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## Hagerstown program helps housing tenants find 'pathways' to better lives

Valerie Bonk Updated 12 hrs ago (0)



Photo by Valerie Bonk

Operation Pathways Resident Services Coordinator Sandra Berry, center right, helps guide residents during a recent Community Council meeting at Alexander House in Hagerstown.

Randolph Samu has lived at the Alexander House in Hagerstown for more than 10 years, but until July, he felt as though something was missing.

“This is the first time where we’ve actually had somebody other than the management company or landlord looking out for our interests other than collecting rent and making sure that we weren’t destroying their property,” said Samu, chairman of the Community Council at the housing complex.

Operation Pathways made its mark on the community this summer when Sandra Berry, a drug-and-alcohol addictions counselor, stepped in as Hagerstown’s first resident services coordinator for the organization.

A nonprofit organization, Operation Pathways works to provide and coordinate place-based programs and services for residents in affordable-housing communities to enhance their quality of life.

The first Operations Pathways program in Hagerstown works through Alexander House, an apartment community for Section 8 residents at 7 East Washington St.

“The first thing I had to do was build trust,” Berry said. “I had to communicate over and over again why I was here, that I was here for them, and that I’m not a part of management. That’s purposely done so that I can advocate for them.”

Through the program, Berry works on paving five “pathways” for residents at the Alexander House, including financial stability, healthy living, academic achievement, case management and aging in place.

Berry works part-time at Alexander House from 2 to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday.

To get started, she first took a survey of residents’ needs and found that most of those who live in the Alexander House wanted to improve their health and literacy.

To accomplish the organization’s goals, Berry created programs such as a book club that meets every other week, during which she reads to residents for them to follow along.

She also set up a healthy eating program in which she takes some of tenants' items from the food bank and creates meals, providing recipes so that they can recreate them in their own apartments.

“It’s been exciting and nerve-wracking at the same time because it’s new territory,” Berry said. “I have the framework they gave me in order to do the job, but the community is different. NHP has resident services coordinators all around the country, but this is the first time we’ve had it in this area, and this demographic is different from a lot of other areas in the country.”

Operation Pathways is provided to the community through the NHP Foundation, a nonprofit real-estate organization dedicated to preserving and creating sustainable, serviced-enriched housing that is affordable to low- and moderate-income families and seniors.

### **More than a job**

Berry also meets with the Community Council at Alexander House on the second and third Wednesday of each month at 2:30 p.m. to stay in tune with community needs.

“It’s nice to have basically our own counselor available 24/7 basically with a phone call that we can contact with any problems that may arise in the building,” Samu said.

Among other things, Samu has Berry to thank for helping him quit smoking, something he has been trying to do for years.

“Our building as of July was one of the last ones to become completely smoke-free, and I unfortunately was a smoker, and I had a dire need to quit, and I asked Sandy if she could get the health department to come out, and she was right on it,” he said.

For Berry, working with the residents over the past five months has become more than just a job.

“I can’t believe I get paid to do something that I love to do like come and sit down and have coffee and talk to them and find out how the residents are doing and find out what their needs are,” Berry said. “It’s been great to see it evolve into what it is right now.”

With the Alexander House the first building in the area to receive support from Operation Pathways, Samu said he hopes that it serves as a model for others.

“As time goes by, I think this program is going to get better and better, and I’d like to see it be expanded into other housing projects in the Hagerstown area,” he said.