

‘Houston Legend’ Interview with Dr. Laura Murillo, President and CEO of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, for CBS-KHOU 11 Television Program:

A little about BakerRipley: One of the largest, nationally recognized nonprofits in the country, BakerRipley has transformed neighborhoods across Houston for more than 117 years. Every day, the Agency infuses the Houston region with possibility through education, access to community centers and resources, childcare, career development, small business support, and technology. Each year we serve more than half a million people, in the greater Houston region and beyond: children and seniors, veterans and immigrants, individuals and families.

A primer on Claudia: Claudia Aguirre has served more than 30 years in the government, education, and nonprofit sectors, directing large-scale community-engagement initiatives.

She is the President and CEO of BakerRipley, a community-development nonprofit with 50 locations across the Gulf Coast and surrounding regions. She is also the first Latina CEO in BakerRipley's 117-plus-year history.

Since joining BakerRipley in 2010, Claudia has served the organization as Vice President of Community-Based Initiatives, Superintendent of Promise Community Charter Schools, Senior Vice President, and Chief Program Officer. In these progressively responsible leadership roles, she has overseen operations and expansions of community centers and charter schools, guided development of a special school for immigrant and refugee children, enhanced programs for entrepreneurship, and immigration services, and she spearheaded the implementation of “Appreciative Community Building,” a strengths-based approach to community engagement.

Known for her expertise in child development, community engagement and immigration policy, Claudia is a Class-C Member and Deputy Chair of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas Board of Directors, and she serves on the boards of the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, and the Greater Houston Partnership. She actively participates on various task forces for the City of Houston and for Harris County and has been honored with numerous awards recognizing her professional leadership accomplishments and BakerRipley's community contributions.

Claudia earned a B.A. in Political Science from St. Edward's University and a M. Ed. from the University of Houston. She is also a Texas Education Agency certified teacher, principal, and superintendent and has completed the Education Executive Certification program at Harvard University.

In her free time, Claudia enjoys spending time with her family. She is the proud mother of two adult children – a son and a daughter.

QUESTION:

Tell us a little about your background and what motivates you to do this important work in our community.

ANSWER:

When I was 7 years old, the Mexican economy crashed, and the value of the peso plummeted. My father was a bank executive in Mexico at the time, and our family had been doing very well and living a comfortable, middle-class life up until that point. Then, suddenly, my family lost everything. My parents had to make the difficult decision to immigrate to the United States.

Nothing was easy about that move. My dad struggled. We lived from paycheck to paycheck. It was painful for me to watch this giant of a man apply for public assistance. The social service agency workers would just throw their clipboard of paperwork at us and treat us like we were "less than."

But we were lucky. Eventually, a friend of a friend took a chance on my dad and provided him with a job. I believe that was the open door that changed our lives. That door was the entry into my American dream, and I have never forgotten that kindness.

Today, I lead an organization with a legacy built on that purpose to ensure every person like me, every family like mine, has doors opened for them, so they too have a shot at THEIR American dream.

I know vulnerable, low-income and immigrant families in our community are not looking for handouts. When we listen to their stories, we identify their existing assets instead of making them prove they have deficits. We offer resources, education, and connection as a hand-UP, not a hand-OUT.

The services and programs we offer can be truly transformational. When you transform one person, one couple, or one family—it changes the path for *generations*. That is what we work toward every day at BakerRipley: *Transformation for generations*.

I feel driven to do this type of work because it empowers our Neighbors to build their own future for themselves, their families, and their communities. I'm paying my family's good fortune forward, so other families have the same opportunity to improve their circumstances. I know firsthand that when families thrive, so will our city and our region.

QUESTION:

What are some of the accomplishments you are most proud of, and how do they influence how you approach your work at BakerRipley?

ANSWER:

I am proud to say that I have more than three decades of experience as a leader of large-scale initiatives for the government, education, and nonprofit sectors. I really thrive on collaboration and innovation in all aspects of operations, resource development, and program delivery to address challenges and opportunities for our most vulnerable Neighbors—including low-income and immigrant families—across the Houston region.

