

**AOL Jobs Week 2011.**

Doe Fund Helps Ex-Cons Join Ranks Of The Employed

By Dan Fastenberg, Posted Oct 4th 2011 @ 2:56PM



Courtesy of Dan Fastenberg

In less than nine months time, Larry Barefield went from being a convict to a professional counselor helping other ex-convicts pull their own lives together.

"I had to find something different," the 53-year old says during an interview with *AOL Jobs*. "I had tried to do everything on my own, and kept ending up in the same place. Which meant jail."

Hiring Now

[Search All Job Listings](#)

[New York Jobs](#)

[Los Angeles Jobs](#)

[Chicago Jobs](#)

[Philadelphia Jobs](#)

Less than two years ago, the New York-native was finishing up a stint at the Queensboro Correctional Facility. He declined to share what the particular offense was that landed him behind bars, but he says it was his sixth prison term over the course of his life. He also added that he had been involved in drugs and weapons running in New York since 1975. "I didn't want to die in a penitentiary," he says. "Every time I do things my way, I would end back up in the penitentiary. All that really meant was trying to avoid the police and not really changing."

Motivated by the maxim that one form of insanity is repeating the same thing, and expecting different results, Barefield pursued a lead with an organization called the Doe Fund.

"It would have been a nightmare getting a job and doing this stuff on my own," he says. "I liked that, because going at it on your own is impossible when you are a convict. I felt the only way forward was to commit my life to change."

'Giving People a Chance'

Having signed up with the Doe Fund, Barefield soon found himself in the care of the Ready, Willing & Able (RWA) program. As a pioneer of paid work and living rehabilitation programming, RWA invites its participants to take part in a round-the-clock, 9-to-12-month program to make them self-sufficient.

"We take anyone who wants to come in," says Lee Alman, the director of external affairs for the Doe Fund, in an interview with *AOL Jobs*. "We don't pick from the cream. So we naturally get a lot of churn at the

beginning, with people who are not ready to give up drugs or who may not want to work. We could be more selective, but then we wouldn't be giving everyone the same chance."



Founded in 1985, the Doe Fund was created by activist George McDonald as part of a campaign to combat high levels of homelessness in New York City.

The Doe Fund soon gave rise to RWA, which located its first facility in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. (The other New York RWA sites are in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn and Harlem. The program has also since spread to Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and Jersey City.)

When launched in 1990, RWA soon became a popular rehabilitation destination for ex-convicts such as Barefield. Once they join, the participants undergo an orientation during which they adjust to living full time in an RWA housing unit. They begin meeting with RWA counselors immediately to discuss barriers to employment before moving on to other programming like conflict resolution training.

The program participants are then soon sent out into city streets to join street cleaning crews (see picture). And it is during this phase that they begin earning their first **salaries**, which is usually around \$8 dollars an hour. (The participants are required to save some of their earnings.) The street cleaning has become a hallmark of RWA; the image of RWA participants in blue uniforms picking up trash has become as identifiable a New York City image as the yellow cab.

"I had a little bit of that in me -- I can't push that bucket. But I had to put my pride aside, and do my job," says Antar Windley, a 40-year old who joined RWA after rehabilitation programs that only focused on interview training failed to help him change his course. Like Barefield, Windley had served six prison terms in New York state penitentiaries before joining RWA. He broke into drug dealing the 1980's first in order to support his young daughter, but said it became nearly impossible to replace as source of income.

"This was all-inclusive and had the built-in structure," he says. "It gives me a sense of purpose, being around people who are working."

After finishing street cleaning duties, RWA participants then move on to the occupational phase of their program. They are allowed to choose from a host of possible sectors, and often opt for security or maintenance work.

"What distinguishes Ready, Willing & Able is its ability to meet reentry needs in such a comprehensive way," says Ann Jacobs, the Director for the Prisoner Reentry Program at the New York-based John Jay College of

Criminal Justice, in an interview with *AOL Jobs*. "There were services like halfway houses before it, but RWA is less like a social services program and more about lifestyle that is empowering from a professional and career standpoint."

