



Northeast Oklahoma partners seek to remove barriers to an inclusive workforce

by: Steven Shepelwich

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Businesses are scrambling to find workers to meet the demands of today's recovering economy. This is as true in Oklahoma, with its low 2.7% unemployment rate, as it is across the country. But populations vary in their experiences. Just as unemployment was higher and considerably worse for people of color in Oklahoma during the pandemic, their employment levels have not risen as quickly during the recovery.

Oklahoma's [Northeast Workforce Development Board](#) (NEWDB), alongside a group of regional partners, will tackle this issue as participants in the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia's third annual [Reinventing Our Communities Cohort Program](#). The program strengthens regional economies by addressing race-based economic inequities in rural and small urban regions across the country.

This year's program is focused on strategies to promote equitable workforce development outcomes and opportunity. Each region will assemble a local cohort of six to eight community stakeholders representing a range of sectors and perspectives. The group will engage in workforce development webinars and racial equity training and receive coaching from national workforce leaders throughout the year. Each cohort will develop a multiyear plan to expand economic opportunities for local workers and communities of color.

"An important aspect of the Federal Reserve's work is to maintain full employment," said Theresa Singleton, senior vice president of the Community Development and Regional Outreach Department at the Philadelphia Fed. "The cohort program supports the Fed's work by helping local communities realize the full potential of their talent pipeline and provide investments and innovation that support workers."



NEWDB is leading one of the 11 cohorts located across 10 states in this year's program. The Federal Reserve Banks of Boston, Cleveland, Atlanta, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Kansas City and San Francisco are each working with cohorts.

The NEWDB cohort, the Oklahoma Equity Network, brings together organizations serving seven rural counties in the northeast corner of Oklahoma. Stakeholders include Tulsa Jobs Corps, Tulsa Ports, Oklahoma Employment Security Commission, MidAmerica Industrial Park, Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College, Quapaw Nation, Union Public Schools and RSU TV, a public television station.

Together the partners will work to:

- address the structural barriers that limit the full potential of workers and communities of color,
- ensure that workforce development programs lead to jobs that pay living wages and offer economic mobility,
- partner with local employers to support workforce development strategies, and
- learn best practices for attracting and retaining talent to foster inclusive economic growth in rural and small urban areas.



Michelle Bish, executive director of the Northeast Workforce Development Board, said “The NEWDB team and our partners are committed to the work ahead of us focused on racial equity and local solutions. We are hopeful that the work we are embarking on will strengthen the regional economy and the workforce system as a whole. The change necessary can only come about as we gain a greater understanding of the root causes of race-based economic inequities and work collaboratively to build community-led structural change.”

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Steve Shepelwich is a lead community development advisor for the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City in the Oklahoma City Branch Office. Shepelwich's work connects workers with jobs, improves the quality of lower-wage jobs, and helps institutions leverage the Community Reinvestment Act to support workforce development programs. He is currently partnering with the Atlanta Fed on the role of [public benefits](#) in supporting positive employment outcomes. Shepelwich began his community development career in the Peace Corps in Kenya as a small business advisor, then worked with other organizations in the region for six years. Before joining the Kansas City Fed in 2004, he worked for a Washington, D.C. consulting group assisting CDFIs, asset-building and economic development organizations. A Texas native, Shepelwich studied marketing as an undergrad at Texas A&M. A six-month internship with a rural development program in India sparked his interest in community development. Shepelwich received his master's degree from Michigan State University and attended the Graduate School of Banking at the University of Wisconsin. Shepelwich is active with Goodwill Industries and Rotary, part of a community disaster response team, and volunteers with Wildcare Foundation, Oklahoma's largest wildlife rehabilitation program. Shepelwich lives in Norman, Oklahoma, with his wife and two children. Highlights of his work include: ["Investing in America's Workforce."](#) Shepelwich hosted roundtables, the themes of which informed a national workforce development conference. [Engaging Workforce Development: A Framework for Meeting CRA Obligations](#), produced in conjunction with the Dallas Fed. [Small Business of Color Recovery Guide](#) to assist communities develop equitable development strategies. **About the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City** The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City is one of 12 regional Reserve Banks that, along with the Board of Governors in Washington, D.C., make up our nation's central bank. We work in the public's interest by supporting economic and financial stability. The Kansas City Fed's territory includes Colorado, Kansas, western Missouri, Nebraska, northern New Mexico, Oklahoma and Wyoming. Our headquarters is in Kansas City, with branch offices in Denver, Omaha and Oklahoma City. The Kansas City Fed Community Development Department promotes economic development and public understanding that leads to progress for lower-income individuals and communities. Our focus areas include community development investments, digital inclusion, small business / entrepreneurship, and workforce development.