Prior to BakerRipley, I served as the Director of the City of Houston Citizens Assistance Office under the administration of two mayors. I designed and developed youth programs, alternative schools for at-risk students, and I created a plan for Super Neighborhood Councils as governing entities for neighborhood associations.

Since joining BakerRipley in 2010, I have been passionate about creating equitable and sustainable solutions for socioeconomic mobility with my team. When I was selected as Chief Executive Officer of BakerRipley in 2018, after a national search, I became the first Latina CEO in BakerRipley's 117-year history. That was a huge moment for me. And the weight of the responsibility was never lost on me. It's why I work hard every day striving to be a role model for new generations. The resilience of my experience continuously colors my perception of what it means to be the leader of a nonprofit community development organization.

Throughout my career I've overseen operations and expansions of our community centers, Workforce Solutions offices, charter schools, and Head Start. I guided the development of a special school for immigrant and refugee children. I enhanced programs for entrepreneurship and immigration services. I also helped spearhead Appreciative Community Building at BakerRipley. This was a big shift away from the traditional deficit-based model of community development. It was especially important to me to make this change, given my family's experience upon entry into the U.S.

It means BakerRipley is not community "heroes" or "fixers." When we take the Appreciative Community Building approach, we help communities focus on their existing strengths and teach them what they can do to build on those strengths. We also help individuals and families in communities develop leadership skills so they can foster transformation from within their own communities.

This strengths-based approach is what sets BakerRipley apart from many other nonprofit social-service and community-development agencies, and it's one of the reasons for our success.

I see a reflection of my own family in each of our Neighbors. Watching them succeed at their endeavors, take pride and ownership in that success, and then thrive as they improve their socioeconomic status—that's what matters to me and drives me.

QUESTION:

BakerRipley has such a broad reach in Houston and throughout the Texas Gulf Coast and surrounding regions. There is obviously great need for the work the Agency does. What are some of the blinking lights you are seeing in our region that we can't or shouldn't ignore right now or in the future?

ANSWER:

Some of the most challenging issues we face in our region are digital equity and inclusion, workforce development, and socioeconomic mobility.

In addition to my role as President and CEO of BakerRipley, I serve on the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas Board of Directors. I'm entrusted with speaking to the Federal Reserve on behalf of the Neighbors we serve. But I also *learn* from the Fed what's going to be happening to our economy in the next 12 to 18 months, and what I will need to do to prepare our underserved communities.

Many low-income families do not have access to basic digital technology and connectivity. This prevents them from continuing their education, applying for work, or participating to the fullest potential in our technology-driven 21st century economy. The lack of access to these resources relegates many of our Neighbors to working long hours in low-skill, low-wage jobs. Inflation has only exacerbated this situation.

We know the challenge is not UNemployment, it is UNDER-employment. I have learned from the Fed that as much as 40 percent of the low-skill, low-wage jobs that people work out of necessity today will not exist by 2050—and they are already disappearing. So, hard-working individuals who were working several of these low-wage jobs to make ends meet for their families are finding themselves unemployed, out of school, disconnected from the economy, and shut out of opportunities to gain knowledge, skills, experiences, and connections that can lay the foundation for a successful career and a middle-class life.

BakerRipley is doing everything we can to help these individuals and their families by equipping them with the knowledge and resources they will need to entrench themselves in their communities and lift themselves up the ladder of social and economic success.

This is our call to action for 2024 and beyond. We must continue to help our Neighbors and their families prepare for, recover from, and adapt to environmental change, pandemics, flooding, and other disasters. But we must also help them level up in their skill sets by guiding

them in their educational journeys or job searches as we help them forge pathways to opportunity.

Our Immigration and Citizenship Program welcomes new Neighbors from around the world, creating a welcoming and safe space for all. We offer a continuum of legal and social work services to help Neighbors on their path to citizenship, including education and outreach, citizenship classes, legal assistance, and social services.

We also offer job training, mentoring for entrepreneurs and small business owners, recreational classes for seniors and families, STEM training at our Learning and Innovation Centers, and so much more.

Yet, it takes all of us to create change.

