

VOICES ACROSS NORTH PHILADELPHIA



Lessons Learned from the Fall
2021 Table Talks Series

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ABOUT THE VOICES ACROSS NORTH PHILADELPHIA

TABLE TALKS AND LESSONS LEARNED

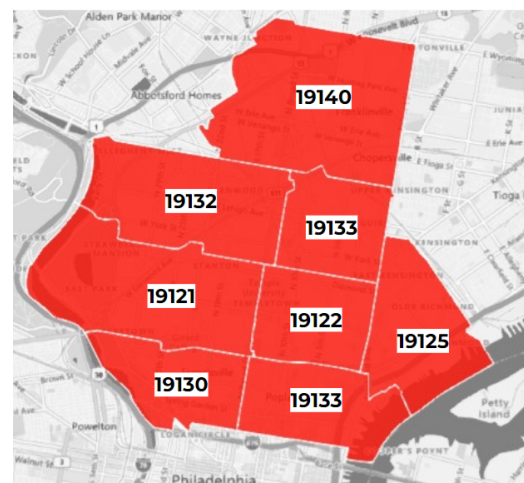
In the Fall of 2021, the Opportunities for Workforce Leadership (OWL) Collective launched the Voices of North Philadelphia Project. For this project, six (6) conversations called *Table Talks* were hosted with participation from 44 North Philadelphia residents. The goal of Table Talks was to bring neighbors together to have open conversations about the current barriers to finding and keeping employment with living wages. Additionally, it was important to hear from residents about what solutions workforce development providers in the area can put into action to better serve people living in 19121, 19122, 19123, 19125, 19130, 19132, 19133, and 19140.

Each conversation was hosted by a member organization of the OWL Collective and had a facilitator chosen by the hosting organization. Facilitators and attendees used a list of questions to spark discussion, but everyone was encouraged to let the conversation flow naturally. Table Talks had a notetaker (a Temple University student) who sat in on the conversations. Notetakers then wrote a summary for each Table Talk to outline the main themes of the conversations and key ideas or recommendations that arose. These summaries were then shared with the host organization to share with participants for review and approval to ensure that the summary accurately reflects the conversation that took place.

This document is a combination of the themes that came out across all six Table Talks. All of the strengths, challenges, and recommendations here came directly from the residents who attended a Table Talk conversation. The lessons learned will be used to create a strategic plan for the OWL Collective. The strategic plan is being designed by a committee of service providers and North Philadelphia residents so that it is truly community-driven.

ABOUT THE OWL COLLECTIVE

This project was started and is supported by a coalition of over 50 education and workforce development service providers called the **Opportunities for Workforce Leadership (OWL) Collective**. The OWL Collective was first gathered in Fall of 2019 by Temple University's Lenfest North Philadelphia Workforce Initiative (LNPWI). The mission of the OWL Collective is to build stronger bridges between talented job seekers in North Philadelphia, workforce development providers, and employers and to improve employment outcomes for North Philadelphia residents through data-informed, strengths-based, and community-driven workforce development strategies. **For more information on the OWL Collective, please visit:** <https://templelnpwi.org/our-partners-2/>.



OWL Collective Focus Area

LESSONS LEARNED HIGHLIGHTS

Strengths of North Philadelphia

1. North Philadelphia is full of skilled people, they just need opportunities.
2. Youth are an emerging part of the workforce.
3. There are training and certification opportunities available to North Philadelphia residents.
4. There are program models that actually work (like mentorship, apprenticeships, and individualized approaches).
5. There are employment opportunities in the city that offer living wages (although they are not always accessible to North Philadelphia residents).
6. North Philadelphia residents are – and always have been – deeply committed to uplifting their communities and seeing every North Philadelphia resident thrive.

Gaps or Unmet Needs in North Philadelphia

1. Many workforce development programs don't match the needs and goals of North Philadelphia residents.
2. Many non-workforce related issues like violence, childcare, housing, and mental health have a big impact on education and employment but are rarely addressed in programs.
3. There needs to be better outreach about existing programs.
4. Workforce development programs need real employment opportunities available at the end of the program.
5. There is a lack of transparent and inclusive local hiring practices among Temple and other large employers in North Philadelphia.
6. Non-Profit organizations and educational institutions have been unhelpful and harmful in the past and need to rebuild trust with communities.
7. Many barriers to employment exist on a structural level and require structural change.

Community Recommendations for the OWL Collective

1. Real change needs real community involvement in designing and implementing solutions.
2. Community residents need a role in updating or creating programs.
3. Organizations in the OWL Collective can share their power and influence to support resident-led change efforts.
4. Organizations need prioritize on-the-ground outreach effort and assess their current outreach strategies to see where they are ineffective or reinforce biases.