The total annual operating costs for RWA came in at roughly \$47.6 million for 2009, the last year for which Doe released its financials. And while RWA does receive government grants, it does not do so under the rubric of the Second Chance Act (SCA), the federal program passed in 2008 to help improve outcomes for people returning to communities from prisons and jails. In early October, the Justice Department began notifying the 131 non-government SCA groups of their grant money. This may, however, be the final run. Amid congressional squabbling over debt and the federal budget, the GOP-controlled Senate has moved to defund all SCA programs for FY 2012, even as the program represents less than 1 percent of total money spent annually on corrections each year in America. (That figure stands at \$52 billion, according to the Pew Center on the States.).

'I Have Been There'

"The reentry movement is really a decade old, where we've really begun focusing on this issue," says Jacobs, of John Jay. "We're talking about the reentry of 700,000 people a year into society. We all have a stake in them having a hand to lift themselves up."

Indeed, RWA sees through the process to culminate in self-sustained living for the prisoners. This most often occurs in low income housing. But before solo living is even addressed, RWA participants must successfully secure a job. Some graduates, like Barefield, may even finish their program with more than one opportunity on their hands.

"I was like a stalker in the program," says Barefield, who came out of the Queensboro Correctional Facility. "I was very attentive in the program, asking a lot of questions and taking the classes seriously. I was going to do pest control, but I ended up being asked to become a supervisor in training last December."

For the past nine months, Barefield has worked at the Harlem RWA facility, located on Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Manhattan.

"I can say to the new guys that I have been there, and I can relate to them," he says. "If you can get an angry person to open up and talk about what's really going on, then you accomplish something."

Because of the intensive nature of the program, RWA caps the number of participants at any given time at around 700 people. It doesn't release the total number of people who have taken part in RWA over the last three decades, but says it counts 4,500 complete graduates.

"We have a very high bar for actual graduation," says Alman, the director of external affairs.

The standards for full graduation are four-fold: full time employment, your own apartment which you are paying for, complete sobriety and, where applicable, resumption of child support payments.

The Holistic Approach

The RWA model of amplifying part-time rehabilitation has attracted an array organizational followers. Among them is the Alex Fund, which is based and conducts its fundraising in New York, but runs programs in Romania. Founded in 2001 by Leslie Hawke, the Alex Fund partners with the Romanian group OvidiuRom. Programming takes a twofold and slightly different tack than RWA's. OvidiuRom uses funds to rescue children living on the street in the belief that it's important to get to children before they even have a chance to commit any crimes. OvidiuRom also puts impoverished mothers through a welfare-to-work program to enable the women to create supportive environments for their children. But of greatest relevance, OvidiuRom embraces the RWA ethic.

"It's the holistic approach," says Wendy Kahn, the director of the Alex Fund, in an interview with *AOL Jobs*. "Distress is caused by a lot of different reasons. It's always a multitude of things, so we focus on a variety of services. We do even the basics, like giving mothers a place to shower."

OvidiuRom structures its program based on incentives, and awards food coupons to families who make sure that their kids have good school attendance. In total, some 1,200 street children have attended preschool under the auspices of OvidiuRom.

Of course, counting successes in the thousands, be it in Romania or the United States, pales in comparison when considering the size of the challenge before programs like OvidiuRom and RWA. Recidivism in America is perhaps as large of a problem as the high toll of incarceration itself. Though five years old, the Confronting Confinement report put out by the bipartisan Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons remains the standard for the subject. According to the report, some 13.5 million Americans spend time in prison or jail each year. And within three years of release, 67 percent of former prisoners are rearrested and 52 percent are re-incarcerated.

But there are success stories, like Barefield's.

"Having grown up with a stepfather who did drugs in my house, I was exposed to all this from a very early age," he says. "It was the time of crack, and it was everywhere in New York. My mind wasn't ready for change until I got out [of the Oneida Correctional Facility] this time. Now, I don't have to look behind my back anymore. I just go home and be with my family and close the door."

Next: Unemployment Rates Fell In Majority Of U.S. Cities

 [Click to check out AOL Jobs Week 2011.](#)

[Join AOL Jobs on Facebook](#) | [Follow AOL Jobs on Twitter](#)

Stories from 24/7 Wall St.

- The 9 States Slashing Unemployment Benefits
- Nations That Wouldn't Trade Places with the U.S.
- 10 Most Valuable Companies In America



Filed under: **Stories of the Unemployed, Employing America 2011**

Tags: **Criminal Justice, Doe Fund, East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, George McDonald, John Jay, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, Romania, Second Chance Act**

Add a Comment



[Sign in »](#)

Type your comment here

*0 / 3000 Character Maximum

Submit