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ITHACA'S ENDEAVOR HOUSE: 4 BEDROOMS ON BUFFALO STREET OFFER LIFELINE FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED MEN

BY JOLENE ALMENDAREZ



ITHACA, NY – At the Endeavor House on the west end of Buffalo Street Thursday morning, Deborah Dietrich seemed like any homeowner getting a newly renovated residence ready for an open house the following day. She set up a small Christmas tree with twinkling lights, reviewed a final punch list, and mentioned that she'd be making Baklava for the public event Friday morning.

But the Endeavor House is no ordinary house and Dietrich is not a landlord.

She's the director of the Opportunities, Alternatives, And Resources of Tompkins County, an organization that helps formerly incarcerated people integrate back into the community, among offering other services.

The Endeavor House at on Buffalo Street will be home to four formerly incarcerated men committed to sober living and following a re-entry plan that will hopefully lead to a more independent living situation and employment.

"Ultimately, we'd like it to be pretty transitional," Dietrich said.

She expects people to live there for about a year at a time.

The home, she said, is a step forward for people though. She said its location near bus lines and social services make it unique among transitional housing. It will help make people part of a community instead of isolating people with no transportation in rural area, such as Groton and Enfield, where many OAR clients live.

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And the quality of the house was something she said is important to offer people.

On the exterior, the home has been upgraded from having flaking white paint that barely covered the wood frame to being tastefully painted mint green with white trim. Everything had to be gutted and redone on the inside — plumbing, electric, tiling. The floors have been sanded and waxed. The entire home smells freshly painted. Some of the rooms even have curtains hanging up already.

"Our clients have lived in such terrible dwellings that we really wanted to make it some place you could call home," she said.

Interviews for potential residents start Friday. People who apply to live in the home, in addition to agreeing to sobriety and re-entry, agree to doing shared work around the home and learning some of the skills needed to keep it in good condition. After the home passes city inspection at the end of the month, people will be able to start moving in by no later than January, Dietrich said..

Originally purchased in April for $95,000, money to buy the home came from a variety of grants including $60,000 from the Community Housing Development Fund, almost $9,000 from the Park Foundation and $18,000 from the Continuum of Care emergency housing fund.

It will continue to be paid for be residents' $400 housing vouchers from the Department of Social Services.

While that may seem like a lot of money to get the house up and running, it's more expensive to keep people incarcerated.

According to The New York Times, it costs about twice as much for the state of New York to house an inmate for a year than it does elsewhere in the country. In 2013, data indicated that New York taxpayers spend about $60, 000 per inmate keeping people imprisoned.

But it's not just the cost-savings that justify getting people off the streets. Dietrich said helping people in need is just the right thing to do.

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"They are members of our community. They're living in very substandard housing currently, if they have housing at all," she said. "They've lost a lot of connections… They've run out of options."

Without housing opportunities, she said people may be homeless and will likely end up in the revolving door of the criminal justice system. About 76 percent of former state prisoners nationally will be rearrested within five years of their release from prison, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

But OAR is trying to fight that statistic locally.

For instance, at the Endeavor House, OAR staff will occupy at least part of the living room four days a week to help people stay on track for their goals. Peer mentors who are navigating sobriety and post-incarceration life themselves will stop in for dinner or coffee.

Dietrich said OAR isn't looking for perfection. During recovery, relapse and mistakes happen. But there will be a system of write-ups in place and residents will be expected to take responsibility for their own recovery.

"They're hopeful. There's a hopefulness to this kind of housing," Dietrich said.

As she moved through the house showing off its closets and renovated bathrooms, two men holding cups of coffee and with paint splatter on their clothes showed up.

"Hey, baby! Look at this f—— thing!," Kevin George shouted as he walked into the living room.

He raised his arms up as Carlos Gonzalez took down the blue masking tape stretched across the doorframe.

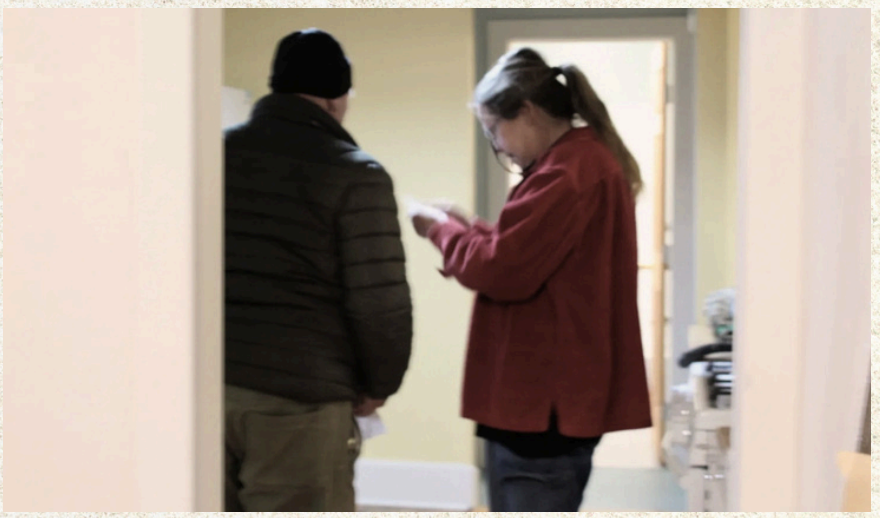
The two have been among a team of people working on the home for months.

George showed off some of his handy work around the home — a secondhand vanity from the Ithaca ReUse Center that has been modified to be a set of cabinets next to the stove, a breakfast nook created from a piece of leftover maple wood.

Gonzalez pulled up photos of what the stained, worn floors looked like before they were redone.

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George said he was formerly addicted to heroin and cocaine. He said he's been in-and-out of jail for drug related crime. He's sober now and has considered applying to live in the house. But he said he's still trying to determine if it's the right choice for him to make. He's more excited about possibly taking a part-time job helping at OAR.

"It's not easy sometimes," George said about sobriety. In the mean time, while he considers his options, George said he'd be happy to be a peer who can offer residents advice.

Dietrich handed George the final punch list before the open house Friday, happening from 11:30 a.m. — 2:30 p.m.

There are curtains rods that still need to go up, furniture that needs to be moved in, and door stoppers that need to be added.

Two more men, Floyd Pond and Brandon Elia, show up at the home also to see how they can help get it prepped for tomorrow. Pond is the one who showed up around midnight Thursday to do some painting, surprising everyone Thursday morning.

He pointed out some work on the stairs that need to be redone and told Dietrich he wouldn't charge OAR for the touch ups he'll end up doing Thursday night. Someone else will be coming by late Thursday night to add finishing touches to some of the counter tops. Dietrich spent a lot of the day baking goods to bring to the opening.

Despite another night of putting in more hours toward making the place better, the workers, volunteers, and OAR employees who have pitched in to make the Endeavor House a home will be there bright and early the following morning to officially open the doors to the public and applicants.