

# Connecting Learners through a Citywide Referral Network

Christine Piven, Philadelphia Business & Technology Center

Philadelphia has three WIOA Title II organizations, 35 (and growing) non-profit providers who offer adult education assessments and classes, a local workforce board, and a municipal government office to support adult education. In the mid-2000s, learners would have needed to locate any of these providers on their own. In 2014, the City of Philadelphia launched myPLACE<sup>SM</sup> (my Philadelphia Literacy and Adult Career Education), which offered residents centralized access to education and career development services through community-based partner programs. By 2020, the basic framework of myPLACE<sup>SM</sup> remained, but with the move to more virtual options during COVID-19 as well as the shrinking of the City's adult education office, there needed to be other ways to strengthen the system of connecting residents to adult education resources.

With so many disparate and discrete providers and funders, how can a resident seeking adult education resources find a single point of entry—a gateway—to connect to these available services? What existing investments can be leveraged? What relationships should be developed or deepened to support this effort? Where can coordination, collaboration, and integration be useful to better support Philadelphians and their connections to adult education? These were the challenges facing the city's efforts to support the community of learners.

## Background

In 2020, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) funded the National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB) to develop a six-month cohort of

workforce boards to help cities and states expand their use of SNAP 50/50 to support residents' workforce and adult education needs.

There are a few programs under the SNAP umbrella that are administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), and one of them is SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T). The purpose of SNAP E&T is to assist members of SNAP households in gaining skills training, work, or experience that will increase their ability to obtain regular employment. SNAP E&T funds can be used to provide enhanced individualized services to program participants, such as childcare, transportation, and adult education connected to certification and jobs. SNAP E&T is funded in two ways, and one of them is through 50% Reimbursement Funds, or SNAP 50/50. For example, FNS reimburses states for 50% of state or local expenditures for supportive services, such as transportation and dependent care. For additional information about SNAP 50/50, see USDA's SNAP to Skills website.<sup>1</sup>

Philadelphia's local workforce board, Philadelphia Works, has worked over the years with the city's adult education office and the WIOA Title IIs to bring adult education resources to their clients. Philadelphia Works and the City of Philadelphia's Adult Education Office used the NAWB training to develop new areas for collaboration.

Patricia Blumenauer (Chief Operating Officer of Philadelphia Works) invited Christine Piven, Ph.D. (former Executive Director of Adult Education for the City of Philadelphia, currently Chief of Prevention, Office of Children and Families) to join the NAWB cohort. This

<sup>1</sup> <https://snaptoskills.fns.usda.gov/about-snap-skills/what-is-snap-et>

work helped to define several challenges—key among them was how to build a system to ensure residents have the necessary support to achieve both their education and career goals. An early result of this partnership was a successful \$2.5 million application to a local philanthropic organization, the William Penn Foundation, to implement this system. A key component of the grant was to streamline access to services by creating a single-entry point for residents to access adult education, vocational training, and career services.

Local workforce boards have the option to create a call center as one way to increase access to services. Philadelphia Works took advantage of this flexibility and established a single number for residents to call for all their workforce needs. In Philadelphia, this toll-free number to PA CareerLink® is 1-833-750-JOBS (5627). In 2020, Philadelphia Works expanded their investment in this toll-free line due to expanding workforce needs during the pandemic. Residents' main reason for calling the toll-free line in 2021 was to access unemployment compensation, and the number of monthly calls was typically about 60 per month.

## The Transition

The Adult Education Office and Philadelphia Works shared the same vision: increasing access to in-demand services, such as quality workforce and adult education programs. Driving traffic to a single place would help residents find both adult education and workforce opportunities, and the system would finally have a clear message: Call the toll-free number for all your workforce and adult education needs.

The budget for adult education was small in comparison to the need among residents, and Philadelphia Works had a fully funded call center. Philadelphia Works agreed to allow adult education to leverage their existing investment in the call center with no additional funding required from the city.

