite strict. We would bring them in; we would tell them how difficult the program was going to be but it was really worth it. What kind of family support would they have? We were going to invest in them and we didn't want them to fall through the cracks. We really wanted them to be successful. Then we sent them down to the QUEST office.

Throughout the quarter century since QUEST was launched, COPS' and Metro Alliance's roles have changed, but their leaders still have to advocate for continued funding from the city. Each year they meet with members of the city council and ensure their votes for continued support. San Antonio's support comes out of the city's general fund—QUEST has received little funding from the public workforce system—and provides the organization with a critical source of flexible resources.