- Shell Oil Company made an amazing one-million-dollar legacy investment in our Pathways to Possibilities program, and we are using the funds to strengthen our collaboration with San Jacinto College to make sure our Neighbors have equitable access to resources, continuing education, community leadership training, and other opportunities that will help them overcome life's obstacles.
- We are also partnering with tech-giant Verizon on digital equity and inclusion through cutting-edge digital technology centers in the Gulfton-Sharpstown and East End areas of Houston. These centers offer industry-recognized credentials in CAD programming, process engineering, 3D printing and other high-demand skills that are taught by instructors and community volunteers who have professional training and experience in these digital technologies. Additionally, a Tech Equity Bridge system enables students to see how they can apply their digital training to high-paying, fast-growth career opportunities in the workforce.
- Last year Harris County approved a contract for BakerRipley and United Way to work together on Raising Educational Access for Children in Harris County. The program is called "Early REACH" for short, and it means that as many as 1,000 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are expected to fill the expanded classrooms for full-day, full-year childcare services that will be available to eligible families at no cost.

Childcare is a vital component for the economy, workforce development, and socioeconomic mobility in our region. For many low-income families that work hard but still struggle with the rapidly rising costs of living, Early REACH is a big positive step toward financial stability and self-sufficiency.

- We were recently awarded the Southwest Harris County Head Start and Early Head Start grant renewal for another five years (Sept. 1, 2024 – Aug. 31, 2029). We've managed these Head Start programs—which serve more than 3,000 preschool children, ages 0 to 5—for more than 30 years. Now, thanks to the hard work of our dedicated Head Start and Early Head Start teams and everyone involved in the rebid process, we will continue

to provide the safest and most nurturing environments for our children while offering innovative programming and services to our families at 26 centers in Harris and Fort Bend counties.

- In addition to Head Start and Early Head Start, we serve children from 3 years old through 8th grade at our four BakerRipley Community Schools. Our schools provide caring classrooms and resources for families and prepare students for the highest levels of academics, leadership, and personal excellence.

We all want the same things for our families. We want financial stability, we want to learn, we want to belong to a community and network that can embrace us and nurture our ambitions, and we want to be well. BakerRipley's impact is therefore targeted toward strengthening community engagement, improving our Neighbors' financial well-being, increasing educational attainment, and improving access to health information and resources in every community we serve.

QUESTION:

You serve on the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas Board of Directors, and the boards of the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, and the Greater Houston Partnership. How do these roles further support your work with BakerRipley?

ANSWER:

Serving on these influential boards has strengthened my understanding of how to link the communities BakerRipley serves to the process of public policy making. I am learning how to use the power of my dual positions as the President and CEO of BakerRipley, and as an active member on these boards, to ensure diverse voices and needs are considered when discussing potential solutions that can help build equitable and sustainable socioeconomic futures.

As I mentioned earlier, my membership on these boards affords me an opportunity to learn about new legislation or measures that might impact our Neighbors in a significant way a year to two in advance. This allows us at BakerRipley to both advocate for our Neighbors on a larger scale, and to prepare our communities for any changes coming their way so they can adapt quickly.

Another benefit I derive from my membership on these boards is the networking and partnerships that are born from our common desire to see our communities succeed and thrive. Houston is still growing, evolving, and diversifying in every way—through economic development, entrepreneurship, education, technology, transportation, our arts and culture, our political system, and our geography. Opportunities abound. My work at BakerRipley and on these boards makes it possible to continuously provide the resources, education, and

connections that will help our vulnerable, low-income, and immigrant Neighbors pave their own pathways to socioeconomic growth within Houston's vast landscape of opportunity.

QUESTION:

What's next for you and BakerRipley?

ANSWER:

We are adapting to our “next normal” and working hard every day to meet our Neighbors where they are. In some cases, that might look like providing more virtual job-finding assistance and home-schooling support, and in others, that might look like partnering with other groups to open innovative playgrounds at our centers for our senior Neighbors’ health and wellness.

Our Promise to the Region is that we will continue empowering our Neighbors to achieve upward socioeconomic mobility through the successful implementation of our layered individual, community, and regional approach. The possibilities are endless for us and for our Neighbors because together, we are willing to roll up our sleeves and work hard to turn dreams and aspirations into reality.