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Group seeks more money for jobs program, raise in minimum wage

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*Sister Consuelo Tovar of COPS/Metro Alliance leads a press conference on the steps of city hall.
Photo: Kin Man Hui, Staff / San Antonio Express-News*

With just over a week left before the City Council adopts the annual municipal budget, a nonpartisan, grass-roots coalition of community organizers called for an increase in funding for the workforce training program [Project Quest](#) and a commitment to raising the city's minimum wage to \$15.

COPS/Metro Alliance leaders, who gathered at City Hall on Tuesday just before a council meeting on employee compensation and benefits, want the city to make good on the council's promise to increase the minimum wage for city employees to \$15 by fiscal year 2019. A few years ago, the council made a commitment to hit the \$15 hourly wage mark over the course of three budget cycles, and it is on track to do so next year.

In the proposed FY '18 budget, the minimum hourly wage is set to increase to \$14.25 — up from \$13.75.

The group was joined by five of the seven council members who committed to COPS/Metro's platform during an April campaign forum: Roberto Treviño of District 1, William "Cruz" Shaw of District 2, Rey Saldaña of District 4, Shirley Gonzales of District 5 and Ana Sandoval of District 7. All five spoke briefly, pledging their support for the organization's initiatives.

Mayor Ron Nirenberg and District 3 Councilwoman Rebecca Viagran have also pledged to support COPS/Metro's agenda but could not attend the news conference.

Father Jimmy Drennan, a COPS/Metro leader, pointed directly to the council members standing to the side of the lectern and asked them to create a new direction for the city that moves people away from dependency on the government.

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"We are asking you to do it," he said. "And we are going to hold you to it."

The group's leaders also are advocating for additional funding for Project Quest, its job training program, in the new budget.

Currently, Project Quest is slated to receive \$2.2 million in the [FY 2018 budget](#). COPS/Metro leaders want to see that increased to \$2.5 million. The additional funding would create 100 new jobs, COPS/Metro leader Sister Consuelo Tovar said.

Project Quest received \$2.2 million in the [FY '17 budget](#).

During the Tuesday council work session, there was some discussion about increasing the hourly rate in the FY '18 budget, which begins Oct. 1, beyond the proposed \$14.25.

"Our plan has always been and will continue to be getting to \$15 next year," Nirenberg said before asking about costs for accelerating the timeline.

City Manager Sheryl Sculley said increasing the starting wage to \$14.50 an hour — a 25-cent increase from what's currently proposed — would cost an additional \$400,000. Increasing the rate to \$14.75 this year would cost an additional \$900,000 in the city's \$2.7 billion budget. Moving to the \$15 hourly wage this year would cost \$1.3 million, Sculley said.

COPS/Metro leaders praised council members Tuesday for action they've already taken on other issues important to the organization: creating a [legal defense fund for immigrants](#) and allocating [\\$6.5 million in federal funds to put toward rehabilitation of owner-occupied homes](#).

After the news conference, Saldaña said the council had some concerns about Project Quest a few years, when the program was undergoing some changes and growing pains. Since then, he said, he believes that the program has proved itself, having expanded its offerings to include coding camps and partnered with outside organizations such as Rackspace to provide training. He said he supports the budget increase for Project Quest but added that he still has some outstanding questions about the specific programs the funding would support.

The council is set to vote on the budget Sept. 14.

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