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## 3 local gov staffers are studying other cities' co-ops to boost Philly's democratic biz economy

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By Grace Shallow / CONTRIBUTOR

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**C**ooperative biz models aren't new in Philadelphia, but lately, they've been getting a bit more top-down support.

A [yearlong fellowship](#) that teaches city leaders the necessary skills for catalyzing democratic business ownership is working in three local commercial corridors: 52nd Street, Woodland Avenue and East Passyunk Avenue.

The **SEED Fellowship** — which stands for Shared Equity in Economic Development — is led by the **National League of Cities** and the **Democracy at Work Institute**. Besides Philadelphia, SEED is working in Miami, Atlanta and Durham, North Carolina.

Three fellows are chosen per city and will travel to their counterparts to learn more about each other's cooperative economies. The **City of Philadelphia** is represented by:

- ✓ **Yvonne Boye**, director of the **Office of Neighborhood Economic Development**
- ✓ **Frank Iannuzzi**, legislative director for Councilman At-Large **Derek Green**

- ✓ **Natalie Jackson**, director of business technical assistance in the Office of Neighborhood Economic Development

**Jamila Medley**, the executive director of the **Philadelphia Area Cooperative Alliance** (PACA), will join SEED as a “community fellow.” PACA aims to grow the city’s cooperative economy and has 19 members that are either co-ops or credit unions, including **Bonfire Media Collective** and **South Philly Food Co-op**.

Worker cooperatives are businesses primarily owned and governed by their employees. They differ from other democratic models, like consumer coops, which are owned by the people they serve.

Iannuzzi said he hopes the fellowship introduces the three corridors in Philadelphia to worker cooperatives as a potential business model.

“Some of the business owners themselves can look at cooperatives as something that’s generous and virtuous and worthwhile,” Iannuzzi said. “It’s also a way of empowering members of communities to have ownership stakes very immediately in both their work and their community.”

Being a worker cooperative isn’t the ideal model for every business, and Medley said the fellows still have to do more ground work to better understand what barriers face Philadelphia’s cooperative economy.

For example, the three corridors in Philadelphia all vary in demographics and barriers. On 52nd Street, a worker cooperative there may have to answer to aging business owners’ lack of capital (<http://www2.philly.com/philly/news/worker-coops-retiring-black-owned-businesses-silver-tsunami-20181029.html#loaded>), Iannuzzi said. For immigrant business owners on Woodland Avenue, the model could solve the question of future ownership when younger generations seek different careers.

Cooperative models traditionally benefit marginalized communities, said **Mo Manklang**, U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives’ (USFWC) director of communications and PACA’s board president. In 1899, **W.E.B. DuBois** wrote about

the already existing practice of economic cooperation in Philadelphia's Black community.



A September SEED gathering in Philadelphia. (Courtesy photo)

Recently, the city has bolstered its support of cooperative economy. Thanks to a \$75,000 city contract (<http://www2.philly.com/philly/news/worker-coops-retiring-black-owned-businesses-silver-tsunami-20181029.html#loaded>), PACA is examining what resources are available for businesses seeking to convert to a co-op model. Green has consistently been a staunch advocate for co-ops on City Council, Iannuzzi said. And at an event for the fellowship in Philadelphia in September, Mayor Jim Kenney spoke about the importance of SEED's work.

Iannuzzi said it's unclear whether conversations started by the fellowship could lead to policy changes, but they're working to increase City Council support of cooperatives in some way.

On the federal level, democratic business models also got a push with the **Main Street Ownership Act** in August, which encourages the **Small Business**

**Administration** to examine how its current policies impede potential funding for cooperatives and supports more widespread education.

To help the act get passed, USFWC spent this past year educating legislators and the public about the benefits of cooperatives, Manklang said. The organization lobbied in Washington, D.C. and provided commentary on the legislation while it was moving through the Capitol.

"It's really important for the government to be spotlighting worker cooperatives in this way because I think it puts worker cooperatives on the tips of people's tongues in a way that it wasn't before," Manklang said.

Policy often trickles down from the federal to local level, she added. It would bolster Philadelphia's already deep-rooted history of cooperatives that began in 1752 when Benjamin Franklin formed the city's first.

"It's a model that's really rooted in the people who have lived here for a really long time," Manklang said. "This isn't just a program that is being supported because it's shiny."

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