5. Workforce development programs should have direct pipelines to sustainable careers and empower residents to build their professional networks.
6. Workforce development programs should increase the supportive and individualized services available.
7. Residents and organizations can come together to advocate for policy changes.
8. Temple and other large employers in the North Philadelphia area need to invest in the future of the communities they are based in.



Image Credit: Ryan S. Brandenburg, Temple University

STRENGTHS OF NORTH PHILADELPHIA

1. **North Philadelphia is full of skilled people, they just need opportunities.** North Philadelphia has a rich and diverse talent pool which employers should be tapping into more. The groups shared that although job training programs are important, many North Philadelphia residents already have many skills, qualities, work experience, education and lived experiences that would be a huge asset to employers in a variety of careers and industries. There are residents of all ages and backgrounds ready to fill positions from entry-level to management level. The only thing missing is an opportunity to get their foot in the door.
2. **Youth are an emerging part of the workforce.** North Philadelphia has a large population of young people who are motivated to learn and explore different career pathways. Many attendees shared that the young people in their communities have a lot of great ideas about how they can serve their communities while also gaining work experience and income. These ideas should be explored more.
3. **There are training and certification opportunities available to North Philadelphia residents.** Most attendees knew about some available training programs. However, some felt that programs they're aware of don't match the needs, interests, or capabilities of everyone in the community. These challenges are discussed more in the Gaps and Unmet Needs section below.
4. **There are program models that actually work.** Throughout the Table Talks, attendees pointed to a few program models that truly opened doors to employment. These program models included mentoring programs, apprenticeships, career and higher education exploration, and programs which offer individualized supportive services like case management. The staffing of programs also played a huge role in whether or not they were effective. Programs where staff treat each participant with respect, recognize participant efforts, and take the time to give one-on-one support create a better experience and lead to more success.
5. **There are employment opportunities in the city that offer living wages.** Table Talk attendees shared that they see the potential for well-paying job opportunities in their community and around the city. They also shared that they were confident that North Philadelphia residents have the skills or can build the skills needed to fill these roles. As mentioned above, the major missing link between North Philadelphia residents and employment is not a skills gap, but an opportunity gap.
6. **North Philadelphia residents are – and always have been – deeply committed to uplifting their communities and seeing every North Philadelphia resident thrive.** Residents at each Table Talk shared that they love their neighborhood and their community and are committed to doing what it takes to help residents thrive. This commitment and civic engagement is not new, and neither are the conversations we had at the Table Talks. The key to meaningful change is not residents coming to the table with organizations and institutions. Organizations and institutions need to come to the residents' tables, listen to residents, and share their organizational resources to make change.

GAPS OR UNMET NEEDS IN NORTH PHILADELPHIA

- 1. Many workforce development programs don't match with the needs and goals of North Philadelphia residents.** Across the board, residents knew about education and workforce development programs. However, some felt that many programs did not meet their needs as a learner or didn't match their career goals. For example, a number of residents mentioned that the workforce programs they knew about were for jobs that offer lower wages and limited opportunities for advancement. Attendees agreed that those programs were helpful for people who were interested in entering those fields or starting out in their career. On the other hand, they also agreed that pathways into higher-level, higher paying options including mid-level careers and higher education needed to be marketed to North Philadelphia residents. Another issue raised is that programs that might be helpful have program or eligibility requirements that prevent people of certain ages, backgrounds, or abilities from joining. These restrictive requirements create more barriers to sustainable employment.
- 2. Many non-workforce related issues like violence, childcare, housing, and mental health have a big impact on education and employment but are rarely addressed in programs.** Some of the challenges that came to the surface were not specifically "employment issues". However, issues like housing, violence, accessible green space, health, affordable childcare and transportation play a huge role in whether or not someone is successful in education and employment. This is because it is extremely difficult to focus on your job or future career path if your basic needs are not being met. For example, it's hard to get to work on-time if you don't have reliable childcare or need to find a ride to work because you're worried about gun violence while you're waiting for the bus. It's hard for youth to succeed in school if they're hungry or if they have nowhere that is safe and clean to play after school and on the weekends. It's difficult to show up to a job interview interview-ready if you don't have a home with running water to shower and get ready. It's hard to handle common workplace stressors if you're already dealing with trauma or mental illness. The list goes on. While the link between these issues and employment is clear, residents do not feel like workforce development providers offer meaningful support to address all the barriers participants might be facing. By focusing only on skills training and ignoring the other factors in someone's life, workforce development programs are not setting their participants up for success.
- 3. There needs to be better outreach about existing programs.** Some of the needed programs and resources mentioned in Table Talks are already offered by OWL Collective members. However, residents were not aware of these resources or were not sure how to access them. Other attendees shared that they often learned about programs without enough time to prepare to apply or attend. This is due to poor or limited outreach from organizations. In addition, some participants felt that they did not hear about certain programs because of prejudiced outreach approaches which focused outreach for workforce programming into lower-paying roles to Black and brown or lower-income communities, while White and more affluent communities were targeted for trainings that lead to higher paying jobs.
- 4. Workforce development programs need real employment opportunities available at the end of the program.** Table Talk participants discussed how offering training or a certification is a good starting point for workforce development programs, but it's not enough. In a world where it's not what you know, but who you know, North Philadelphia job seekers need direct connections to employers and opportunities to build their

