

Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk

Volume 7
Issue 1 *50 Years After the War on Poverty:
Historic Victories and New Challenges*

Article 9

2016

IAF: Examples of Institutions Organizing on Behalf of Families

Willie Bennett
The Metropolitan Organization, wblvjr@gmail.com

Rev. John Ogletree

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/childrenatrisk>

Recommended Citation

Bennett, Willie and Rev. John Ogletree (2016) "IAF: Examples of Institutions Organizing on Behalf of Families," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*. Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58464/2155-5834.1310>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/childrenatrisk/vol7/iss1/9>

The *Journal of Applied Research on Children* is brought to you for free and open access by CHILDREN AT RISK at DigitalCommons@The Texas Medical Center. It has a "cc by-nc-nd" Creative Commons license" (Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives) For more information, please contact digitalcommons@exch.library.tmc.edu



In 1997, Samsung received an \$80 million tax abatement to build a plant in Austin, Texas amid the promise of “high paying jobs.” People were excited about the company coming to town and there was great buzz, but then they learned that most of the jobs would pay minimum wage. At a meeting of non-profits gathered to learn more about the Samsung jobs and to help them recruit, the company said that they also needed \$1 million to train an advance group of 100 workers for six weeks. In addition to forgoing \$80 million in tax revenue that this growing city needed, and creating an uneven playing field with direct competitors in the tech industry, now the city of Austin and Travis county were being asked to come up with an additional million dollars. This angered Fr. John Korcsmar, pastor of Dolores Catholic Church. He had come to the meeting in hopes of hearing how his parishioners could work one job to provide for their families instead of two or three. Angry that most jobs would pay minimum wage and that this was not what was promised, Fr. John Korcsmar stood up and said, “We will fight you on this!”

The “we” he was speaking of was [Austin Interfaith](#), a diverse organization of congregations, schools, and non-profits that taught their members how to build power to produce local change. Austin Interfaith was part of the West/Southwest portion of the IAF Network. The IAF stands for the [Industrial Areas Foundation](#), the oldest and largest organizing entity in the country with 60 organizations in the US. It was founded by Saul Alinsky, but nurtured and grown under Director Ed Chambers and an organizer who would go on to build the [West/Southwest IAF](#) network, [Ernesto \(Ernie\) Cortes](#). Fr. John was one of the co-chairs of Austin Interfaith and he and others were there representing the organization and their interest in living wage jobs. The organization had just completed 200 house meetings with roughly 2,000 people from 18 congregations in a six-week period. House meetings are a basic tool in IAF organizing. They are small group meetings where people share the pressures facing their families and break those shared problems down into definitive winning issues. Access to good paying jobs was determined to be one of the priorities for the organization. Because of the house meetings and conversations around a strategy for better paying jobs, Fr. John knew he was not alone in his disappointment. Austin Interfaith quickly pulled together a meeting of 500 persons with public officials to announce opposition to the tax abatement and the additional \$1 million. They began doing “research actions” with elected officials to understand

who knew what before the tax abatement deal was signed and why it did not include target wage jobs. They also met with Samsung's competitors, and other churches and organizations to get their reactions and to build support. Austin Interfaith galvanized enough support from the City Council and County Commissioners to hold up the \$1 million, forcing Samsung back to the table where they agreed to raise wages to \$9/hr. Viewing this, the County Commissioners agreed that they could not have a company raise their wage floor unless they as a county did the same. Travis County Commissioners raised the starting wage of county workers as a result of this fight. This spurred a conversation about the wage floor in the City of Austin. Soon after, the City of Austin raised wages for city workers.

Thousands of people had their wages increased because an organized constituency of local leaders, house wives, clergy, teachers, sales persons, lawyers, etc., said that their families deserved a better deal from their city and county. They said this not simply with bluster, but with power and expertise that came from a constituency of thousands with relationships built through one to one and small group meetings to last over time. If this was just about the success of a protest movement pressuring change, this would be the end of the story and we would have to wait for the next movement to catch fire and spring up. It would not be repeatable. But this was not the end. This is why Austin Interfaith was created. It served as a university of public life teaching, forming, and connecting leaders from institutions to impact their local communities for positive change. Instead of this being a one-time event, this was a notable victory in a string of accomplishments because this was not a movement. It was the habits and practices of an organization that trained local people to take charge of their situation and improve the situations for their families.

