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Author(s): Reggie Sheffield of The Patriot-News
(717) 255-8170 or rsheffield@patriot-news.com

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Program Links Work, Life Skills

When Ryan Harris is completing a 9-to 23-month Dauphin County sentence for theft, drug possession and other crimes, and owes more than \$1,000 in restitution.

Instead of spending his work-release time washing dishes in some fast-food kitchen to work off that debt, Harris, 21, learned carpentry skills as part of a project to rehabilitate an Allison Hill home.

Harris has participated in a new county program in which he helped rehabilitate a home that will be sold later as affordable housing. He said the program has given him a new lease on life, one that is apparent when he walks down the street. "When I go out to my truck and see one of my friends, I can say, 'Look. You can see I went totally legit,'" Harris said.

Dan Robinson, the director of the county's department of community and economic development, hails the project at 1513 Vernon St. as the blueprint for other programs that he says will combine public and private resources from groups such as the faith-based nonprofit Firm Foundation of Pa. of Harrisburg. "Then they'll have some skills to make a living where many of them don't have job skills," Robinson said.

Wayne H. Blow, CEO and Founder of Firm Foundation, received the three-story property near Vernon Park as a donation to his group in July. The building was in deplorable condition and had been badly vandalized. Graffiti artists had plied their trade and at one point a fire had been started inside.

"It's about government and a community organization coming together from the same angle, making our community a better place to live," Blow said. Blow had the idea but needed someone to supply the elbow grease. That came in the form of Donnie Rice, a contractor with another faith-based group, New Life Cable Services of Stevens.

"The major goal of Firm Foundation is to be able to give work-release guys, guys who are just coming out of prison, a trade, life skills, to the point where they will be able to buy one of these," Rice said, gesturing toward the almost-finished dining room.

Further encouraged by a donation of time and money from New Life's owner, Tommy Moyer, Blow contacted Terry Davis, the director of the county's adult probation department, and Dauphin County Commissioner Lowman S. Henry. Once it got approval, Blow's group went through the property from top to bottom, ripping out everything down to the studs and then replacing it with sheetrock, windows, and appliances, much of which were donated by local groups and stores.

Blow said he expects the property to go for about \$45,000. While working with Firm Foundation, men such as Harris do not pay the work release center rent as other inmates there, but can take the money earned to pay overdue child support, restitution orders or court-ordered fines.

Besides the carpentry and repair skills Harris and the 10 or so other workers have received, Rice, a 1971 graduate of the Milton Hershey School, and life skills trainer Bruce Lengeman also given them training in areas such as budgeting and communication.

Henry pointed to 1513 Vernon St. as evidence that planning meetings, networking and donation-seeking eventually pays off. "You can always sit around and theoretically talk about these sorts of things, but what's good about it here is it's actually happening. We're not just talking anymore," Henry said.

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http://www.firmfoundation.org/FirmWorks-Patriot-News_2002-01-08.pdf

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