



## Workforce Leadership Café #4 — Greater Memphis Chamber (Transcript)

Hosted by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, February 1, 2024

### Description

The [Greater Memphis Chamber](#) is the voice of business and the lead economic development agency for the region, and the sponsor of a [Workforce Leadership Academy](#) in 2023. Meet them at the intersection of economic development, workforce development, equity, and job quality for a reflection on their lessons from this unique vantage point.

This is the fourth in a series of [five conversations with our partners in local Workforce Leadership Academies](#). We invite you to listen to our previous discussions with [Pima Community College and the Center for the Future of Arizona](#), with local workforce board [Workforce Solutions Alamo](#), and capacity building and leadership development in workforce development with [United Way of Central Maryland and Scranton Area Community Foundation](#). Learn more at [as.pn/WLAcafe](#).

For more information about this event — including video, audio, transcript, speaker bios, and additional resources — visit our website:

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/workforce-leadership-cafe-4-greater-memphis-chamber/>

### Speakers

- **Amber Covington**, Vice President of Talent Innovation, Greater Memphis Workforce Development Board
- **Sondra Howell**, Director of Community Development, Greater Memphis Chamber
- **Jessica Mosley**, Acting Executive Director, Greater Memphis Chamber
- **Dee Wallace**, Senior Fellow, The Aspen Institute

## Summary

Dee Wallace, senior fellow with the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, welcomes the partners from the Greater Memphis Chamber to discuss their involvement in the Workforce Leadership Academies. The Greater Memphis Chamber is an economic development organization that focuses on attracting new businesses, growing existing businesses, and building strong talent pipelines. Fellows joined the Memphis Workforce Leadership Academy to connect with other leaders in the community and to develop their own leadership skills. The Chamber believes in the importance of job quality and has been having conversations with businesses about what constitutes a quality job. They have found that job quality is not just about wages, but also includes factors such as workplace culture, opportunities for growth, and support for employees' personal needs. The Chamber is also focused on fostering collaboration and partnerships within the workforce development ecosystem, rather than viewing other organizations as competition. They share resources, data, and expertise with their partners and work together to achieve common goals. The Chamber believes that investing in talent development and supporting workforce organizations can lead to stronger ecosystems and more investments in talent development.

## Transcript

### Dee Wallace (00:08)

Hello, and welcome. I'm Dee Wallace, Senior Fellow with the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program. We're so pleased that you're here joining us for the fourth of our Workforce Leadership Cafes. A series of conversations we've been having with practitioners in the workforce development field with our partners who have been operating local Workforce Leadership Academies over this past year.

These conversations are with the leaders in the ecosystems about how investments in their workforce workforce that is the practitioners, the frontline workers, the leaders and managers of organizations that connect people to jobs, could significantly grow the capacity of local workforce ecosystems.

One of the things that my colleague, Sheila Maguire and I lay out in a blog that we published a while ago called, "The Cobbler's Children Have No Shoes", is that we think that investments in the capacity of our local ecosystems, in the human infrastructure of our local workforce development ecosystems could really foster more collaborative and effective system.

And today we are very pleased to welcome our partners with the Greater Memphis Chamber. Before we get started, a few technical reminders. Everyone's muted upon entry, and we encourage you to submit questions and examples and your perspectives in the chat as we go along. This session will be recorded and posted on our website. If you have any technical issues during the event, please message us in the chat or email [eop.program@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eop.program@aspeninstitute.org). Closed captions are available for the discussion. Click the CC button at the bottom of your screen to activate them.

And one note before we get started, our conversation here will be about 45 minutes. If you're available, and can stick around for another 15 minutes for informal chat with our guests, please do. So grab your coffee, your tea, or beverage of your choice, and let's get started in conversation here.

So some background, the Workforce Leadership Academies have grown out of EOP's commitment over the past decade to leadership in the workforce development field. The academies are a 10-month peer learning program that brings together leaders in local ecosystems from training providers, community colleges, public agencies, employers, industry associations, philanthropy, and others to come together and learn from each other and others across the country about workforce development through the lenses of systems change, personal leadership, and racial equity.

Fellows have the rare chance to step back out of the fray and really think about their local ecosystems through these lenses and make some recommendations for changes. No, it's 2024. In 2022, we started working with partners in eight communities to deliver local academies. And we've been in conversation with them about their experiences supporting leadership at the local level and their unique vantage points from their different organizational types.

