

Correctional Employees Volunteer to Help Rebuild Houses With Habitat for Humanity In Baltimore

By Susan L. Clayton

Sandtown, an area on Baltimore's west side, is home to one of Habitat for Humanity International's 1,700 local affiliates in the United States. Here, in this 72-square-block area of the historically black inner-city neighborhood, change is evident. On Aug. 3 and 4, several ACA members and staff became a part of this change.

During the two hot and humid days before ACA's 135th Congress of Correction in Baltimore, more than 50 volunteers joined the Sandtown Habitat for Humanity staff in rebuilding houses. Morning and afternoon shifts of volunteers worked on four different houses. Some worked on roofing and helped tear down an old roof and clean up the debris. Others helped put up a new fence and grade a backyard. The third group assisted in framing a house. Lastly, a group helped frame and pour concrete steps.

Jane Maloney, director of national programs for Habitat for Humanity International, says the Sandtown affiliate is unique to Habitat because it is "creating a community." Sandtown does this effectively because within the neighborhood, a church, school, health care facility, job search and placement agency, and arts program have also been incorporated. Thus, Sandtown Habitat provides a long-term, community-based support system for all Habitat families through its sister programs.

According to a June/July 2000 issue of *Habitat World*, a Habitat for Humanity International publication, Sandtown got its name from trails of sand that dropped from wagons leaving town after loading up at the local sand and gravel quarry. "Years ago, Sandtown was a thriving community," said Laverne S. Stokes, co-executive director of Sandtown Habitat for Humanity. However, after local riots in the 1960s, she says many people left the area and things began to go downhill.

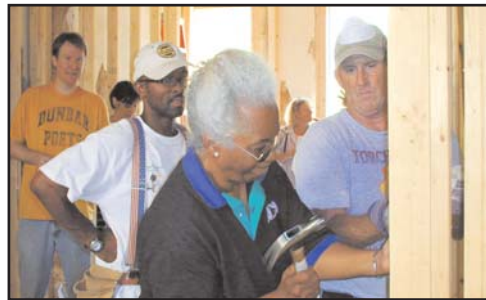
Stokes notes that although many people moved from the area, many chose to stay — even if it meant living in an area of deteriorated and vacated row houses and lacking the funds to rebuild the community. This, she says, is due to the neighborhood's strong sense of community. In 1987, Allan Tibbels, also co-executive director of Sandtown Habitat for Humanity, and his wife Susan, along with their friend Mark Gornik, decided to move from the suburbs to Sandtown. At that time, it was rare for white people to live in Sandtown. Although there was some initial skepticism among local residents, eventually because of relationships that were formed, Tibbels, his wife Susan and Gornik were accepted and trusted.

After establishing the interracial New Song Community Church in 1988, Tibbels and Gornik learned that the most critical issue in Sandtown was

housing. In 1989, Habitat for Humanity Sandtown was founded. Sandtown Habitat has nearly 15 full-time staff and about 10,000 volunteer laborers a year. Stokes, who has lived in Sandtown her whole life, says that Habitat decided to focus on 15 blocks of the neighborhood. "We want to make a strong impact," she said. With nearly 500 units of public housing, more than 220 homes have been completed by Habitat with the help of neighborhood residents, local and national foundations, and thousands of volunteers.

In Sandtown, Habitat deals with low income families. "Everyone should have a decent place to lay their heads at night," Stokes said. Stokes, who became a Habitat homeowner prior to becoming a staff member, says that providing the opportunity for home ownership boosts people's self-esteem and helps to rebuild the community. She notes that Habitat's goal in Sandtown is to eliminate all vacant houses in the 15-block area and then move out from there.

After the establishment of New Song Community Church and Habitat for Humanity Sandtown, the community began to identify other needs. In 1991, New Song Community Learning Center was founded. It includes New Song Academy, a school for kindergartners through eighth graders; a preschool; an after-school program; and adult education programs. Plans



Photos by Joseph Fuller II and Gabriella Daley Klatt

are now being made to add a high school. Also in 1991, New Song Family Health Services began providing health care services at a discount for those in the community. Two years later, EDEN (Economic Development Employment Network) Jobs opened to provide job search assistance and placement for the unemployed. New Song also includes art and holistic ministry programs.

