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# Uplifting Through Upskilling: Corpus Christi/Nueces County and the Inclusive Development Network



*This article [originally appeared](#) on The EvoLLLution® — an online newspaper exclusively for and by those who understand higher education best.*

**With forecasts of a recession looming on the horizon, institutions need to be focused on upskilling and reskilling existing and new learners to help their region’s economy recover.**

**In March of last year, CAEL launched the Inclusive Development Network (IDN). Supported by grants from ECMC Foundation and JPMorgan Chase & Co., the 18-month initiative is dedicated to identifying and implementing strategies that reduce equity gaps in local workforce and economic development. Its focus is on educating selected communities about inclusive practices, strategizing, and implementing policies that will revitalize local economies.**

**Five U.S. regions comprise the first IDN cohort: Cleveland, OH; Corpus Christi/Nueces County, TX; Spokane, WA; the Northeast Oklahoma Regional Alliance (NORA); and Pensacola, FL. Recently, I checked in with Gilda Ramirez, who leads the IDN project for the Corpus Christi region. She shared some highlights about the impact the IDN has had so far.**

As you might expect from a mission that sports “inclusive” in its name, the IDN process convenes a diverse set of stakeholders. That task is ideally suited to Gilda’s skills and experience. Following her retirement from a 25-year career with Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, Gilda’s volunteer work led her to take on leadership positions at the Corpus Christi Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (CCHCC) and the United Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce (UCCCC). The latter was formed in a 2016 unification between the 78-year-old CCHCC and the 100-year-old Corpus Christi Chamber of

Commerce. Her work for the chambers included grant work and nurturing the complex relationships among various groups that come with it. That experience is serving the Corpus Christi IDN well as it considers how to incorporate short-term disaster response and long-term recovery efforts into its strategic plan amid the COVID-19 crisis. In the process of directing IDN activities, Gilda coordinates efforts among entities representing government, nonprofit, educational, and private business interests.



In the Corpus Christi area, the IDN focuses on promoting inclusive growth centers for women and Hispanic people. Both are majority-minority demographics. Gilda says they were at risk of facing career obstacles even before the pandemic. They were among those most likely to be unemployed yet willing and able to work. Accordingly, identifying workforce and other economic barriers was a key first step the IDN took in designing inclusive growth strategies.

A lack of educational attainment or skill training often accounts for the economic gaps between local Hispanic and non-Hispanic teens, but not the area's relatively well-educated women. In Corpus Christi, Hispanic folk make up nearly 65% of the population. Yet, despite recent improvement, they suffer disproportionately from gaps in educational attainment and economic conditions. Gilda notes that women are less likely than men to enter the workforce, contributing to their higher poverty rate. Among all demographic groups, Hispanic women are least likely to be employed, with Hispanic mothers of young children the most likely to be excluded from the labor force. The IDN has identified a lack of access to daycare and upskilling opportunities as primary obstacles. They are preventing the community's disadvantaged residents from accessing living wages. They are also denying targeted occupations and industries a source of valuable talent.

In April, Ramirez joined the first cohort of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) Academy of Texas to learn from best practices in collaborating with employers in meeting workforce needs. These tactics will support the community's work to upskill populations targeted by the IDN plan, so they can access well-paying jobs in prioritized industries.

The TPM program's curriculum directly supports the IDN's overarching plan as one of the core strategies to develop approaches for building demand-driven, employer-led initiatives for sustaining talent pipelines aligned with dynamic business needs. This collaboration has quickly adapted to focus on evolving short- and long-term employer needs affected by the pandemic and recovery planning. Ramirez says the IDN plan is emphasizing adult certificate and degree completion through fast-tracked community college programs. Along with internships and apprenticeships, they comprise guided career-education pathways linked to in-demand, high-paying jobs.

The insight created by intensive planning and landscape analysis services the IDN has provided us with have helped

position the community for other potential partnership and development opportunities. A recently submitted proposal to the U.S. Department of Commerce included key target population and other data unearthed by IDN analysis. It would help attract entrepreneurs in telemedicine and the digital delivery of wellness programs, connecting startups to funding opportunities through public-private partnerships in the South Texas Coastal Bend.

Gilda points to several other partnerships that have benefited from the multilateral collaboration that is the hallmark of the IDN model. A 2020 census project is underway to reach historically underrepresented populations in the county. The Nueces County Opioid Task Force is securing resources and grants to help rehabilitated clients reenter the workforce. The Chamber has also joined Nueces County, the city of Corpus Christi and other IDN and regional counties to seek COVID-19 crisis stabilization funding through the formation of the Code Blue Coalition under the direction of Nueces County Judge Barbara Canales. Each case, Gilda says, is an example of working relationships among IDN participants supporting connections that lead to holistic benefits from collaboration beyond the immediate IDN scope.

However, she also stresses that a strong legacy of collaboration already existed among diverse stakeholders in the Corpus Christi community. In fact, she credits the group effort of educators, economic developers, nonprofits, local government and business representatives for Corpus Christi's selection to be an inaugural IDN community. The difference, Ramirez says, is that the IDN has broadened the community's perspective from a city- to a county-wide framework and from a P-16 education priority to one more inclusive of adult learners.

Note that the IDN has extended regional perspectives even further by encouraging benchmarking and exchanging best practices between fellow IDN member regions. Gilda describes the process as a "social experiential experiment in the works." In February, the Corpus Christi chapter of the IDN hosted its four peer cities. She says that convening attracted additional stakeholders to support the local IDN cause. Prior to that, a Corpus Christi IDN delegation visited Cleveland and Spokane.

Virtual convenings continue during the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with its challenges, says Gilda, the crisis offers opportunities to plan for future needs. She's heard from colleagues in career counseling who say that many people are using the unplanned time at home to reskill or upskill,

especially people accustomed to working multiple jobs. This “pause” can be an unusual chance to pursue skills that could unlock new career opportunities.

That impulse dovetails well with the IDN’s focus on fast-tracked programs, online certifications and other tools to address local labor workforce obstacles. Looking ahead, Gilda

says adult learners who take advantage of these resources to upskill quickly into key industries and occupations will be vital to their regional economy’s recovery. As Gilda likes to remind people, communities must be shovel-ready when they emerge on the other end of the crisis. As she sees it, regardless of when that is, every moment not spent on upskilling or reskilling those in need could be a moment wasted.



Claire Linnemeier joined CAEL’s Workforce and Economic Development Team as the Program Director in 2018, leading and managing the delivery of our consulting projects, identifying new business opportunities, and strategizing with WED and CAEL leadership about internal processes and improvements. Claire has a background that ranges from policy and advocacy work to workforce and economic development consulting. Prior to CAEL, Claire worked in Indiana for Strategic Development Group, Inc. and Thomas P. Miller & Associates – both of which are consulting firms that focus primarily on economic and workforce development strategy and analysis at the regional and national level. Claire has worked with a wide variety of clients in public, private and non-profit sectors with topics ranging from Housing Needs Assessments to Manufacturing Supply Chain Analyses.

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Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers, postsecondary educators, and employers, industry groups, foundations, and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, we foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. Established in 1974, CAEL, a Strada Education Network affiliate, is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) membership organization.