And so please welcome Sondra Howell, Amber Covington, and Jessica Mosley from the Greater Memphis Chamber in Memphis, Tennessee. We're so pleased to have you join us. So tell us a little bit about the Greater Memphis Chamber.

**Sondra Howell (04:14)**

Thank you Dee, so much for having us. So the Greater Memphis Chamber, we are the leading economic development organization and we represent in the region and our region includes three states counties in three different states that align. Memphis, of course, being our primary state where we're located. But we're also connected to Mississippi. And so, the northern part of Mississippi is also in our region as well as Arkansas. West Memphis, Arkansas, which is just right across the bridge.

The Greater Memphis Chamber today is different than it has been in years before. We've been very fortunate to have two consecutive presidents. All previous presidents were wonderful too, but our two most recent presidents, Beverly Robertson and our current president, Ted Townsend have a strong belief in economic prosperity for all and our mission, our goals, the work that we do have all been founded on that.

And we are very fortunate that both of them hold us accountable for all of that. They believe in people and therefore we invest a lot of our work in people, the growth of people, the support of people. We believe that people are the foundation. They're the first step in leveling up any community, leveling up any economy.

Our three strategic goals are to attract new businesses and new investments into our region in every community to grow existing businesses and Jessica who leads a lot of that work. We're growing businesses from the community level up. While we do focus on corporations that can bring lots of jobs that pay a lot of money, we also believe strongly in our local entrepreneurs and what various communities want and need. And we support those efforts as well for them to start up and grow capacity and to sustain.

And then we also, of course, focus on building strong talent pipelines because that's the number one need that you hear from any business. And although we do all this work, we remain the voice of businesses in our community and we also focus on strengthening the business climate. We have a team of about 30, 35 individuals who work very closely in various departments to achieve those goals.

**Dee Wallace (06:40)**

Thank you. So when I hear Chamber of Commerce, I think as you said, voice of business, business membership, right? How did a Workforce Leadership Academy fit into the Memphis Chamber?

**Sondra Howell (06:59)**

It fits perfectly at the given time. And so just to give you a little context and background on our community, our region, and so not unlike a lot of other locations, we faced a lot of challenges, right, historically. And those challenges included the misalignment of talent training and resources, competition amongst organizations because of various things, including the perception that there's a lack of money, a lack of resources. So then we became more competitive than collaborative.

And then also one of those things where we were making decisions based on our gut or our personal experiences as a region versus on data. And so again, with the Chamber's leadership, we decided that our ecosystem, our community, cannot continue to regroup and start over and think and make mistakes because we were doing so at the suffering or at the expense of those who need economic development and economic growth most. And those are our most impoverished and neglected communities.

And so the Chamber made the very conscious decision to step into this workforce space because again, workforce is the foundation for economic development. Any business you talk to, what's the thing that they stay up at night, they worry about, especially when they're relocated into a new area, do you have the talent that I need to keep my doors open to impact my bottom line? And so everything starts with a skilled talent base.

And so after we believe in partnerships, we believe in collaboration, but if we're the organization that we have our hands on and are directly connected to businesses who provide those good jobs and who are wanting to do better so that they can grow, what better organization would it be then to take a leadership role, extend our footprint wider into this workforce space?

And we were very deep into it when the opportunity for the academy came around that we were like, "This is perfect. This is perfect for us to begin to connect with other leaders in the community." And another thing that we focus on is the Chamber doesn't focus on programs, we focus on systems changes. And so that reflected loud and clear in the application, how do you look at things through an equitable lens and also through a systemic lens when you're talking about economic growth and workforce growth. And we were like, "This is perfect."

So these are all part of our strategies. The Academy will not only help us move forward with our strategic goals, but it will also help us develop other leaders in our community. We also know that we can't do this work by ourselves. This is definitely a collaborative, a whole regional approach. And so that's how the academy fits. It was perfect timing with a perfect opportunity.

**Jessica Mosley (10:03)**

I wanted to add to what Sondra mentioned, having this being a collaborative effort, it also allowed us to generate a common language, common goal in this space. I think oftentimes we're working in this space and the leaders are not really using the same language to describe our ecosystem and how we

look to move the needle forward. So it was a great opportunity to hear from the leaders in this space to inform the Chamber, to let us know what language that they're using to describe the workforce ecosystem and how we can support it with that same language.

