

# Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority residents learn construction trade through program

## Construction jobs provide skills, contacts

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Carl Hampton didn't have many places to turn to when he started looking for a steady job a few months ago.

The 52-year-old Cleveland native, who had found sporadic work as a painter since being released from prison in the late 1990s, was down to his last few dollars earlier in the year. The situation forced him to move into a friend's home.

But when Hampton moved in May into the Riverview Towers, a building owned by the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority, he found work and learned some new job skills by enrolling in the authority's Project Area Resident program, or PAR.

The program, part of an initiative set up by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in the 1980s, requires construction contractors doing work for housing authorities to hire residents for some of the unskilled labor on projects that exceed \$25,000.

The CMHA Board of Commissioners amended the rule in the late 1990s, requiring contractors to make sure residents represent at least 25 percent of the workers on building projects, said George Phillips, the agency's chief executive officer.

Phillips said PAR has given thousands of current and former residents a chance to find employment in construction trades and clerical jobs.

"This program not only gives them jobs, but it gives residents a sense of pride and well-being," Phillips said.

Lora Thompson, a CMHA spokeswoman, said that between 2005 and 2007, resident workers have been paid nearly \$2 million and have averaged around \$11 an hour. In many cases, residents work at the facilities where they live, she said.

Phillips said that between 400 and 500 residents have been hired at a time to work on building projects at facilities owned by the housing authority.

"The feedback has been overwhelming, and the response we get from residents is that they want more of this to go on," Phillips said.

Hampton, who served time for drug trafficking, was hired to work on an energy-conservation project and learned about plumbing. The program exposed him to several trades, and he is looking forward to the next job.

"When people are incarcerated or don't have education in certain skills, they don't have a résumé to pass out . . . that is a hurdle to finding employment," Hampton said. "This job has provided me with a chance to learn some skills and to also build contacts."

Some employers who hire workers said the program is a benefit for both sides.

"It opens up doors for residents and it also gives the community a sense of what it takes to build something," said William Skaggs, general superintendent with Ozanne Construction Co.

The construction company is completing work on a multimillion-dollar project on the city's West Side, and Skaggs said he plans to keep some CMHA residents on his staff for full-time positions.

William Smith, president of the CMHA commissioners, said the program is an important step to help people find ways out of poverty.

"Aside from the fact I think the program gives them a sense of worth because they are employed, I think it also drives them to do a little bit more and further themselves," Smith said.

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