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Temple University’s Lenfest North Philadelphia Workforce Initiative (LNPWI) strengthens the earning potential of local communities by providing programs and training that result in outcomes that lead to sustainable employment.

Through the support of a grant from the Lenfest Foundation, Temple’s LNPWI focuses on identifying opportunities for youth and adult employment, as well as professional and workforce development. In addition, LNPWI works to increase collaboration between Temple University, local employers and the North Philadelphia community.

This collaborative and community-informed initiative focus on providing resources to residents who reside in the ZIP codes immediately surrounding Temple’s Main Campus and the Health Sciences Center.
FORMULATING WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS: A FOCUS ON NORTH PHILADELPHIA

On January 16, 2019, Temple University sponsored an event, "Formulating Workforce Solutions: A Focus on North Philadelphia." This event was an opportunity for individuals to come together to learn, discuss and shape workforce development opportunities for North Philadelphia residents. Over 200 people attended the event, which was open to community residents and leaders, volunteers and staff of community, faith and non-profit organizations and Temple University, as well as representatives of government agencies and employers.

The agenda included an overview of the Lenfest North Philadelphia Workforce Initiative at Temple University, a presentation from Meg Shope-Koppel, Ph.D., Chief Research Officer for Philadelphia Works, Inc., and a panel presentation facilitated by Nick Frontino, Managing Director with the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia, and with representation from Philadelphia Youth Network, Office of Workforce Development, Office of Adult Education, Philadelphia Department of Prison, Philadelphia Housing Authority and Congreso de Latinos Unidos.

Following the presentation, participants broke into small groups to reflect on the previous presentations and to discuss workforce development strategies and employment-related issues facing specific populations, such as youth, adults, ESL and immigrants, returning citizens, veterans and individuals with a disability. There was also two additional small groups, that discussed community and employer engagement. Each group was co-facilitated by a representative from Temple University and a representative from an external organization.

A Temple University social work student was assigned to each group. The student was responsible for taking notes at the event, and wrote a draft report on themes that emerged from the discussion. The report was shared with the co-facilitators, who provided input and feedback. In order to share the key points from the small group discussion, Temple University’s LNPWI has published a series of reports, based on each small group. This report is based on the discussion on Adults. The small group was co-facilitated by Ulicia Lawrence-Oladeinde, Director of Community Education with Temple's Office of Community Relations, and David Thomas, Associate Vice President of Strategic Initiatives at the Community College of Philadelphia.

FORMULATING WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS: Focus on Adults

There was a total of 18 attendees at this breakout session. Participants included individuals from local educational and workforce development programs, the City of Philadelphia, community organizations, public health and healthcare agencies, employers, and higher education institutions.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The co-facilitators used the following facilitation questions to guide the conversation:

1. What does sustainable employment mean and look like to you?
2. How many and what kinds of opportunities for sustainable employment exist for North Philadelphians? Are these opportunities taking full advantage of the talents, skills, and passion that exist in North Philadelphia?
3. Are employers offering jobs that meet the standard for sustainable employment? Why or why not?
4. Does the average unemployed, underemployed, or underpaid person in this population have the skills/experiences to fill sustainable employment opportunities? Why or why not?
5. There are open jobs, there are people who are unemployed or underemployed. What is the disconnect? How can we bridge the divide?
6. How much focus should be placed on working with employers to improve and expand sustainable employment opportunities for North Philadelphians? How much focus should be placed on preparing North Philadelphians for sustainable employment and connecting them with employers?
7. What changes need to be made to prepare employers to hire and maintain employees from North Philadelphia in sustainable positions (policy, educational, cultural)?
8. What are other barriers that citizens face that can prevent them from finding and maintaining employment? (housing, food, education, transportation, race, gender identity, computer literacy, professional culture?) What can be done to minimize these challenges?
9. What are indicators that programs or interventions are successfully reducing the number of people who are unemployed, underemployed, and underpaid in North Philadelphia?
1. The one-size-fits all approach to educational and workforce development programs is a barrier for many.