**Sondra Howell (10:41)**

Great point. Great point.

**Dee Wallace (10:43)**

Got it. Yeah. So as a Chamber, what kind of opportunities provide you as a convener of all of these leaders across your ecosystem and what kind of challenges were there? Again, because you are a unique kind of organization doing this kind of work.

**Jessica Mosley (11:04)**

So as a convener, there are a lot of people in the ecosystem in our region that we don't know. We try our best to get to know every single business, every single person that's doing something in Memphis. And so I'm in this Workforce ecosystem. Well, for the academy, it was a great opportunity for us to engage and identify with new local leaders that's doing this work.

We were grateful that the application process pulled in some non-traditional agencies that you would think were workforce-focused, but they also had someone on staff that does that type of work. So it was a great way to pull in unique individuals who lead this work within their organizations and also allowed for us the opportunity to have the fellows connect better with each other.

We worked to strengthen relationships at the Chamber, and so with us learning more about what the fellows and their agents were doing in the ecosystem allowed us to continue to plug them into different opportunities and resources that we may be aware of.

And then also too for the fellows to get to know each other better. We talk about reducing silos and duplicating efforts and work. And so this was an opportunity for us to have some of the stakeholders and leaders in our Workforce ecosystem to talk amongst each other, to share ideas and to learn about what someone else is doing so that we can reduce the duplication of efforts.

And also in that respect, we're increasing our partnership opportunities amongst them. There are a lot of local and federal and state dollars that are available to them to apply for. And so it strengthens the application process as they work together to partner with their different strengths and skill sets to support the work to move it forward.

There's also another opportunity that it presented to us that we had... So we were able to get input and guidance from leaders that we typically sometimes don't really hear from. As the Chamber we talk a lot with CEOs who really share their high level vision setting goals for where they see the ecosystem to move. Whereas with the fellows, we were able to connect with them with their team members who actually implement the work.

And so they also share a deeper understanding of the system challenges as they work in the day-to-day. That was a great opportunity for us to learn more about what's happening on the day-to-day level for those that work in this ecosystem.

Yes, I did want to also share that as Memphis has the largest Black population in the country, and so racial equity inclusion was very important during this conversation. And so we were able to really hear about how it shows up in their work and learn about what changes need to be made in order to better reach and serve those who feel that opportunities are not for them and therefore count themselves out.

And so it was a great opportunity for us to learn more about what they're seeing as issues and barriers and how we can help address those barriers. And of course, the challenge being positioned as the leaders of this space and this ecosystem, it was very important that we not impose our thoughts and ideas and be more as facilitators in the space and practice active listening.

And so people come to the Chamber to hear our expertise and what we should do and how we should align programming or systems. But this was an opportunity for us to actually just sit back and be active listeners, which is a very important skill as any leader in this space. And so I think that was a great challenge for us, but also an opportunity for us to continue to have that practice as we engage with the ecosystem leaders.

**Dee Wallace (15:24)**

I can imagine that, like you said, people come to you for the answers and you had to provide a space for others to share their answers.

**Sondra Howell (15:35)**

Yeah, that was pretty hard, especially for me. But I want to just add, Jessica made a really good point about bringing people together who normally don't interact. And one thing that we learned during the process is that the way we convened the way Aston had us convene, but allowed us some flexibility as well. We actually ended up providing a safe space for the fellows to interact and grow and express what's important to them that they always didn't feel safe in doing so in their own organizations.

I think we did a really good job at bringing together very diverse fellows when it comes to ethnicity, gender, et cetera. And it took maybe by the middle of the second convening with them or the third convening, people really started to open up and we started hearing the feedback that this was, "Thank you for allowing me to be me in this space", which we didn't even think about.

So we had folks from the younger leaders all the way to those who are looking to retire soon, and everyone felt very safe in expressing who they were. And I think it personally helped some of them work through some challenges they were having on the job as well with some of these priorities, implementing some of these priorities as they see as critical to our community. So I thought that was a really good opportunity for us to learn from our peers.

**Dee Wallace (17:14)**

Thank you. That's very interesting. Now let's turn to Amber. Amber Covington, I want to say congratulations to you on a couple of things. You were actually one of the Workforce Leadership

Academy fellows, and you just completed and joined the Economic Opportunities Network, a fellows network of alumni of Academy. So congratulations there.

