

Good Afternoon, I am Karina Ayala-Bermejo, CEO, Instituto del Progreso Latino.

When most people think about workforce development, the image that comes to mind is helping a client put a resume together, fill out a job application and successfully land a position. That is, of course, the heart of what we do - **but it is so much more.**

Workforce development is about investing in people and business. It's about making sure that workers and businesses have the skills they need to compete in today's global economy. It's about investing in proven strategies that connect workers with skills training and career pathways that lead to skilled, well-paying jobs at growing companies. And about wrap around support services to stay and grow in jobs.

Access to employment and the supports needed to stay and thrive in a job is at the core of **building equity** for individuals, families and communities. **A sustainable, living wage job is the ultimate equalizer.** And achieving these careers requires education and credentials appealing to employers.

For my own family workforce and social service supports was a game changer. My parents came to Chicago in 1974 from Mexico. My father had a third grade education, but he did not let that stop him from building a better life for us. Like many Latino immigrants coming to Chicago at that time, he connected to work at US Steel and that became the pathway to for our future. They encountered many barriers, leaving family, not knowing English, and not having a place to live.

Let me introduce you to a modern day version of my father: Al was referred to Instituto in early 2017. He was couch surfing, much like our family. His uncle agreed to let him stay on his sofa until he got on his feet. He came to us to enroll in our manufacturing training program. At the time AL was receiving \$194 in SNAP benefits monthly. He enrolled in the Manufacturing program and was an exemplary student, perfect attendance, instructors praised his student performance. He graduated with two technical credentials, and our employment specialist team helped him land a full-time job making \$11 per hour. Then he faced a barrier...as soon as he got his first paid stub, his SNAP benefits were reduced to only \$15 per month. He's resourceful, but it's hard making .50 cents a day for food work.

Have you ever gone hungry because you needed money to get to work the next day? I remember how hard it was when my father lost his job at the steel mill. I recall the hunger and also recall his humiliation admitting we needed food stamps during that period of his unemployment. I mostly recall the pride when he received his welding credential and was back on his feet.

Let us start by recognizing that it takes more than a job for a family to gain financial security and stability. We need systems that respond to the **real roadblocks people face that can affect finding and keeping sustainable employment.** In order for me – or any of you - to succeed professionally, we need the basics - childcare, transportation and healthcare - to be in place. That is no different than what our participants need. At Instituto, we meet people where they are and provide all of those wrap around supports that we all need – regardless of our income or education, like my father – with respect and dignity.

I wish I could say that Al's story has a happy ending. But I can tell you his Instituto case manager is working diligently with the DHS case worker to restate his \$194 at least until he achieved his 90 day job retention. We are hopeful, and more importantly he has hope that very soon he will no longer need his uncle's sofa and truly be on his way to self-sufficiency.

Expanding access to supports – even by a few months – could be a game changer for families.

How can we expand this impact and improve workforce development services for our communities?

Let us start by **working together to build a more transparent and equitable distribution of workforce development resources.** Where is workforce investment happening today –who is it benefiting and how are we collectively measuring impact? We cannot deliver the programs, create the collaborations and truly serve the families and communities without that information. As a people who have committed our careers to connecting people to jobs, we need to break down the silos and move towards creative partnerships that address the barriers to employment and financial stability and **we cannot even begin to do that without transparency and data.** We are committed to bringing the workforce development community – providers and funders – together to share information, build new partnerships, work collectively to the research and document and share the information we currently lack.

These days in our country – it seems like it increasingly hard to find an issue that we can all agree on. However, I think we have one here – as a system of workforce development providers and people who care about the success of families and communities – let's **breakdown the silos,**

reduce the barriers and do what we need to do together to set people up to succeed in Chicago's economy.

Thank you.