With leadership buy-in on both sides, the operating teams began to focus on five areas. These included:

- changes to the adult education database that hold all learner data, class schedules, and referrals to allow

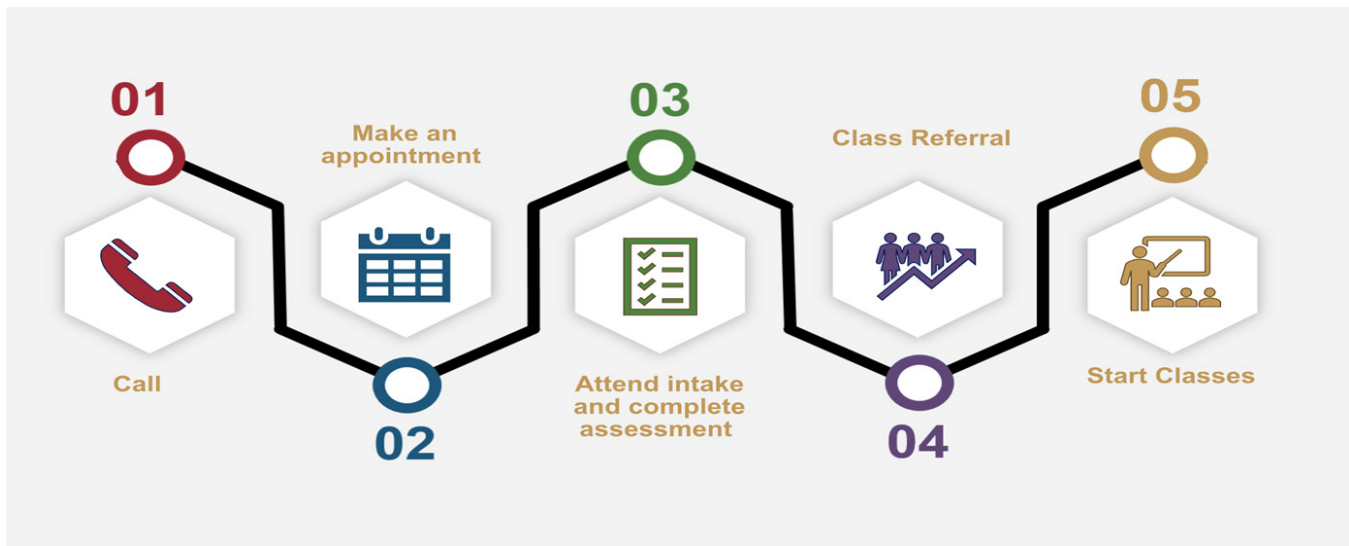
easier navigation for the call center staff

- new designed scripts for call center staff that matched the database changes and were user-friendly
- training for the call center staff and re-training for Adult Education providers on how to navigate the new system
- development of a shared communications plan to inform residents about the toll-free number
- ongoing internal communications and continuous quality improvement to ensure a quality experience for residents, call center staff, and providers
- The collaboration launched publicly in May 2022.<sup>2</sup>

## How it Works: Five Steps for Residents to Connect to a Class

Learners are connected to the call center through multiple avenues. This may include organic calls responding to the marketing for this resource, internal referrals from the PA CareerLink® Centers, the City's Adult Education Office, or from adult education providers who want to connect learners to other classes. The call center staff then have a defined script to collect basic information (such as contact information) and understand the needs of the learner. For example, a learner is asked about class type, desired location, and time of the class. The database itself holds class listings from providers across the city. Class types include Adult Basic Education (ABE), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Citizenship Prep, English for Job Search, Digital Skills (from computer basics to smart phones to video calling), and High School Equivalency Classes. Providers also offer both CASAS and BestPlus 3.0 literacy tests as a pre- and post-assessments. The call center staff then use the city's database to locate an organization that has open intake/assessment sessions that match the learner's needs and then sign up the learner for that session. Both the provider and the learner receive an email confirmation from the database of the upcoming session. Once the learner completes the intake/assessment session, they can be enrolled in the class that aligns with their educational goals and literacy level. This process can be seen in Figure 1.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.phila.gov/2022-06-02-office-of-children-and-families-launches-next-level-learning-campaign-for-adult-learners-with-single-phone-call-access-to-program-information/>

**FIGURE 1:**

If there are any hiccups in the process (such as a learner missing a session or voicing concerns about a provider), the learner can call the toll-free number to be matched with a new session, and any concerns would be forwarded to the city for follow-up. Anytime a call center user creates a learner profile, they manually tag that profile as a “1-833” call, and the database itself logs the user account creating the learner’s profile. Some callers might have a profile in the database already, so being able to combine multiple documentation methods to track which learner profile came through the call center helps with data accuracy.

