



Millville and Easter Seals partner to paint windows on abandoned homes

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MILLVILLE — With great care, Joseph Siciliano, 45, of Millville, ran a paint roller over the boarded up window of an abandoned home on Cedar Street.

"You have to concentrate," he explained. "You have to be very careful not to get anything on the house because then you have to go back and get it off."

Siciliano and Charles Sheppard, 59, of Millville, were able to paint the boards on three houses before it began to rain Tuesday under the direction of Mike Guenther, job coach for Easter Seals New Jersey — an organization that helps individuals with disabilities and special needs.

The boards are first painted white and then squares are outlined in tape — where the Easter Seals participants carefully paint black to give in to give the impression of windows.

"It looks almost like windows," Guenther conceded as he pulled the tape off, but to someone passing by the abandoned home's appearance looks not as abandoned as before and gives the neighborhood greater curb appeal.

Easter Seals joined into an agreement with Millville earlier this year for the project. Using an approximately \$12,000 Community Development Block Grant, Easter Seals has its Millville participants go to abandoned homes in the city to paint on windows.

The intention is for the houses to have the appearance of windows and therefore not abandoned — warding off the possibility of vandalism or other criminal activity. The painted boards also make the abandoned homes look nicer.

"When you drive by you don't notice it as much," said Lynne Porreca Compari, city commissioner and director of public affairs. "That particle board stuck out like a sore thumb."

Porreca Compari's department has been focusing on demolishing vacant homes in order to clean up the city. For the homes that can't be demolished, the boarded windows get painted.

She and Easter Seals Site Director Chris McMahon developed the painting program after meeting and discussing possible project opportunities for the participants to take part in.

"It builds people's esteem and gives them an opportunity to get back into the workforce," McMahon said about the work. "It gives them an opportunity to participate in the community."

Easter Seals New Jersey has served the South Jersey area from its Bogden Boulevard facility since 1990. Approximately 200 participants are enrolled into the program through referrals from the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation and there is even a waiting list for participants.

The participants are people with specific barriers making it difficult to enter the work force, McMahon explained.

"It could be disability related, it could be somebody who had a stroke in a certain field and lost ability or whatever they needed to do that certain task," he said. "Our job is to kind of break down and work with that individual to find new or better ways for them to succeed."

For the abandoned homes project, that involves painting.

"It's a structured environment," said Shirley Battistini, assistant plant manager for Easter Seals. "They're out there with a job coach, so they're learning on-site job. It's not in the facility — it's outside the facility — so it replicates a community job."

The neighbors have also been appreciative of the abandoned homes having their boards painted, according to Battistini, and have expressed their gratitude to Easter Seals.

But most importantly it gets the participants outside and working.

"I really enjoy painting," Sheppard said while painting the windows on the Cedar Street home. "I always have. It's fun to me. It's like putting a model together."

"It's a pretty good job," Siciliano agreed. "I make good money and get out of the workshop for a bit."

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