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Building a New Life Construction Gives Ex-Offenders Second Chance

In the half-completed, two-story Middletown home, Kevin Dougherty and Cameron Hutchinson Sr. nailed together boards, framing out what will eventually be a finished, drywalled basement.

Though it looked like any other residential construction site, this one is different.

Dougherty and Hutchinson are both ex-offenders, and they work for a blend of nonprofit and for-profit corporations created to give men a second chance through construction careers.

Dougherty and Hutchinson work for Opportunity Builders, a for-profit construction company created last March by the nonprofit Firm Foundation of Pennsylvania.

The idea is to provide job training and other help to those on work release or just out of prison, and then have a construction company that can provide a career opportunity for those who want it.

"It's difficult because under the system when you apply for a job or even a place to live, you have to say you're on state probation," said Dougherty, 44. Recently, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded Firm Foundation a \$700,000 grant, which it is using to grow the fledgling Opportunity Builders into a firm that officials hope will create up to 75 jobs over the next three years.

For Dougherty, released last March from state prison after serving three years on burglary charges, Firm Foundation helped him find an apartment in Middletown and then, through Opportunity Builders, made it possible for him to work in construction.

"It's not just the job, but the atmosphere," Dougherty said. The companies are Christian-based, and Dougherty said there's not all the talk about wild behavior that's common on construction sites.

Firm Foundation, a Christian community development corporation, was created in 1998 with help from Dauphin County's prison work-release program, but was mostly dormant until two years ago.

Then it began receiving help from the Evangelical Free Church of Hershey. The Evangelical Free Church of America also kicks in about \$20,000 a year. The church provided the organization's executive director, Rev. Ron Tilley II. With Tilley organizing the effort, Firm Foundation was able to attract more government and corporate support.

Over the past two years, Firm Foundation has worked with about 45 men from Dauphin County's work release, working with the Community Action Commission (which provides building materials) to help restore 15 homes in South Allison Hill, Tilley said.

Firm Works also has 14 "transitional housing" beds in two centers that have helped 49 men over the past two years, both those coming out of prison and others escaping homelessness. Because the housing part of the operation doesn't use government funds, it also includes religious programming with its support services, Tilley said. In creating Opportunity Builders, a for-profit arm of Firm Works, Tilley said the goal was to help those leaving prison get good jobs.

The \$700,000 grant, being spent on equipment and other start-up expenses, is being provided to Opportunity Builders from Firm Works as a low-interest loan over 20 years.

The loan repayment and quarterly dividends when Opportunity Builders begins making profits will give Firm Works an income stream to expand its community efforts. Chris Hitz, Opportunity Builders' president, described the setup as "social entrepreneurship."

Residential construction is well suited to giving ex-offenders a new start because entry-level jobs require little formal education but can pay fairly well, Hitz said.

Terry Davis, Dauphin County's adult probation chief, who oversees the 360-bed work release center, praised Tilley's work. "If I get these clients out of the low-income job market and into a respectable-income job market, we'll never see them back in the criminal justice system," Davis said.

For Hutchinson, 41, the six months he spent in work release for nonpayment of child support allowed him to start learning construction with Firm Works, which is providing him with transitional housing. Hutchinson said the \$9.50 an hour he makes with Opportunity Builders is more than he made cooking, which he did in the past. "I like doing the work," Hutchinson said. "It's a

good feeling inside, knowing that someone is going to live in something I helped make."

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<http://www.firmfoundation.org/Opportunity-Builders-Patriot-News-2006-02-16.pdf>

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