

# Cooking Up Success: The Enterprise Center-CDC and Leveraging the Food Industry for Community Development

Brett Heeger 08 December 2014

Through the Dorrance H. Hamilton Center for Culinary Enterprises (CCE), The Enterprise Center Community Development Corporation (TEC-CDC) uses food as a means to spur community economic development in West Philadelphia. A commercial kitchen facility, the CCE is both a business incubator for early-stage food entrepreneurs and an important component of neighborhood revitalization. Through the CCE, TEC-CDC comprehensively addresses interrelated issues of access, knowledge, affordability, convenience and economic opportunity to empower food choices among West Philadelphia residents.

## Project Overview & Impact

TEC-CDC was started in 2001 by The Enterprise Center, an accomplished minority business accelerator. TEC-CDC extends TEC's entrepreneurial mission to the neighborhood level, working with the Walnut Hill

neighborhood and greater West Philadelphia community to implement programmatic initiatives and physical redevelopment projects in support of neighborhood revitalization. Further, TEC-CDC understands that a strong correlation exists between health and economic status, and that community members need jobs with stable, family-supporting incomes to be empowered to lead healthy lives long-term.

West Philadelphia is a microcosm of the opportunities and issues facing Philadelphia. On the one hand, prominent hospitals and universities anchor the local economy and provide thousands of jobs for the region. On the other hand, as of 2012, 34% of area residents were living below the federal poverty line, compared with 26% citywide and 15% nationally.<sup>[i]</sup> This dichotomy extends to the built environment of West Philadelphia, where constant construction on and around the university campuses is juxtaposed by vacant land and abandoned buildings as one moves away from these anchor institutions.

When an abandoned grocery store in West Philadelphia became available,<sup>[i]</sup> TEC-CDC saw an opportunity to address the needs of two communities—the immediate community suffering from the void left by the abandoned building, and a growing regional community of early-stage food entrepreneurs in need of affordable access to commercial kitchen space. With input from the surrounding community and support from the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation and a wide range of


other public and private sources, TEC-CDC converted this space into a \$6 million state-of-the-art, LEED-certified culinary center. With four commercial kitchens available for rent by the hour, a studio kitchen fully equipped for events and one of three retail locations now open, the CCE is helping to enliven the commercial node at 48<sup>th</sup> and Spruce streets. Since the opening of the facility in fall 2012, more than 100 local entrepreneurs have used the CCE space and services to grow their food businesses, and this business growth has influenced the creation of more than 200 food sector jobs.

## Innovations

The CCE embodies TEC-CDC's unique effort to support aspiring entrepreneurs and work with the neighboring community for equitable and systemic development. It provides both the physical space and regulatory compliance required for local food entrepreneurs as well as the technical assistance, financing and downstream economic development opportunities essential to any small businesses. Further, in activating this space in West Philadelphia, the CCE steadily contributes to the neighborhood's redevelopment.

CCE programming addresses three key common challenges for food industry entrepreneurs: business development, product refinement and commercialization and access to capital. TEC's historic strengths and

resources in business development have been readily leveraged as coaching and technical assistance programs are expanded and adapted to support food producers and aspiring restaurateurs. The CCE is also host to public workshops and presentations on finance, operations and marketing in the food industry. On the product side, the access to otherwise expensive commercial equipment, coupled with in-house culinary expertise, gives CCE members a unique opportunity to learn how to scale and develop their products. Moreover, by making commercially licensed space and equipment available by the hour to early-stage entrepreneurs, the CCE takes an essential step in increasing access to food entrepreneurship opportunities. Many CCE members also share contacts, opportunities and employees, taking advantage of the natural networks facilitated by the shared space. Finally, TEC-CDC connects member businesses to small business loans through its affiliated Capital Corporation, ensuring the ready access to strategic capital for committed entrepreneurs. Within the broader food ecosystem of Philadelphia, TEC-CDC effectively combines the business expertise, product support and capital resources needed to propel early stage food entrepreneurs through the initial strategic moments of growth and commercialization.

The CCE is also a key component in TEC-CDC's  community development work, revolving around three tenets: physical revitalization, increased financial

opportunity and community empowerment and engagement. The physical redevelopment is described above, but the CCE is also an important boon to financial opportunities for community members. Minimal education is required to enter the food industry, and the threshold for CCE membership is kept deliberately low so that all community members may begin legally producing and selling their products. The entrepreneurship, employment and programming opportunities at the CCE, combined with TEC-CDC's West Philly Foods community farm program, make TEC-CDC and the CCE a gateway for those in West Philadelphia who are interested in locally sourced products and informed consumption.

## **Lessons Learned and Looking Ahead**

The comprehensive nature of the services TEC-CDC provides to entrepreneurs makes the CCE unique among the various commercial kitchens, business incubators and community-based financial institutions that serve aspiring food entrepreneurs in the region. Since CCE opened in 2012, more than 100 different food businesses from around the city and region have enrolled as members. At the same time, TEC-CDC hopes to leverage the income-earning potential of the commercial rental space in order to sustain its community development work. The activation of diverse income streams through the CCE—from tenant businesses, commercial kitchen users and events—may steadily allow the CCE to

become a self-sustaining program. Though there have been challenges to date (in part given the West Philadelphia location), one of three retail spaces opened in fall 2014 with a full-scale restaurant that fills a need for more sit-down eateries in the area. In turn, the challenges of opening this first restaurant inspired TEC-CDC's next initiative, Common Table, a restaurant incubator scheduled to open at the CCE in early 2015. By giving aspiring restaurateurs the opportunity to test their concept and menu in a 'pop-up' environment, TEC-CDC hopes to further contribute to both the success of these entrepreneurs and the ongoing revitalization of the area. There is still a long way to go, but as the CCE moves closer to sustainability, TEC-CDC programming can continue to engage and comprehensively support the communities it serves.

### **Author Bio:**

Brett Heeger is The Enterprise Center's first Food System Director, a role in which he leads strategic planning and operational enhancements across the TEC food system. Brett received his JD from Harvard Law School in 2014 and a BA from Brown University in 2008.