**Amber Covington (17:37)**

Thank you.

**Dee Wallace (17:38)**

And you were just appointed interim executive director of the Greater Memphis Workforce Development Board. So congratulations there. That's a fairly recent development and it's so great to know you and see that. What are your thoughts on talent development in the Workforce development field? What are some of the challenges in the field and what's working?

**Amber Covington (18:08)**

Well, first off, thank you for the congratulations. I am in a unique space right now as the interim executive director for our Greater Memphis, local Workforce development board. Still working hand-in-hand with the Chamber as far as talent development and the Workforce Development field is extremely important and necessary. Most young people or people in general, don't go to school and say, "Oh, I'm going to be a Workforce development professional as a career."

I think we were talking earlier with Sondra and Jessica, a lot of times we're just pulled into this field, but there are so many challenges across the system that need to be addressed, and that's from reentry to the poverty issues, wraparound services, et cetera, that we need more Workforce development professionals and the Workforce development professionals that we have currently need continuous professional development opportunities to continue to grow in this field to make true impact through systems change.

I'm grateful for my opportunities, and have been a fellow in this academy. I feel that I've grown tremendously as far as my knowledge, but also being able to sit in a room with diverse thought leaders. This was an excellent group of fellows that came together over the last few months in 2023 to really talk about systems impact, look at things from an equity lens and for us to really learn about our different line of work and just being with different diverse thought leaders is a part of development too in the Workforce development field. So I'm very grateful for the experience.

I think you mentioned what are the challenges right now in Workforce development? And that is one of the challenges, not being able to get everyone in a room and be able to collaborate and have individuals from different modes of life talk about their experiences professionally and how do we continue to move the needle in our various regions on how to make systems change and impact.

So one of the challenges I know here in Memphis and similar to other places is an alignment between employer needs, also training providers. I think the chamber itself, we're in a unique space right now to be able to make an impact in those areas because as Sondra mentioned, we're the voice of business. But also too, we're in this unique space of being able to lead the Workforce development area to be able to align the business community, all the training providers, and then even the other community-based organizations here regionally to ensure that we can see some changes.

What's working? I will say here in the Memphis area, there are a lot of innovative ideas being brought to the table. We're seeing that through data-driven studies. Also here, for those that may have heard, there's a huge more from Memphis initiative where we're looking at different components from justice involved to creative economy. How do we increase efforts in those areas because we can't have economic development without Workforce development. They're married to each other.

So we're seeing a lot of innovative ideas across the board. There's a lot of grants that are coming into the area where there's a lot of different partner agencies that are actually working together, collaborating together to make changes in various sectors of Workforce development. Also to our Tennessee Department of Labor commissioner. She's opening doors to us here in Memphis to be more innovative and to bring more innovative approaches. So we're very appreciative of that and how that's going to work for us as an area, because Memphis, we're very unique compared to the rest of the state.

Our demographics are different, so we do have to be able to try some more innovative concepts to continue to move the needle here. For many of you all, you may have heard that we have our challenges with public safety, but those challenges are all across the country. But what can we do differently here to be the model? So she's allowing us to be able to do that with some of the funding that we're receiving in this region.

And then what can we do next? Connect those who need training and services to organizations that provide the services. So we're still in this continuous improvement stage, even though we've improved as far as not working so much in silos, we still have to continue to bridge the gap to ensure that the constituents across the region are receiving the services they need to be successful and to be self-sufficient. So that's where we are right now in Greater Memphis, and we're really proud of the work that is happening here.

### **Dee Wallace (23:51)**

Right. Great. That's going to be really exciting to watch as you do your work. It really landed with me to hear you talk about thought diversity and how you've created an environment to have thought diversity from these different constituents in the ecosystem. And you mentioned matching employer needs with the Workforce needs.

In this series, and in our blog, we raised the question of job quality within the Workforce development field, how we as Workforce practitioners are advocating for job quality with our employer and business partners. Something that I've heard your team, Sondra and others on your team refer to this year is raising that question of job quality with the businesses that you work with. So tell us how and why that shows up as you work with businesses in your region.