Austin Interfaith leaders then went back to Samsung and built a relationship with the company and asked them to be part of an innovative pilot project that would later be named [Capital IDEA \(Investing in Development and Employment of Adults\)](#). Capital IDEA was premised on 1) training people for jobs that already exist and can be trained for at a community college in under two years, 2) jobs paying a living wage, 3) providing support for people so they can finish the program, and 4) ensuring most participants walk away with a living wage career. These ideas were not theirs alone. Years earlier their sister organizations Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and Metro Alliance in

San Antonio had created the innovative and award winning workforce intermediary called [Project Quest](#). This was in response to the closing of the Levi Strauss plant and the Airforce base which left thousands of people out of work. Not only that, the jobs that San Antonio lost were good paying jobs that could support families. Without them, workers without a college degree were resigned to the low wage reality of San Antonio at that time. [COPS/METRO](#) leaders and pastors did house meetings across the city in Catholic and Protestant parishes and in schools talking about jobs and the nature of work. They also did research to find out who had the good jobs and what it took to get them. They researched job training programs and began to ask why so many people completed these programs but had no work or good paying jobs as a result.

COPS/METRO was following the tried and true IAF process of organizing that they helped perfect in their early years. Founded in 1974, COPS was the first of the modern IAF organizations in the country and focused on organizing through institutions, primarily congregations, instead of individuals. This would become the model for the rest of the IAF. The thinking was that since the end of the Civil Rights movement, many individuals that led and participated in civil rights, were gone. They had to take care of their family. They were tired or lost interest. Some had died while others were now working in the local, state, or federal bureaucracy. However, the institutions that the movement fought against still remained but had changed tactics. Banks still redlined, schools fought integration, and money still flowed away from minority and poor areas.

A young organizer name Ernesto Cortes came back to his hometown of San Antonio having participated in the Civil Rights movement and the Farm Workers movement before joining Ed Chambers and the IAF. He decided to focus on organizing and training a large constituency of institutional leaders, people who had deep networks of relationships and trust within their church and community, to build the power to change the plight of the poor and minorities in San Antonio. The rest, as they say, is history. COPS went on to become arguably the most powerful citizens' organization in the country. It forever changed the city of San Antonio winning bond after bond and victory after victory for water, sewer, playgrounds, and parks for the neglected Westside of San Antonio. Later it expanded to the North and became COPS/METRO. The work of Ernie Cortes also expanded as he recruited organizers and placed them in cities asking for organizations like COPS across the southwest. He had

proven that people did not have to wait for the next charismatic leader or movement. They could create an organization that taught how to produce change for themselves through organizing, and they could do it repeatedly as long as they built the power necessary.

Armed with this institutional memory of successes and learning from mistakes, COPS/METRO took on one of their greatest challenges, the creation of a new way to train people for jobs. At the time their ideas were quite radical. The conventional wisdom was that no one could train for jobs at a target wage. Neither could you guarantee employment afterwards. The idea of a 'one stop shop' for job seekers was also seen as radical. But armed with stories from 5000 people in house meetings and their memory and experiences from the past, they challenged the city to support this new effort with an over \$2 million investment from the general fund. At first Mayor Wolff balked, but after coming out to the COPS/METRO rally at on the steps and hearing them chant, "Invest in US. Invest in US. Invest in US!" he agreed to work with the organization to find the money. This led to the creation of the first high/wage, high/skill training initiative, Project Quest. It was a separate non-profit created by COPS/METRO but with its own board and staff. Project Quest was an unqualified success. Not only were they able to train workers for high level jobs AND get them hired at an 80% placement rate, they found that the children of participants graduated high school and attended college at a higher rate. Project Quest became the model for Austin Interfaith as they created Capital IDEA, EPISO (El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization), ARRIBA(Advanced Retraining and Redevelopment in Border Areas) and Valley Interfaith as they created VIDA(Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement).