According to Stokes, Sandtown Habitat is one component of a holistic approach to neighborhood development known as "church-based Christian community development." Since 1988, the New Song program, which includes Habitat, has grown to a staff of more than 75, mostly from the local community. Not only is Habitat trying to eliminate all vacant houses, it is providing programs and opportunities to foster empowerment.

Sandtown Habitat can rehabilitate a house for an average of \$50,000 —

about one-third the cost of traditional construction. Costs are kept to a minimum by acquiring properties from Baltimore City at little or no cost, using donated materials and private funds, and maximizing the use of volunteer labor. All volunteers are overseen by full-time construction staff. In addition to providing a down payment, all individuals who apply for home ownership are required to invest a minimum of 330 and up to 430 hours of "sweat equity" (work/ labor) in their homes and others, depending on the size of the home they will purchase. Habitat houses are sold at no profit and financed with affordable, no-interest loans. The homeowners' monthly mortgage payments are used to build and rehabilitate more houses. Families in need apply to local Habitat affiliates. Homeowners are chosen based on their level of need, willingness to participate in the program and ability to repay the loan. Neither race or religion is a factor.

ACA has been a partner with Habitat for Humanity for several years. The association has held a number of silent auctions at its conferences to benefit Habitat's Prison Partnership Program, which facilitates cooperation between Habitat affiliates and correctional institutions. Through the prison partnership programs, offenders have the opportunity to volunteer to participate in various aspects of house construction. This gives inmates vocational skills and self-worth. It also benefits the community because it is able to tap into a skilled labor pool and prepare inmates for release. And Habitat homeowners benefit because quality houses are completed in a timely manner. In January 2004, ACA received Habitat's Golden Hammer Award for its contributions, which include raising more than \$20,000.

Gwendolyn C. Chunn, ACA's president, came by the work sites one day and welcomed the chance to swing a

hammer a few times. "ACA's Habitat for Humanity Baltimore Build Project gives people in this business a way to give back and it benefits the community," Chunn said. "It changes the lives of the people who will live in these houses; it is the gift that keeps on giving."

At ACA's 135th Congress of Correction in Baltimore, the association's partnership with Habitat once again was made official. The two organizations signed a memorandum of understanding that formally recognizes their relationship. "The members of ACA are proud to partner with Habitat for Humanity because Habitat helps those who want to help themselves," said James A. Gondles, Jr., ACA's executive director. "One of the most important things in anyone's life is to be able to own a home. It can make people much more proud of how they live and what they do," Gondles added. "And we are very excited to be helping someone have a home."

One ACA member volunteer, Michael D. Pinson, director of corrections for the Arlington County (Va.) Sheriff's Office, made the trip to Baltimore with co-worker Capt. Dave Kidwell. "It was a real enjoyable experience for both of us who work so closely together at our jail to be able to volunteer our help to those at Sandtown," Pinson said. "We worked with some really nice people from the Maryland Division of Juvenile Services and Bo, our construction contractor was great." Pinson and Kidwell helped on the framing crew. "We didn't want to stop when it was time to quit, and I hope to make it out there again sometime," Pinson said, adding, "We appreciate Sandtown and ACA making possible the opportunity to give back to others and help make a difference."

As Stokes told ACA members and staff volunteers, Habitat Sandtown could not do what it does without volunteers. "Not only are you helping to rebuild a house but you are improving the quality of life here," she said. In spite of the lingering presence of drugs, violence and poverty, Sandtown is changing one block at a time. Students are succeeding in school, an increasing number of people are working in jobs they

enjoy, more individuals have access to affordable health care and residents are establishing businesses in the area. Stokes notes that there are so many people in need of help. "Invest in them and they will make a difference," Stokes said, adding, "All

of us can make a difference even if it's in just one person's life."

Susan L. Clayton is managing editor of Corrections Today.

Thank You

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