### **Sondra Howell (25:02)**

It sometimes sounds very... But when we first started really talking about job quality and if COVID did nothing for us, it really started to force us to look not only at the employers, but also at the employees, to start looking at what a quality job looks like, feel like mean to me? And what we found was that some businesses, some companies, had already gotten deep into it. So they were the ones who suffered the least during COVID with employees leaving or not wanting to come back to work because they had



already recognized, identified, and responded to what their employees felt was a good job, and they tried their best to create that culture.

What we learned, because we forced, unfortunately, I don't want to say force, but we encourage employers to have those real conversations with us and with others, with their employees as well. What is a good job? What does a quality job mean to them? And what we've learned is that it's not always wages. We continue to say, well, let me just backtrack and say wages is at the top of the list, right? Because no one wants to make \$14 an hour when their counterpart's at another company are making \$22 an hour.

That's the first thing we ask is have you looked at our data? Let us share it with you on what your competitors are paying, right? And if you're paying one, two, three, four, \$5 less, you're going to continue to have challenges because You're not providing a quality job per se, for that individual. But what we also learned is that quality jobs are not only dictated by wages.

When we talk a little bit about us feeling good about being able to be ourselves and having these conversations in the cohort, we've learned that employees also want to feel comfortable and be their whole selves when they come to work, right? And not anything that's disrespectful or anything, but me as an African American, light skinned woman with freckles and red hair today, black hair tomorrow, I want to be okay with coming to work and being who I am as long as my skills and my competencies are exactly what you hired me for.

And then we also know that individuals want the culture to feel right, right? If I'm a mother and also recognize that I have challenges that have nothing to do with my desire and want to come to work. I want to be able to provide for my family. However, life is just that. It's life. I need childcare support. I need transportation. We are in a city that doesn't have the best public transportation system.

It could really take someone two hours to get to a place on public transportation where if you had a car, you could get there in 30, maybe 45 minutes in traffic. And so how can employers step in and support their employees a little bit more of those quality employers? We talk about quality jobs, but people have quality employees that they need to support as well. So those conversations have been hard to have, but they have been eye opening. They have been encouraged by a lack of employees once it became after COVID. Employers, again, were forced to have those conversations.

And what we learned is that culture matters. Yes, wages matter, respect matters. And also, I'll say this and then turn it, allow Jessica and Amber to add on because I know they probably have thoughts too. People also want to have clear pathways for growth. I want to know that if I step into your company at entry level or even a mid-level supervisor's role, what's my clear path for growth? If I come to work, are there training opportunities? How do I get to that next level, that next level, and that next level? Tell me so that I can do the work.

We have great companies here who have done a really good job at that. Like Smucker, Smucker is a wonderful company here, and they have clear pathways for employees to elevate and it's in writing. And you can literally check off, if I do this, then this many hours here, learn this, test this, I'm here. And they don't have as high of a turnover rate because that's a very, very strong asset that they provide for their employees. Amber, Jessica, did I forget anything or is there anything else you guys would like to add?

**Amber Covington (29:49)**

I don't think you forgot anything. I just wanted to add too, just from speaking with employers as well, we see a generational difference now because we have the different generations that are working in the workplace, baby boomers and Gen X and the millennials, and then now you have Gen Z in the workplace. And when you go back to talking about company culture also too, you think about those non-traditional benefits that many employers have started to put in place since COVID, but some still are still trying to figure out how this can work?

So my business can still be effective, but a lot of young people in that Gen Z category, they're looking for flexible work shifts, opportunities to work from home, going back to even just childcare. You have more companies now that are looking at how do we have childcare facilities on site, or is there an opportunity to have a childcare facility around the corner where we have employers that partner together to be able to help fund that facility in some capacity, or at least add it as an employer benefit.

So just even looking at the generations, there's a difference now. You don't necessarily have this group anymore that's going to work for a company for 30 and 40 years. You see the Gen Zers, they'll leave a job in one year and go to the next job because the company culture or the benefits are different or what they need at that particular time. So that's another conversation we have with employers about how we continue to increase those benefit packages that make sense for their companies.

**Jessica Mosley (31:45)**

Just one last thing I'll add on is the companies showing that they're investing in the employees, just knowing that the transition from, I guess thinking about the business model and where their goals are, but focusing more on the employer or employee needs, the people needs. And so talked about on the job skills training and professional development skills, having that clear pathway and allowing your employees to know that you're investing in their growth.

