



Photos by Ray Whitehouse / For the San Antonio Express-News

Client Ivan Cantú gets a hug from daughter Annalyssa, 10, after speaking at the first-ever luncheon celebrating clients' participation in or completion of the Department of Human Services' Training for Job Success program.

Celebrating commitment to a better future

By Silvia Foster-Frau
STAFF WRITER

It was her youngest daughter's third birthday when Phelicia Salas had what she called a "little epiphany."

After 10 years of caring for her children and with no educational degree, Salas decided to go back to school.

"We had a death in the family, and I was thinking, what if something happened to my husband? Or what if we weren't together anymore?" said Salas, 29, resting her elbow on a decorative table at The Neighborhood Place on the West Side. "I don't have anything — I don't have no education, no training for jobs, I don't have nothing. So that's when I decided to go back to school."

She and a handful of other families attended a luncheon Saturday celebrating their participation in or completion of the Department of Human Services' Training for Job Success program. Though the program is at least 17 years old, the event celebrating its clients was a first.

"We felt like going through the program takes an incredible amount of hard work and it takes a commitment. We wanted to celebrate that they

Agency honors clients seeking success in work



Gisele Ikuku and daughter Lucie, 5, were among those attending the celebration. Ikuku is enrolled in the program and studying to become a registered nurse.

started in poverty, took a look at their situation and decided to get out of it," said Minerva Hernandez, the family support coordinator of the department who oversees the program.

Training for Job Success helps low-income clients attain gainful employment in high-demand jobs such as nursing, computer systems analysis and welding. The program offers financial assistance as well as transportation, child care and referrals to other resources for up to two years, typically. Caseworkers make contact with their clients at least twice a month to keep updated with their life situation and adjust their support services accordingly.

The clients must be at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline, which is \$14,850 annual income for one person. The average income for the program's clients this year was \$11,152, Hernandez said.

The program takes applications on a rolling basis. While currently at The Neighborhood Place, which also houses San Antonio's Family Service Association, the program is set to move to the Claude W. Black Community Center on the East Side in January.

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By the end of the year, Training for Job Success will have spent more than \$250,000 in direct assistance to its clients, Hernandez said. As of this month, she said, the client's total combined income has increased from \$256,518 to over \$1 million since January. She said 36 clients are expected to have transitioned out of poverty this year.

"We identify the barriers and try to work around them as much as we can. It's not just about going to school, it's about what their family, home or work life is and trying to

make it work," Hernandez said.

Salas was born and raised on the South Side, and for a while, she thought she would spend the rest of her life taking care of her children — now she has four. She started taking classes at San Antonio College three years ago and could barely afford it. She had no job skills, and her husband worked, and still does, at Pizza Hut.

"I wanted to make something of myself. I never really thought about the future, what I was focusing on was the present, and how everything was going until that day, until that night, after the birthday," Salas said.

Since Salas signed up last fall, the program has at times helped her pay for rent, utilities, tuition and textbooks. Her caseworker has connected her to internships with the city and last year helped her apply for Habitat for Humanity, which she was accepted into last October. In May this year, her family got to move into a house that she and the Habitat volunteers built.

At the lunch, a client named Ivan Cantú gave a speech about his path from poverty to now being an occupational therapy assistant. His daughter rushed over at the end to give him a hug, shortly followed by his caseworker, who teared up during his speech.

At the event, a video of the program's clients was projected, including Salas. Caseworkers spoke of the program's benefits. They encouraged people to let others in need know about the services they could receive.

"This thing has led me to so many different opportunities. It took me out of my shell; the old me wouldn't have done that video," said Salas, who will phase out of the program just around the time when she's set to graduate in the spring. "But to see that they want me to succeed, that's what makes me keep on doing it."

sfosterfrau@express-news.net