

EDITORIAL: Fresno's impressive battle plan for winning war on poverty



Jesse Alonzo, a heating, ventilation and air conditioning specialist at the Hampton Inn Fresno who also does general maintenance, was one of 50 people who received free job training and public assistance as part of the Fresno Bridge Academy's pilot program to help move people from low-wage jobs or welfare to self-sufficiency.

JOHN WALKER — The Fresno Bee file [Buy Photo](#)

Fifty years ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson and a Congress ruled by Democrats put into motion the Great Society Programs that addressed social needs with an unprecedented volume of federal resources.

Despite some successes, many of these efforts have failed to completely lift families out of poverty, help kids stay out of gangs or result in young adults receiving the necessary education and training to succeed in the workplace.

The poverty that grips the San Joaquin Valley is well documented, as are the shortfalls in educational attainment that cause our economy to sputter.

But there is hope for better times, because Fresno leaders have put together their own model to help the poor and the unemployed get off public assistance and into the work force.

It is called the Fresno Bridge Academy, and it is a team effort that brings together government funding, the nonprofit Reading and Beyond, the business community, schools and volunteers.

As The Bee's Andrea Castillo reported April 3, the Fresno Bridge Academy started in 2010 with 127 families as a demonstration project.

Two years later, founder Pete Weber and other leaders took their positive results to the Fresno County Department of Social Services, which partnered with Reading and Beyond to expand services.

Since then, more than 1,000 people have graduated. Among those in the second group, from October 2012 to last month, 77% graduated. Of those, 80% received raises or promotions and 32% became self-reliant, no longer needing government help.

These impressive results, along with Bridge's dedication to tracking clients and results, convinced the U.S. Department of Agriculture earlier this month to award a \$12.2 million grant over three years to expand the program.

Bridge is using the new money to add sites in central and west Fresno, Pinedale, El Dorado Park, Kerman and Reedley. It already serves residents in southeast Fresno, the Lowell neighborhood and Coalinga.

The goal is for 800 more people to graduate from the program by September 2017. Leaders hope to graduate another 1,500 people through the pilot expansion and ensure that at least half achieve self-reliance by the end.

So, what is the secret to Bridge's success?

It works with the entire family. Wrote Castillo: "Adults receive 18 months of job training and support through workshops covering a variety of topics, such as parenting skills, résumé building and computer training. Children get help with reading and math, English language learning and exposure to the arts."

The case managers assigned to families also are willing to go the extra mile.

For example, the case manager paired with Valeria Leon helped her become a U.S. citizen. Leon, 22, was able to go to school full time after enrolling in Bridge, and she now is working as a medical interpreter.

Now for the statistic that should interest government officials everywhere: Bridge leaders say that for every \$1 spent on the program, taxpayers and participants get back \$22.28.

That's taking into account reduced food-stamp costs and increased tax contributions by newly working families. They also found that, on average, participants saw a \$284 monthly wage increase by the end.

If Bridge leaders are able to replicate these early successes with a larger client base, Fresno might become known as the city that took on the poverty fight and won.

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