**Sondra Howell (32:17)**

And just one last thing we will talk about again, I just really tend to focus a lot more on quality employees because we tend to paint a bad picture of people who jump, especially when they're at the lower end of the wage scale. But when you are thinking about someone who has a family who they need to support, and yes, they want to work, they do come to work every day, but they see an opportunity across the street or around the corner, that to us or to an employer may appear to be minimal, but that 50 cents difference in pay makes a difference in what they can bring home at the end of the week or the end of the pay period.

And so another conversation that we're having with companies is how do you look at and begin to tap into and invest in the untapped populations, those individuals who are great employees, but they're not your traditional employees, just because we haven't spent the time to really get to understand who those individuals are.

And when you say untapped, we automatically go to those who are just involved, which is right. There are so many, especially in the state of Tennessee, there are so many levels of felony offenses. We had the conversation earlier today about what such minor infractions can be, and you can still get a felony

here in the state of Tennessee, but when we hear of a felony, we automatically think the person is the worst person in the world. And that's not always the case.

And so until employers and the rest of us really learn what our untapped population is and how we approach them, then our doors will open and our talent pipelines will strengthen. And another untapped population that Amber is focusing on the justice involved individuals. We have an initiative there that she's leading. And then Jessica is focusing on our immigrant population.

For many people who live in communities with a lot of immigrants, you know that many folks who come to our countries come well educated with incredible work ethics, but because there may be a minor language barrier or because their degrees in their home countries don't transfer over into the United States with the same level of respect, then they're left to be jobs that don't nearly justify their skill sets and their education.

And so Jessica is leading a collaborative, a program that, well, I won't say program, but an initiative to really bring some system changes into how do we support our immigrant and refugee communities in Memphis? And we're starting with an entrepreneurial training, but those are the kind of conversations, hard conversations, but real conversations that we're having with employers. And you'd be surprised at how many want to be involved and want to engage, but just don't know how.

So when you either bring them to the table to help create the strategy, to help think through what the process looks like, but then also where they don't have that knowledge set, we're able to either be that subject matter expert or bring a third party to the table as that subject matter expert to lead us all because we don't know everything either, but I can tell you what somebody in this office knows somebody who knows what we need to know. So it's about making those connections.

So we're having those conversations every day across our entire office and staff and everything that we do. And they're hard, but they're getting easier the more that we have and the more results that we see, and in each of those programs that they're leading, employers have stepped up. I'm not saying 200 employers have stepped up, but just by having that conversation and the response is, well, what can we do? Well, I can tell you what we can do. We're getting ready to start. So yeah, so we're seeing the results. It's slow, but it's very impactful.

**Dee Wallace (36:36)**

It's really powerful to me to hear you talk about changing those mental models of the community and employers out there, which is where systems change really needs to happen. So we've got just a couple more minutes before we open it up to any questions in the chat.

And I just wanted to ask you, from your perspective as the Chamber, as the voice of business, as we look at the Workforce development ecosystem, do you have suggestions for... What do you think could be some changes in the way that we invest and support Workforce organizations that could lead to stronger ecosystems and more investments in talent development? Do you have any thoughts on that from your perspective?

**Amber Covington (37:25)**

Well, one of my thoughts is that a lot of times with the Workforce programs and these various grants, we focus on KPIs and metrics and performance from the beginning. So let's say for example, you have an organization, they have to start a contract July one, August 1st. They should have had 50 people enrolled. But we have to keep in mind, we do need to be more realistic in those areas to provide some type of ramp up and training development period for those organizations to truly be successful and for us to actually see quality over quantity.

Of course, we want to see an amazing number of people obtain credentials that lead to quality jobs, but at the same time, we need to ensure our staff and various resources are equipped for them to be successful in those efforts. So it would be great to see some changes in how funding is filtered down to organizations and what those responsibilities and metrics are from the start, just to give them some time to be able to ramp up and be able to really understand what they need to do to create change in our communities.

**Dee Wallace (38:48)**

That's powerful. That's powerful. Thank you. We've got a couple of minutes for a question that I see came up in chat. Most Workforce programs see each other as competition. How did you all get around that? Or so how are you fostering not competing?