Educational and workforce development programs provide access to real skills and certifications that will attract employers. However, there is a great focus on a linear approach to education within these programs that is not reality for most people due to individual differences in learning styles, quality of past education, support systems, self-esteem, personal and familial obligations, and more. For example, many programs require individuals to read and write on a tenth-grade level to qualify for educational and workforce development programs. Due to the failing school system, some people may have a high school diploma but still only read on a fifth-grade level. Instead of working to support the goals and aspirations of these individuals by upskilling, many programs turn these individuals away. By not taking the opportunity to work with a student’s current skill-level and upskill them so that they can achieve higher credentials and more sustainable employment opportunities, many individuals in the North Philadelphia region are left behind. As a result, workforce development programs and employers are missing out on driven, talented employees. To respond to this gap, more programs should operate with a nuanced understanding of the needs of specific populations in order to get them to sustainable employment.

2. We must redefine “Soft Skills” as “Primary” or “Power Skills”.

Many of the group attendees felt that a significant part of being a good employee includes being timely, working well with others, having a positive attitude, being able to communicate effectively in person and in writing, being able to interpret social cues in the workplace, and possessing critical thinking skills—otherwise known as “soft skills.” However, these skills sets are often not intuitive or embedded in someone who is entering the workforce for the first time. As a result, many individuals who have not yet developed these skills—even if they have the technical skills to be able to complete their tasks—struggle to maintain employment or advance in the workplace. Defining these critical skills as “soft skills” seems to undermine the importance of working to develop these skill sets within students who are preparing to enter career pathways. In re-defining them as primary or power skills, more weight and ideally more focus might be given to cultivating these skills in students of education and workforce development programs in addition to the technical skills they need to perform.

3. Being honest with job-seekers about employment requirements while emphasizing an individual’s experiences as strengths is a crucial part of job preparation.

The group agreed that many if not most North Philadelphians have experiences, both personal and professional, that make them strong candidates for the workforce. However, some individuals are unaware that their experiences could contribute to their effectiveness in finding and maintaining employment. Working with program participants to identify their personal strengths and translate these into applicable job skills can help build an individual’s resume, but also improve their self-esteem and boost engagement, which could have an even larger impact on their employment success overall. In addition, while it is important for providers to have a basic level of understanding and consideration around the individual’s strengths and needs, they must also reflect and yield the standards and expectations of the employers. Therefore, educators and other providers must be franker about what it takes to succeed in a capitalist society, and should prepare individuals to make the shift to their professional self.
4. Educators and employers need to be able to holistically meet the needs of students or new employees in order to set them up for success.

While, some individuals struggle to find stable employment because they have not developed the necessary skills, the group felt that more often than not, finding and maintaining employment is difficult because individuals, particularly individuals who are extremely low-income, are facing a number of barriers to success. These barriers are varied, but could include lack of affordable childcare, unreliable transportation, housing insecurity, food insecurity, physical and mental health concerns, and familial obligations. In order to advocate for broader access to sustainable employment, more workforce development programs need to be aware of and address the environmental factors that can impact an individual’s ability to obtain and maintain employment. Introducing wraparound services into education and workforce development programs could be instrumental in addressing certain barriers by providing necessary support such as connecting individuals with public benefits, helping them find stable housing, and providing childcare and transportation support. From an employer standpoint, being more flexible with employees about scheduling around childcare or healthcare needs, providing working schedules a few weeks in advance, and understanding that sometimes employees will be late due to unreliable public transportation or life events, will create an environment that enables individuals to be more successful.

5. Workforce development programs and employers need to work together to build stronger partnerships.

Partnerships between workforce development programs and employers are not a new practice. However, a number of participants noted that many of these relationships dissolve due to a number of factors. On the workforce development side, some participants felt that service providers are unable to maintain partnerships with employers because they do adequately respond to the needs of the employers and lose their credibility as a result. This is an issue because employers rely on workforce development staff to accurately assess an individual’s basic needs and skills, work to connect them to the appropriate resources, and ensure that they are prepared to enter to field before referring them out to employers. Failure to do this means that employers are unexpectedly receiving unprepared candidates, which ultimately creates more work for the employer and defeats the purpose of the partnership. On the other hand, some participants acknowledged that employers also need to buy-in to the mission of workforce development in order to maintain effective partnerships with workforce development programs. For example, if an employer’s sole motivation for the partnership is to save time and money in screening and training employees, without understanding that many program participants have faced a number of barriers to sustainable employment, and may need to be given some flexibility, support, and the benefit of the doubt as they adjust to the work environment, then the partnerships are not likely to be successful. If an employer is unable or unwilling to understand the needs of employees (within reason) to set them on the path towards sustainable employment, then workforce development program participants will quickly become unemployed again and return to workforce development programming, which also defeats the purpose of the partnership.
6. Employers are the key to increasing sustainable employment opportunities.

