

What is the Philadelphia Peacekeepers Institute, in plain terms?

JT: The Philadelphia Peacekeepers Institute is a partnership between the Roca Impact Institute and the City of Philadelphia Office of Public Safety to prepare credible messengers in frontline community violence intervention (CVI) and first-level supervisor roles to do this work effectively, giving them real tools and information, including the skills to maintain their own wellness. For a long time, workers in this field have been told, essentially, "you are who you are, so you can go stop violence in your neighborhood." We now understand that's not enough. This Institute helps frontline workers harness their own experience effectively, while equipping them with the tools and knowledge that have to go alongside the credibility their story gives them.

We also built the curriculum while I was part of a year-long national collaboration developing a CVI National Action Plan, so we designed it to align with where those national standards are heading, while running focus groups with local staff to hear what they actually wanted. Roca's partnership with Philadelphia OPS means we can contribute important insights into what helps prepare front line staff: understanding trauma, safe and effective practices, and professional development. This institute is meant to be part of building out what this field looks like as it evolves.



James "JT" Timpson

*Managing Director,
Roca Impact Institute*

The foundation of your training, across staff wellness and skill building, is Rewire CBT. Why?

JT: Rewire CBT, our non-clinical adaptation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, is foundational at Roca because we know it works. It's built on brain science: helping people build a pause between impulse and action and move out of a reactive "survival brain" into the reasoning part of the brain, through simple, practiced skills. Roca's direct programming has consistently proven Rewire CBT's efficacy year after year, through huge improvements in behavioral health and emotional regulation, while reducing recidivism rates. Beyond Roca's direct programming, at the Roca Impact Institute, we've trained over 14,000 frontline staff across 75 cities and 24 states, with notable outcomes. This model holds up across all kinds of environments and populations exposed to trauma and violence. It's also the right tool to prepare frontline staff specifically, and at Roca we all use Rewire CBT on ourselves. It's not something we hand off to participants without living it ourselves first.

In the curriculum, we teach it as a dual approach: a person-centered practice people can use on themselves, and a tool they can use with the community members they serve. We ask people to actually try the skills between sessions, then come back and talk through what felt off, what was hard, what they didn't try and why. We want people to not just learn the skills, but also get comfortable employing them regularly. But the goal is always to give people the tools that helps them show up steadier and be more effective in work that asks so much of who they are.



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The curriculum overview says "for CVIs, the people are the program." Can you unpack the curriculum and how that sentiment shapes it?

JT: We spent a lot of time listening before we ever built the curriculum, and that shaped what went into it. Rewire CBT makes up about four of the eight weeks, and then we cover intentional outreach, building relationships, conflict mediation and resolution, storytelling (how and when to share your own story as a credible messenger), supervision, and how data and evaluation connect to the work. We close the last week with professional standards, led by the deputy director of Philadelphia's Office of Policy and Strategy, so staff could hear directly what the city expects of them. We also built in Narcan and Stop the Bleed training.

"The people are the program" is really the whole philosophy behind this curriculum. This is such a relationship-based field, and the actual intervention happens through the connection between a worker and the person they're trying to reach. So, if you don't prepare the people delivering that program, the program itself can't be strong. There's no separating the two. You can't ask someone to case manage other people through their trauma if they've never learned to manage their own. Also, a lot of folks coming into this work have never had a baseline, and there isn't as much clarity around the professional standards or skills they're being measured against. Pouring into your people from day one, helping them understand their role, their tools, and their own story, is what makes everything else in the program possible.



The Institute is really about helping people move from survival, to learning how to live, to eventually thriving.

What do you imagine success looks like for frontline workers who graduate from the institute, and on a larger, national scale?

JT: Success looks like people walking away with clarity about their role, their tools, what their expertise means, and how to actually use their lived experience in the work. There's no manual for this job the way there is for a lot of professions, and CVI is still a new field in many ways, so a huge part of the goal is giving people stability and a clear sense of how to approach the work. The value in someone's story isn't in telling war stories just to get attention, it's in using that story to help someone else avoid the same path. But you can't do that on charisma alone, you need real skills, tools, and resources. The Institute is really about helping people move from survival, to learning how to live, to eventually thriving, and giving frontline staff the skills to do that for themselves so they can help others do the same.

That same thinking is why sustained investment matters at a city and national level, too. When homicide numbers drop, that's good news, but it doesn't reduce the weight on frontline workers. If a city goes from 50 homicides to 20, those 20 are still the highest-risk people frontline workers are connected to. The trauma and impact of the work doesn't shrink along with the numbers, even though funding often does, because people assume the problem is solved. The only way to keep those numbers down is a sustainable, well-trained workforce, prepared for the trauma and complexity of the job and given the tools to navigate it. That's part of why we're pushing for this to become a credit-bearing, credentialing program: more universities are bringing CVI into their coursework, and completing this academy leading to real continuing education units or college credit opens doors for people in this field that don't exist today. We also built the framework to be movable. It wasn't designed to only work in Philadelphia, it flexes wherever the work is happening, with room for local history and context. It's not a Philly thing or a Baltimore thing, it's a CVI thing, so it can travel wherever the work is being done.