**Sondra Howell (39:14)**

So I didn't see my colleagues mute go off, so I'll take it. It's been a process and we still need to deepen that process. But one of the things that we had to do as an organization, say one, we don't have to lead everything, but what we do have to lead is lead by example, which means we have to support partner organizations. We have to provide capacity building resources, et cetera, to those organizations that we rely on to be effective in order for us to be effective.

We are not case managers, we are not training providers. I don't care what hat we wore in a previous career as a Chamber staff person, that's not who we are. And so we have to rely on our partners and support them to be the best that they can be so we can do our jobs. And so how do we do that? We identify grant opportunities that will be good for the region and we bring partners together who make sense, and then we have open conversations about this is the requirement. Who is the best organization to lead this?

And then as a group, we make that decision and then we enter into a formal or informal discussion. In some cases there may be an MOU that's not enforceable, but it's just something in writing that says we agree to work together in partnership and collaboration to achieve this goal, rather we get this funding or not in our Digital Delta initiative in creating a smart city in this region is part of that effort.

We went through the same process. We did not receive the phase two award for the Building Back Better Grant, the EDA Grant, but that initiative still moved on because of the collaboration and the partnerships that we formed at that point. And so we actually have an advisory committee that met yesterday and there were more than 50 plus individuals that want to be a part of the advisory group moving that work forward. And so I think one of it is you have to be able to lead by example and say, I don't have to control the world, but I do have to be a very good and effective and faithful partner.

Also, the other thing is we share our resources once upon a time. Any data or reports or anything that the Chamber produced, you had to pay for it whether you were a member or not. Well, in some regards, that's still true because we are a member-based organization, and I like getting paid every two weeks too. But we also share data, especially when it comes to the economic development and prosperity of our region. And if we know we've done the data, we've participated in the research groups, we've invested hundreds of thousands of dollars to get this data to earmark and paint the path for our growth forward.

We know we can't do it all. So why would it stay here with us? Why wouldn't we share it out with our partners? And so that's what we've done over the last four or so years, four to five years. And what it has rendered is Amber alluded to a little bit about the amount of grant investments that have been made in the Memphis region, which is unprecedented because of collaborations, right? We have the state grants through the Tennessee Department of Human Services.

I know two organizations, maybe three. I'm getting older, so I don't remember everything, but they received \$25 million grants to invest in this community. All formed around the collaborations and built on their strategies were built on and aligned with the data and the regional goals that the Chamber has established. We've also received an unprecedented amount of federal funding that has come into our region. Again, built on those same metrics and baseline so we all can see what the clear path ahead is, and we don't have to figure it out individually. And it's not what the Chamber wants, it's what the data says our region will move into.

And then lastly, you mentioned that Amber now is the interim director of our local workforce development board. Well, because of a lot of those challenges, but the work that we've done, the Chamber actually has been designated by our local Cleo, who is our county mayor as the interim Workforce development fiscal entity and administrative entity for the region, right? We're interim, but there's an opportunity that we may do this long-term, nothing that we raised our hand for, but because of the disconnected and the fragmented ecosystem that we've had historically, the work that the Chamber had been doing was recognized by them and saying, "Hey, we need to get out of this position, get funding flowing back into the region. We want the Chamber to do that."

So then what do we do? We bring partners together and we start talking about what does this look like moving forward? After Amber fixes a whole bunch of stuff that's broken, BUT we'll get there and we'll have partners at the table, including employer partners who are already raising their hand to say, "Hey, we want to do this." And it's a lot of work, but we're very encouraged and we do believe in partnership with others in this space that we will be able to really shape the future and become a model region of economic development and Workforce development.

**Dee Wallace (44:48)**

And we are so grateful for your partnership over these past couple of years with the Workforce Leadership Academies, Sondra, Amber and Jessica, thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate it. And congratulations on all of your work. Everybody thank you for joining us for this Workforce Leadership Academy.

Mark your calendars for the final cafe on February 22nd when we will have the Ohio Workforce Coalition and the New York Alliance of Training and Employment Professionals in conversation with

Abby Snay, who is the Deputy Secretary for the future of work with the State of California Labor and Workforce Development Agency. And if you have the time and want to stick around for another 15 minutes to be in informal conversation with our guest here today. Thank you for joining us and we hope you can stick around.

**Sondra Howell (45:49)**

Thank you all. Thank you.

**Jessica Mosley (45:51)**

Thank you.