



Power in Partnerships: Addressing Workforce Development Challenges



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Tammy Edwards: Welcome to the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta's Economic Development podcast series. I'm Tammy Edwards with the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. Workforce development issues tend to be locally distinct, and thus require community-focused and cross-sector solutions. This point was reinforced for us during recent workforce development roundtable meetings held across the country as part of the Federal Reserve's Chronic Unemployment and Workforce Development initiative. Indeed, collaborative local and regional efforts focused on addressing workforce development challenges are gaining momentum, and community-based funders are becoming more engaged. One such initiative is the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, a coalition of local and national funders that supports 30 regional funding collaboratives focused on advancing careers of low-wage workers through long-term employer engagement and job and career training for workers. In this session, we explore the importance of public, private, and philanthropic partnerships in addressing local and regional workforce challenges and the early results from some of these collaborations.

Today I'm speaking with Damian Thorman, national program director at the John L. and James S. Knight Foundation and chair of the Investor Committee for the National Fund for Workforce Solutions.

Damian, thank you for speaking with us today.



Damian Thorman: Thank you, Tammy. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today. The National Fund is honored to join you for this conversation.

Edwards: Tell us more about the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. What is your goal and what is your approach for helping create scalable solutions to local workforce development challenges?

Thorman: We are a fund of 12 national funders, and I'm proud to say a blend of both traditional philanthropy and corporate philanthropy. I mention that because it's at the heart of what we are trying to accomplish, which is to bring business and workforce development programs together so that, at the local level, we can have robust partnerships that deliver training and support that results in more individuals getting placed in jobs. The way we do that is really to put the employer at the center of a lot of our work. We are trying to create regional funding collaboratives or organize these workforce partnerships, develop strategies for specific industry sectors such as transportation or health—health is our largest—and then we want to build career pathways for those that we are training. So, not only are we training individuals for new jobs, but we're also working with employees within the system to try to make sure that they can move forward and move up the career ladder. And then, of course, we coordinate the local workforce programs that actually deliver the services in each of the local communities.

At the heart of this is really making sure that the partnerships support the work and the needs of the local community. As you mentioned, we have over 30 sites around the country and they are very unique, and we want to make sure that we are meeting the local needs of each of these communities. And so we work very closely with the local community to help them, that is, the local employer and the local funders and the local workforce development programs work collaboratively at the local level.

Edwards: What are the key elements of a regional funding collaborative for workforce development, and how would a community move from concept to a functioning collaborative?

Thorman: There are five strategies that emerged from our research and practice that we found essential for a local regional collaborative. One is to create a regional funding collaborative itself, that is, to bring together the funders, the government agencies, and the foundations into a collaborative. Second, we would organize workforce partnerships. Partnerships create long-term relationships between employers and service providers. Thirdly, we develop strategies for specific industry sectors. Fourth, we really work to make sure that these local collaboratives build career pathways, so we want to not only train workers to come into new jobs, but also to make sure that those that are in jobs can move up effectively through that training program. And finally, we want to coordinate these local workforce programs. We want to align all the existing programs and connect that with this effort so that we're not leaving programs out and we're having the greatest impact possible, and the resources are utilized in the best way possible.

The second part of your question was how do you get from no partnership to the creation of a robust partnership I just outlined. It really starts with an important building of relationships within the funding community and the local government and civic infrastructure. As I said earlier, we really allow this model to be adopted per community and so those players will differ, but we want to make sure that we have the leading voices on this issue in a community coming together at the beginning to really sit down and think through, do they want to go through and make the commitment. We want to make sure that the employers and the local workforce program is able and willing to implement that program in the local community.

And then there's a four-to-one match, so we need to make sure that the existing resources that are in the community can be put together in this collaborative, and the new resources have to be dedicated; there's no way to do this without new resources. In order to do that, we need to make sure that the local community has the capacity to raise those dollars. And then finally, really and what it always comes down to is, is the leadership both in the workforce community but also the employer community to bring this collaborative together and to make sure that it continues to function robustly.

Edwards: All that sounds like a significant undertaking, especially given the variety of players. With respect to the regional collaborative, what are the challenges you've seen in both the start-up and implementation phases?

Thorman: I think the largest challenge that we tend to face is that we're really suggesting a really bold and innovative approach here. So, we have to really work hard to communicate effectively to the local funders and to the local, primarily the local workforce development system, that this new approach really is providing them with resources to build on what they've already been doing, but they haven't had the resources to innovate as much as they have. We're coming in and providing these new dollars that allow them to build and innovate, and reach out and create these cross-sector collaboratives, which really, ultimately inject more of the employers' needs.

Edwards: *Can you provide an example from a regional collaborative that demonstrates the ability of these groups to benefit both job seekers and employers alike?*

Thorman: Take Philadelphia, which is one of our earliest and most successful programs. Hundreds of workers have been served. More than 35 employers, ranging from advanced manufacturing to food manufacturing, have also been a part of the collaborative. Now, through the recession, many of the firms found ways to steadily grow their businesses and workforce even though many of the other folks in the region were struggling. This ties back to the need and the economic impact that high-quality workforce training programs really can have, allowing employers to have the skills they need to move through these tough times.

A recent study of that program showed that the partners, the employers, and the employees really found that there was a very strong exchange of ideas and they were able to gain a sense of camaraderie or partnership, they were able to troubleshoot common issues, discuss policy changes that might be necessary at the local, state, and national level to help facilitate this being implemented more broadly and meet the needs more broadly of employers and employees. They were also able to stay informed about industry trends, and compare training and experiences and recommendations to fellow employers.

Edwards: *Damian, thank you for joining us today.*

Thorman: Thank you, Tammy.

Edwards: *This concludes our podcast. We've been speaking with Damian Thorman, Knight Foundation's national program director. Plan to attend our upcoming national conference on workforce development titled "The Future of Workforce Development: Where Research Meets Practice" on September 19 and 20 in Kansas City, Missouri. The Kansas City and Atlanta Feds are conference cohosts. For more information and to register, visit workforce.kcfed.org.*

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