## The Data

In 2020, there were no calls for adult education to the toll-free line. In 2022, when the call center first accepted adult education calls, 907 of the 2,160 calls (or 42% of all calls) were for adult education. In 2023, 3,584 of the 5,875 calls (or 61% of all calls) were for adult education. In 2024, (01/01/2024–11/20/2024), there were 2,251 adult education calls. Together, the call center supported 3,724 unique learners between May 23, 2022, and November 20, 2024. Learners often reach out to the call center multiple times with additional questions, which is why the unique learner count is much less than the total call count. Of the unique learners who called the call center, 2,806 of 3,741 (75%) were validated with accounts in the adult education database. Some learners may have called asking for adult education but were routed to another part of the

system after talking to the call center staff and identifying other needs. For example, a learner may have needed a workforce program, so they would be routed to a PA CareerLink® Career Navigator who could assist with both their workforce and adult education needs. Of the 2,806 learners with validated database profiles, 2,462 (88%) were enrolled into an intake/assessment session: the first step a learner takes to be placed in a class.

## Continuous Quality Improvement

Since the launch of this new resource, the call center and the Adult Education teams meet on a consistent basis to catch errors, respond to provider or learner concerns, and problem solve. This allows for dedicated time to focus on a structured feedback loop with timely and thoughtful improvements. The two teams have worked together for more than a year and have built a trusting work environment, which allows for direct and immediate feedback, immediate responses to any mistakes, and potential revisions to improve the learner experience.

Since the launch of this partnership in May 2022, several areas of continuing collaboration have come into focus.

### Provider Feedback Loop

This has been Adult Education’s first opportunity to understand more fully what is happening between the provider and the learner. Prior to the toll-free number,

Adult Education had limited insights into the learner experience at the provider level. With this data now collected centrally, the length of time from the first call to the assessment appointment to being connected to a class can be tracked. In addition, how many times a learner calls the toll-free number and the types of follow-up questions they may have is also tracked. For example, a learner may call the toll-free number line again because they were not contacted by the provider or because they can no longer attend the intake session. This helps the Adult Education team provide feedback and support to the providers as well as ensuring the learner gets attached to the service they requested.

### Learner Feedback Loop

The call center and Adult Education teams meet weekly to discuss anything that has happened over the last week at the call center. Originally, this meeting was set up for project-planning purposes, but it continued after launch to discuss implementation bugs, updates/changes, and caller feedback. Up until this partnership, the Adult Education team did not have a consistent and reliable learner feedback mechanism. This partnership unexpectedly created a feedback loop that is used to improve call quality, learner experience at provider sites, learner accessibility, and translation needs. Learners may call the toll-free number back to report a negative experience they had after working with the call center, and the toll-free number staff will report those calls to Adult Education for further action. We have learned so much from the feedback loop that call center managers decided to learn what the overall call quality is like for callers with specific needs. Currently, there are plans for a formal evaluation to measure call quality, which includes observing how different call requests are handled by call center staff members.

### Refining the System

Through both the provider and learner feedback loop, some callers who reached the answering machine (either because they called after hours or because the line was busy) did not understand how to leave a message because the answering machine message was in English only. The teams worked together to ensure that language access was available for the four most common languages (excluding English) spoken in Philadelphia. Once the languages were selected, keypad options were given for

callers to select their preferred language. Moreover, the teams provided phone-based translation services, which are used daily by the call center. Thus, if a learner calls the toll-free line and does not speak English, the call center will connect all parties to a translator who will support the learner and the call center staff member during the registration and enrollment process.

## Conclusions

The partnership has been a productive collaboration on several levels—but can it be replicated? We think it can, and here are our recommendations for what other cities can take away from this Philadelphia example.

1. Learn about and build relationships with your local system-level partners. Who has significant investments in adult education or adult education-related opportunities?
2. What is the relationship between your local workforce board and adult education? Does your local workforce board have a call center? If not, how do they communicate with residents about their services? Are there any opportunities to partner around shared communications about both workforce and adult education opportunities? Or does your local workforce board have the appetite to invest in a call center?
3. What are the needs of your learners? Would this type of collaboration be useful to them? Would it increase their access to and knowledge of other resources available to them?
4. Incorporate enough time before implementation to build or leverage the relationships and resources needed to support the endeavor. Are there key stakeholders that can help manage the project through to completion? What capacity concerns are there and how will they be addressed?

Our aspiration continues to be creating a seamless and simplified system for both learners and providers, and to expand the community reach of the workforce system. By having strong, committed leadership, mission-aligned partners, clear communications, a commitment to quality programming, as well as flexible and ready information systems, we are able to take the next steps in our work together.