professional networks. In addition, investing time to join a training program without a real job at the end of the line is not a luxury that most people have. Therefore, having connections to real employment opportunities for workforce development participants should not only be a priority—it should be the norm.

5. **There is a lack of transparent and inclusive local hiring practices among Temple and other large employers in North Philadelphia.** In addition to the challenges mentioned above, Temple University, Temple University Health System, and other large employers in North Philadelphia such as Temple vendors, non-profit organizations, schools, and property developers were specifically called upon to use more transparent and inclusive local hiring practices. Across every Table Talk, participants shared stories about attempts to work at Temple only to never even receive any communication about their application. Similarly, residents have seen new construction projects or businesses popping up all over their community but have rarely been considered as potential employees by these employers. As some of the largest employers in North Philadelphia, and as organizations who benefit from their position in North Philadelphia, Temple University, its vendors, and other large employers have an obligation to invest in the community by hiring more local residents.
6. **Non-profit organizations and educational institutions have been unhelpful and harmful in the past and need to rebuild trust with communities.** Historically, non-profit organizations have offered helpful services to the North Philadelphia community, but they have caused harm too. For example, failing to respond to community feedback about their needed services, support, partnership and improvements has caused many to lose faith in the ability or interest of non-profits and Temple University to serve their community. Attendees also shared that some programs have staff that are not from the community, are not adequately trained in working with the community respectfully, and enter the role with a prejudiced or a judgmental attitude. This shows up in the way they work with participants, and it can be discouraging or traumatic for participants. This creates a hostile environment that reinforces barriers to employment, particularly for Black and Indigenous People of Color, returning citizens, people with disabilities, and other people who have been historically excluded from the workforce.
7. **Many barriers to employment exist on a structural level and require structural change.** Low wages, poor or unjust working conditions, inaccessible or discriminatory hiring practices, racism, limited protections for workers, and lack of work-life balance were all mentioned as major issues that affected North Philadelphians' ability to find and keep employment and move up the career ladder. These are challenges that workforce development providers and residents alone cannot address or change through training alone since there is no amount of training that can fix these issues. However, residents and workforce development providers working together have a lot of power that they can use to create change.



Image Credit: Ryan S. Brandenburg, Temple University

COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OWL COLLECTIVE

- 1. Real change needs real community involvement in designing and implementing solutions.** Residents from the Table Talks are ready and willing to partner with organizations in the OWL Collective and have been ready for a long time. It's time for organizations to come to the table and commit to supporting the changes that the community wants and needs. This will not only make sure that organizations are actually meeting the needs of the communities they serve, but it will also help begin rebuilding trust between organizations and residents. Suggestions from Table Talk attendees to start building real partnerships included involving residents in planning and decision making for workforce development strategies, holding more Table Talks to hear more perspectives and continue conversations, being more transparent about ongoing work so that the community can hold organizations accountable, and responding to the concerns of the community.
- 2. Community residents need a role in updating or creating programs.** In order to offer programs that truly meet the current needs, interests and capabilities of the community, residents' feedback should be a core part of program design. Some suggestions for new or improved program offerings included more pathways into higher education for youth and adults, courses resulting in professional certifications, paid training programs, mentoring programs for youth and adults, internship or career exploration opportunities for youth and adults, pathways into STEM, pathways into professional and business services careers, and trainings into mid-level careers for participants with work experience, transferable skills, or the motivation to build their skills. On the program model side, participants recommended that organizations implement more practices to address implicit bias among staff. Participants also suggested that organizations could offer programs directly in the communities they serve.
- 3. Organizations in the OWL Collective can share their power and influence to uplift resident-led change efforts.** Partnership is a two-way-street. In addition to joining with residents to improve workforce development programs, members of the OWL Collective should be investing their time and resources into supporting resident-led initiatives. Some suggestions included attending community events, joining block clean-ups, sharing their platforms to amplify resident-led causes and organizations, and providing financial and/or in-kind resources such as funding or space.
- 4. Organizations need to prioritize on-the-ground outreach efforts and assess their current outreach strategies to see where they are ineffective or reinforce biases.** Organizations should prioritize more on-the-ground outreach efforts such as canvassing, working with grassroots and faith-based organizations, sharing outreach in schools, placing ads on public transportation, and marketing on social media, to spread the word about their programs. Additionally, organizations should plan outreach more effectively so that residents hear about upcoming programs and events with enough time to adequately prepare to apply or attend. Finally, organizations should assess their outreach efforts to pinpoint weaknesses and areas where their strategies may be reinforcing harmful biases and employment disparities.