While workforce development programs are important for preparing individuals for careers, employers play a key role in determining whether or not employment is accessible and sustainable. Employers determine wages and benefits for employees, set job requirements and recruitment strategies, and decide which positions are eligible for upskilling and advancement opportunities. In order to bring meaningful employment to North Philadelphians, employers must be willing to critically evaluate their current policies and practices for wage structure, job descriptions, hiring processes, scheduling practices, workplace culture, and employee benefits. Making the commitment to sustainable employment will require putting more money towards family sustaining wages; retooling job descriptions and recruitment strategies to identify and bring in more individuals who are willing to work, regardless of education or qualification; and dedicating more resources towards training and professional development.

While this may seem like a large task, throughout the conversation, group members identified a number of employers who are making a commitment to sustainable employment and initiatives that are being developed to acknowledge and commend employers who are doing quality work. Working to solidify these initiatives and establish a formal way to recognize employers committed to sustainable employment could create a standard and serve as a model for other employers to follow, and incentivize employers to make changes to their workplace.

7. The current provision of public benefits poses a major barrier to employment.

While public benefits such as SNAP, TANF, and subsidized housing are great assets to supporting low-income families, it can limit an individual’s ability to enter the workforce. Within the current system, when an individual finds a job, many of their benefits dramatically decrease or are completely terminated. In theory, it makes sense that obtaining employment should mean self-sufficiency. In reality, in an environment without family-sustaining wages, affordable housing, comprehensive benefits, full-time positions, or affordable childcare, this system often places families in greater deficit when employed than when unemployed. Without processes that adequately assesses the needs of an individual based on their wages compared to living expenses, or a transition plan that eases individuals off of public benefits in order to allow time for an individual to prepare to manage their expenses on their own, many individuals who would like to work are forced to decide between being unemployed and being able to meet their needs, or being employed and struggling to make ends meet. To address this systemic barrier, providers, community members, and local government should mobilize to collectively advocate for improved legislation on both public benefits provisions for employed individuals and increased minimum wages.

8. Successful programs can be defined by many indicators.

Indicators that programs or interventions are successfully reducing the number of North Philadelphia residents who are unemployed, underemployed, and underpaid would include reinvestment within the neighborhood, increased number of residents being employed by Temple University, an increase in the median income, a decrease in the total number of people receiving SNAP benefits, and an increase in the high school graduation rate. In addition, we could monitor an individual’s progression along their career path: Are they making positive strides to increase income? Are they moving closer to their goals? Are individuals learning how to translate skills and navigate agency culture? Other indicators included thriving public schools, lower levels of displacement, increased community diversity, and increased economic activity within the community.
SPECIAL THANKS

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**Presenter:** Meg Shope-Koppel, Ph.D., Philadelphia Works, Inc.

**Panelists:**
- Nick Frontino, Economy League of Greater Philadelphia
- Terrell Bagby, Philadelphia Department of Prisons
- Brendan Conlin, Congreso de Latinos Unidos
- Stephanie Gambone, Philadelphia Youth Network
- Diane Inverso, Office of Adult Education, City of Philadelphia
- Sheila Ireland, Office of Workforce Development, City of Philadelphia
- Lopa Kolluri, Philadelphia Housing Authority

**Co-Facilitators:**
- Jeffrey Abramowitz, JEVS Human Services
- Shari Brightful, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Jessica Collazo, LISC
- Scott Emerick, Youth Build Philadelphia Charter School
- Dennis Miller, Wheel Dog Industries
- Lydia Parigi, Aramark
- Nicole Pumphrey, Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanian
- David Thomas, Community College of Philadelphia

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