

# Structures of Opportunity

## Developing the Neighborhood Jobs Initiative in Fort Worth, Texas

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The Near Northside neighborhood of Fort Worth, Texas (population 13,000), is among the city's poorer enclaves, with a median income more than 40 percent below that of Fort Worth as a whole. Yet the neighborhood's employment rate is high, with many heads of households working two or even three low-wage jobs a day. In short, the antipoverty challenge in the Near Northside isn't mainly a matter of encouraging residents to work. It's a matter of helping them raise their skills, and their access to job opportunities, above the level of unstable, subsistence work with few or no benefits.

The great majority of Near Northside residents are immigrants from Mexico or first-generation Mexican-Americans, with a growing minority from other parts of Latin America. As a result, many residents speak little or no English, and literacy levels, even in Spanish, are below average. This has one important consequence: Even though the neighborhood is close to the geographic heart of Fort Worth, residents are in many respects isolated from the employment economy around them — the informal networks of information about jobs and educational opportunity, or about child care and other basic family needs, that pave a way for most American families toward career mobility and a rising standard of living. Opportunities and services may be available, but they are removed from many Near Northside residents by barriers of distance, cost, or language.

In the mid-1990s, the Near Northside Partners' Council, once an all-volunteer network of neighborhood residents, hired its first full-time staff and took on the task of finding or creating those mainstream opportunities in its community. The plan got a significant boost in 1999, when the Council became one of five centers for a national demonstration called the Neighborhood Jobs Initiative, sponsored by the Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan Chase Foundations and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and working in partnership with the Urban Institute and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC). After an extensive planning period, the Neighborhood Jobs Initiative started full operation in the Near Northside in 2000, and the early results are both encouraging and surprising.

Although the preliminary research and planning left no doubt that residents would respond in large numbers to an offer of training and job referrals, one surprise has been a flood of applications specifically from women. Based partly on cultural patterns in Latin America, the Partners' Council had imagined that women might be slower than men to apply for training, or to envision themselves on a career track. Instead, women have made up the overwhelming majority of early enrollees, even for classes that were specifically scheduled in non-work hours so that all employed people could attend. Men have, however, responded in rising numbers to opportunities for technical training, among other skill-intensive programs — everything from basic computer

operations to specific career tracks in telecommunications and computer support functions. To build and fine-tune its web of training and services, the Council has had to rely on a network of cooperating organizations with different specialties. Tarrant County College, for example, has recruited intensively from the neighborhood and offered some classes on-site. The Fort Worth Independent School District now offers a full range of English classes in the neighborhood. The Women's Center, a citywide service organization, has provided case management, soft-skills training, and crisis counseling both in its own offices and at the Center's headquarters. A local church has made classroom space available at modest rent. The county workforce board has brokered hiring and training relationships with some key employers and created an Employers' Advisory Council for the Center. In short, the Partners' Council has begun to mobilize all the crucial elements of a functioning labor market — from education to hiring and training, from transportation to networking — around a goal of significantly boosting employment in its neighborhood.

Barely a year into its operation, it is far too soon to declare the Neighborhood Jobs Initiative in the Near Northside a success or to predict how much of its ambitious goals it can accomplish. The point of this report is to describe the particular challenge it faces — helping residents not just to enter the workforce but to think of the job market and their own skills more expansively — and the approach it has taken to that challenge. American debate on workforce policy has tended to concentrate on communities where work is rare, public assistance is widespread, and residents are fatalistic about their prospects in the labor force. That is not the profile of the Near Northside. But like plenty of other American neighborhoods — many though not all of them immigrant communities — its high rates of employment coincide with deeply entrenched poverty and isolation.

Tactics for addressing that combination of circumstances may be different, in some ways, from those needed in neighborhoods with low employment. But both kinds of communities have at least one thing in common: When residents believe that their opportunities are few and their current circumstances are all but permanent, both the opportunities and the psychology of the community need to change. Building connections to the labor market is one part of that task. The other part is building confidence among residents that the connections will truly work for *them*.

Finding the right changes, and making them a palpable reality in the Near Northside, is what the Partners Council and the Neighborhood Jobs Initiative have set out to achieve in Fort Worth. This report describes what they've done so far and outlines the challenges that lie ahead.

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