5. **Workforce development programs should offer direct pipelines to sustainable careers and empower residents to build their own professional networks.** The phrase, “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know” cannot be emphasized enough when it comes to finding employment. Because of this, workforce programs need to go beyond sharing information about job opportunities and helping candidates apply. Workforce providers should have strong, trusting relationships with employers that lead to their candidates receiving true consideration for employment. These relationships can also help remove some of the barriers to finding sustainable employment such as inaccessible recruitment and hiring practices and low wages. Additionally, programs should be helping candidates build up their own professional networks so that, in the future, they can make these kinds of connections on their own.
6. **Workforce development programs should increase the supportive and individualized services available.** A one-size-fits-all approach is not effective and creates an environment where individuals with a specific set of characteristics succeed, while others—who are equally talented—are left behind. Instead, programs should focus on truly meeting a person where they are to understand a person’s learning style and what kinds of support, resources, and accommodations they need to be successful. Additionally, organizations should be set up to respond to these needs efficiently. This means that they have staff who are trained to offer the support necessary or that staff know of who they can directly connect participants with to make sure that they receive needed support.
7. **Residents and organizations can use our collective power to advocate for policy change to affect sustainable employment.** Some of the issues and challenges that came up in the Table Talks cannot be solved through training programs or employment alone. However, that does not mean that the OWL Collective and North Philadelphians cannot influence change. Suggestions from residents included inviting elected officials to future Table Talks or events so that they can hear these conversations and learn about the community’s major concerns and suggested solutions directly from residents. Table Talk attendees also coming together to advocate for things like an increased minimum wage, stronger protections for employees, stronger anti-discrimination laws in employment and housing, free childcare, less employment restrictions for returning citizens, probation and parole reform, and more funding for public transportation improvements.
8. **Temple and other large employers in the OWL Collective and in the North Philadelphia area need to invest in the communities in which they are based.** The presence of large organizations like Temple University and other members in the OWL Collective and large businesses could be a great asset to North Philadelphia residents by drawing in new opportunities and resources to the area. However, without meaningfully investing in the future of the community and making sure that the original residents are reaping the benefits of the new opportunities and resources, the presence of these large organizations has caused many negative effects. Temple University and other organizations or businesses can and should be taking steps to have a positive impact in the communities where they’re based or expand to. Participants propose that these steps include implementing transparent hiring practices, making sure that their policies do not have negative consequences for the surrounding communities (i.e. Temple University parking overflow taking parking spots away from residents), and prioritizing and financially supporting equitable local hiring, pathways into higher education, work-based training, paid internships, youth programming, scholarships, and safe and reliable transportation to and from work. This will not only improve employment outcomes for the community but could also address some root causes of chronic unemployment, underemployment, and low wages by preventing housing insecurity due to gentrification, alleviating poverty for local families, and more.

NEXT STEPS

It's not enough to talk about the issues--we need to continue the conversation and act! The OWL Collective is committed to working with residents and deepening our connections to make our shared vision of education, employment, and safety for all a reality in North Philadelphia.

1	Join the Strategic Plan Steering Committee Between April and December 2022, a committee of OWL Collective members and North Philadelphia residents are creating a plan for the OWL Collective to better meet the education, employment, and safety needs of North Philadelphia. Email lnpwi@temple.edu to learn more about joining the committee!
2	Join the OWL Collective Are you part of a community organization that serves North Philadelphia residents living and committed to working with other organizations to improve employment outcomes for residents? If so, contact lnpwi@temple.edu to learn more about joining the OWL Collective.
3	Continue the conversation Your voice matters, and we still need your input! These Table Talks were only the beginning. Share what changes you'd like to see in your community by responding to the North Philadelphia Community Survey at www.surveymonkey.com/rNorthPhillyCommunitySurvey

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For more information about the OWL Collective or the Table Talks, please visit <https://templelnpwi.org/our-partners-2/> or email lnpwi@temple.edu.

HOST PARTNERS

The Norris Homes Resident Council, The Welcome Table @ St. James School, RAH Civic Association, Congreso de Latinos Unidos, and JEVS Human Services.

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