Valley Interfaith was created in the '80s with institutions from across the Rio Grande Valley, one of the poorest areas in the country. Like COPS/METRO and Austin Interfaith, it drew on its past experiences and local power to create [VIDA](#). Valley Interfaith leaders were justifiably proud that they, with the support of their sister organizations in Texas, had passed a \$500 million bond to bring water and sewer infrastructure to the Valley. Before you had Flint, Michigan, you had Rio Grande Valley residents paying for jugs of water at local stores to use for cooking and bathing because there was not running water there. It was one of the few areas of the country where third world diseases were common due to lack of access to clean water. Through their organizing and statewide

relationships, they brought state officials to the Valley to see the *colonias* firsthand. These Valley leaders, mostly Spanish speaking, taught themselves and politicians how to add water and sewer lines to the *colonias* where they and their fellow parishioners lived. With this knowledge, experience, memory and power, they went on to create VIDA as a way to increase job opportunities in the Valley.

However, as great and needed as VIDA was, it still did not solve the low wage problems that existed in their area. Wives and workers complained that they had to leave the Valley and seek work in Houston and other places to feed their families because the pay was so low. In 1997 after winning several bonds and sales tax increases for schools, health care facilities, and libraries, Valley Interfaith leaders began thinking about a living wage campaign. At first many leaders accepted the conventional view that you cannot mess with the labor market and that view was reinforced by business persons they met during research actions. But the more they listened to the stories of their families, studied their faith tradition, and attended trainings with economists and organizers, the more they began to understand that this was about their dignity as people created in the image of God. If they wanted to be treated as such, they had to demand higher wages. After an analysis of the labor market and thoughts about raising the minimum wage for the area, which would require state legislation, they decided to target the thirty-two school districts in the Valley for their campaign. Since Valley Interfaith had passed bonds in some areas to build schools, the districts knew of the organization's power and began meeting with them. Each of these districts had cooks, bus drivers, aides, and maintenance workers paid at or just above the then minimum wage of \$5.50/hr. Valley Interfaith leaders made an argument for wage increases to these workers to reduce turn over, increase worker quality and loyalty. They worked with each separate district to craft a strategy to raise wages. This initiative was [studied by economist Paul Osterman](#) and he concluded that 8,400 people had their wages raised by an average of ninety cents an hour. At the time it was one of the largest wage campaigns in the country.

By 2007, Texas IAF's ten organizations had created four labor market intermediaries like Project Quest, which spawned three others in Arizona, Louisiana, and Iowa. Project Quest had become a signature piece of the statewide network. One of the critiques of Project Quest was that it was too expensive and needed to be brought to scale for its impact

to be felt in cities and to decrease the cost. Leaders and organizers across the state then met to figure out a way to expand the programs within existing cities and to other cities. In 2007 they created the [JET Fund](#) (Jobs Education and Training). This set aside \$5 million dollars for high/skill, high/wage training programs that had a track record of training people for jobs that already existed and had raised a local match to draw down state funds. This allowed Quest type programs to expand to Houston and Dallas and allowed the existing programs to increase in size. It also funded some non-affiliated workforce programs in other areas. During the 2013 state legislative session it was changed to the [ACE Fund](#) (Accelerating Connections to Employment) and continues to fund expansion efforts by adding a state match to local dollars.

What started as a radical idea in the 90s has turned into multiple workforce projects that have received [Department of Labor grants](#) and many accolades for their continued success. These programs only exist because a generation ago, organizers and leaders believed they could build organizations with the power to repeatedly change their communities as needed. Today this work continues on behalf of families as COPS/METRO leaders in 2015 successfully [raised the wages of city workers to \\$13.00/hr.](#) Austin Interfaith raised the wages of all city workers, including [temporary and contracted workers, to \\$13.03/hr.](#) In Houston, the leaders of TMO, The Metropolitan Organization, challenged mayoral candidates to raise city worker wages to \$15/hr as well.

Whether it's fighting for wages, paving streets, reducing hospital wait times, improving schools, or passing bonds, these citizen organizations continue to stand for the local interests of families now as before. As they celebrate their 40th anniversary of organizing in Texas and as we look back on 50 years of accomplishments after the war on poverty, the work of the IAF, and its citizen organizations that give people the power to determine their own fate, is a model to be lifted up.