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What Works

Work Works

**For Ready, Willing & Able, finding a home
starts with cleaning the streets**

By Gerald Burstyn

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JOB TRAINING

Work Works

For Ready, Willing & Able, finding a home starts with cleaning the streets *by Gerald Burstyn*



Formerly homeless workers in bright blue Ready, Willing & Able uniforms receive encouragement from residents as they clean the streets. Some workers carry and hand out business cards.

The key to getting homeless people off of the streets is the dignity of employment.

That's the philosophy behind Ready, Willing & Able (RWA), a program run by the nonprofit Doe Fund in New York City, Jersey City, N.J., and Philadelphia, which starts with the proposition that work is rehabilitative. The work, in this case, is mainly street cleaning: Each day, more than 150 participants in New York alone fan out across the city's streets in bright blue uniforms with brooms and garbage pails, sweeping sidewalks, emptying municipal trash cans, and picking up litter.

For nearly 1,500 graduates of the program since it began in 1990, getting a job and keeping it has forged their pathway to the mainstream. According to the Doe Fund, 58 percent of RWA graduates have a full-time job and a permanent residence two years after finishing the program.

"Some people think that [the homeless] need to be protected from the expectations on them," said George McDonald, the organization's founder. "We look at it differently. We think we should prepare people to enter the mainstream. We have a much higher expectation. Guess what? That works."

The homeless who come to RWA, like many in their demographic, have abused drugs or alcohol and may have served time in prison. That's why Ready, Willing & Able begins with a 30-day orientation, during which trainees are confined to one of the Doe Fund's five shelters, attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings, and submit to twice-weekly drug screenings. On the second day of orientation, each trainee is given a job in the shelter's kitchen or on a cleaning crew. A few also work at Back Office of New York, a small, for-profit direct mail and Internet firm founded and run by the Doe Fund. Trainees are assigned a case manager who



serves as a counselor and mentor, assisting them with a range of issues – from obtaining a driver’s license to resolving pending legal issues.

All RWA trainees are required to end their welfare subsidies and are discouraged from applying for government-subsidized Section 8 housing. Unlike other homeless services programs, explained Alton Johnson, director of the 190-bed Harlem One Shelter, one of the largest Doe Fund shelters, the goal is to wean people from public assistance. Removing the social safety net, organizers say, is an essential part of forcing participants to rely on themselves.

Once the orientation is complete, RWA participants begin a six-month stint cleaning streets. In many cases, the host city contracts with RWA to provide the cleaning services; in some cases, local business improvement districts, community trusts, and neighborhood associations contract with RWA to clean neighborhood streets.

The program has immediate, tangible benefits: Participants are paid \$5.50 to \$6.50 per hour for a 35-hour work-week. Of that amount, \$65 goes toward room and board at a shelter and \$30 is put into a savings account.

Though it is far from glamorous work, McDonald argues that instilling a work ethic in men and women accustomed to dependence, and with little self-esteem, is key.

Harriet McDonald, George’s wife and Doe Fund’s vice president, was one of the original proponents of putting the homeless on the streets with brooms. “From the beginning, we’ve always been an entrepreneurial organization,” she said. “We believe in work as a core solution to a social problem.”

Those who enroll in RWA do so voluntarily, and for that reason, organizers say, they tend to be motivated to stick it out.

“I wasn’t that enthusiastic about sweeping the streets,” said Nazerine Griffin, 48, a former RWA participant. “But I wasn’t happy about my life situation and I knew that I needed a chance to work. This program is about you paying your own way.” Indeed, after completing his rotation as a street cleaner, Griffin rose through the RWA ranks until he landed his current job as director of one of the program’s Brooklyn shelters.

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At the program’s nine-month mark, participants begin their job search. With the assistance of a job development department, trainees prepare resumes, learn job-searching techniques, and hone their interviewing skills. Participants also gain access to a long list of potential employers – including the Gap, Starbucks, and Bloomingdale’s – with whom RWA has developed relationships. Once participants secure employment, they begin searching for permanent housing and are encouraged to move out of the shelter and sign a lease.

By the end of the program, which runs anywhere from nine to 18 months, depending on how quickly trainees can find work and housing, most participants

have saved at least \$1,000 – a figure matched by Doe Fund, leaving graduates with roughly \$2,000 in savings.

Street Level Marketing

In 2002, the Doe Fund raised about \$13.6 million in revenues from government grants and private contracts.

My Bucket

by Walter Gayton

When I first saw my bucket
I did not think much of it.
I could not see its value
I could not understand its depth.
Someone more experienced got my attention
and took the time to mention,
‘Remember your misery, humiliation and pain.’
So, I took hold of my bucket and,
with blind faith,
tried again.
With each passing day,
with my bucket leading the way,
my life seemed to gain meaning.
I thank that experienced person
for taking his time with me.
He smiled, I smiled.
Today, I’m responsible, happy and free.

—From *Behind the Bucket*, a collection of writings and artwork by Ready, Willing & Able participants.

Roughly \$1.6 million in Doe Fund revenue came from corporate and foundation grants and donations, and another \$1.4 million came from individual donations. But individual donations are up dramatically. In 1995, when RWA workers mainly refurbished low-income housing, Doe Fund had just 40 private donors. At present, Doe counts 33,000. The main reason, officials say, is the “street level marketing” of the men and women pushing garbage buckets.

RWA participants – decked out in blue uniforms stamped with a large “Ready, Willing & Able” patch and a prominent American flag – are instantly recognizable in many of the neighborhoods, and they often receive encouragement from residents. Trainees carry RWA business cards, which they hand out to curious residents who often stop them on the street.

According to Elizabeth Lion, a spokeswoman for Doe Fund, the “high visibility” of the men and women in blue uniforms accounts for most of the individual donations. “Before the street cleaning initiative, it was much harder to raise money privately.” Now, she said, “People are constantly asking trainees who they are and thanking them for the services they provide. Most go the next step and send us a check.”

The uniforms allow for name recognition. “People see the great work the guys do and they know what organization is responsible for it,” Lion said. “The uniforms go a long way in changing the public’s perception of the homeless.”

But for most workers, Lion added, the main benefit is that the workers feel like they are a “part of something,” which helps them change their “perception of themselves.”

Just ask Robert Bridgett. When Bridgett was 9, his father died and his mother began abusing drugs. As a teen, he moved into a public housing project, and soon began experimenting with drugs. By 17, he was a father, an addict, and a dealer. In his 20s, he worked several jobs, but none that he could keep. Two years ago, at age 34, he was in a detox center when he heard about RWA. He decided to give it a try.

Eighteen months after entering the program, Bridgett landed a full-time job at Pitney Bowes, earning \$10 per hour as a mailroom assistant. He rented a Brooklyn apartment, where he lives with his wife and 9-year-old daughter. He has become an active father, picking up his daughter at school, ferrying her to the library, and attending PTA meetings.

At his RWA graduation, held at St. Ignatius Church on New York’s Upper East Side, Bridgett spoke emotionally about his path from addiction to homelessness to recovery.

“If I wouldn’t have come to this program,” he said, “I wouldn’t have made it.” □