

Chester Housing Authority Gives Ex-Convicts a Second Chance

By Vince Sullivan, Delaware County Daily Times, January 18, 2015

Wilbert L. Jarrett Sr. is a 45-year-old Parkside resident employed as a mechanic's aide for the Chester Housing Authority. He is a married father of four. He is a Navy veteran who served for eight years. And he is an ex-convict.

Jarrett served 18 months in prison for a 2008 conviction of drug possession with intent, and since his release has been working for the housing authority under a program where ex-offenders are given a job and an opportunity to turn their lives around. He has been a model employee, according to CHA Executive Director Steve Fischer, and Jarrett said the job has given him a chance to succeed in life.

"When I came home from incarceration, I was in a halfway house across the street (from the CHA headquarters on Avenue of the States)," Jarrett said. A friend let him know that the housing authority had a job opening. "A friend came to me and asked me if I was ready to go to work," Jarrett said.

Prior to serving time in prison, he had a job with a trash hauler in Chester. He set to work immediately to find a job, and took the opportunity presented by his friend. "My goal was to stay out of trouble and do things the right way," Jarrett said, adding that his family gave him a reason to stay out of trouble with the law. "They're something to look forward to at the end of every day."

Jarrett has worked his way up to the mechanic's aide position with the authority, and said his goal is to become a mechanic. The training and work experience gained while employed with the authority has helped to restore his personal dignity. He knows all too well what can happen to most ex-convicts when they are released from prison and they can't find work. "It's tough for felons to get a job," Jarrett said. "A lot of guys have a bad attitude when they can't get hired after getting out of jail."

Jobs are generally hard to come by for city residents and a criminal record doesn't make it any easier. "In the past, there hasn't been a lot of opportunities for guys from Chester," he said. "I tell a lot of guys that you can't stop after one or two tries. You've got to be patient and try to keep your spirits up."

The stigma associated with past incarceration is a tough obstacle to overcome, and Jarrett said he couldn't have done it without help. He tries to provide that same support for others returning from prison. "Somebody really has to open the door for you," Jarrett said. "But the person really has to work hard, too."

Jarrett was confined to the halfway house for one year, where 30 percent of his paycheck went directly to the house's operators. He struggled with the financial challenges and he said it was hard for him to still be separated from his family. But having a job earned him certain allowances within the facility, including a later curfew and weekend furloughs.

Fischer said he has employed several ex-convicts in his nearly 10 years as head of the housing authority. Some have worked out, like Jarrett, and others haven't. His goal behind the program, which is run without any outside financial assistance, is to do what he can for the people that might be walking a thin line between rehabilitation and recidivism. "The No. 1 thing to focus on for coming out of incarceration should be employment," Fischer said.

Providing housing for recently released prisoners is something that he cannot do because the housing authority has a decade-long waiting list. But having gainful employment gives a person the opportunity to earn those

things and be self-sufficient. “It’s more important that they are out and have employment,” he said. “The housing will follow.”

Fischer said he currently employs two ex-convicts, including Jarrett, and that they are working out as great employees so far. Jarrett has been with the housing authority for about four years, while the other employee has served about eight months. Housing authority residents are supportive of the effort, and Fischer thinks it is because they can relate to the struggles ex-convicts face upon their release.

Iris White, who lives in the Ruth L. Bennett Homes off Ninth Street, experienced the same challenges upon her release from prison many years ago. She eventually found work, but it took about 18 months. “I’m an ex-convict and it was hard,” White said. “Doors were shutting. But once someone saw me for what I was, I never looked back.”

White has known Jarrett for 15 years, both before and after his incarceration. She said he is a good worker and a respectful person. “I’m glad that he has this job,” she said. “I’m glad that they gave him a second chance, because you don’t know anybody until you give them a chance.”

Fischer hopes to expand the job opportunities for city residents and ex-offenders, and also would like to provide professional counseling services to them. Unfortunately, there aren’t a lot of funding sources for such endeavors. He has been unable to secure funding through county programs geared toward ex-convict employment.

Several groups have approached him over the years to offer their services, but they come with a price tag. Fischer said there is so much work to be done in the thousands of housing authority units that he could double or triple his work force. But he wouldn’t be able to pay for it.

“We’re doing this as amateurs,” Fischer said. “We’re giving jobs to people. We’re training them. But our relationship is strictly employment.” People like Jarrett who have experienced incarceration and come out of it to achieve personal success can and do offer guidance and advice to others, but Fischer wants to see a more professional form of counseling.

“We have a built in support system because we’ve got a guy like Wilbert who’s been through it,” Fischer said. “We just have not gotten any more funding. I know we could do it to a greater extent and much more efficiently with a little assistance.”