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A commitment to improvement

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DALE WHITE dale.white@heraldtribune.com

They want out. And they're determined that nothing will get in their way, especially not the defeatist attitudes of others.

They are about two dozen **tenants** of the Sarasota **Housing** Authority's projects in Newtown, mostly single mothers who are unemployed or working menial jobs. They're determined to redefine themselves. They are making a commitment to lift themselves out of poverty, move out of the projects, get a career and, when the time is right, maybe become homeowners.

"The more I know, the more I can help myself," said Sheena Denrow, a 21-year-old with a 2-year-old son.

Denrow and the others are enrolled in a two-week course offered by the authority to prepare them, not just for jobs that pay the bills, but for careers that could lead to promotions and make them self-sufficient.

Instructors from Goodwill Good Jobs, Olsten Staffing and the Women's Resource Center are guiding them through two-hour classes every weekday that are part goal-setting and part self-examination.

During the second week of November, Sears, Sarasota Memorial Hospital, Walgreens, Sarasota County Area Transit, Protocol Communications and Scarborough Research will interview successful graduates of the course for job openings.

They may have to start at the bottom of the career ladder. But they expect to move up, rung by rung.

"There is nothing that can hold you back unless you let it," Karen Curry, director of the authority's new Resident Opportunities and Self-Sufficiency program, told the class this week.

"The only doors closed to you are in your mind."

Their discussion focused on their long-range ambitions and to-do lists.

Denrow knows precisely what she needs to get done.

She intends to get her high school equivalency diploma and study nursing at Manatee Community College.

"I don't have a car right now but I have plenty of bus passes," Denrow said, explaining how she will get to and from the Bradenton campus.

Kareema Crenshaw, 28, has two children in elementary school and a toddler. As soon as the youngest is enrolled in day care, she also intends to pursue a career in health care.

"My main goal is to work with the disabled," Crenshaw said.

The federal government took over Sarasota's troubled Housing Authority last year. The new

management doesn't want to be a landlord that merely repairs the pipes and collects the rent, Executive Director William Russell said.

"That's not the **Housing** Authority I want to preside over or Karen came to work for," Russell told the class. "I want us to offer opportunities that will change your life."

Step by step, Curry -- who joined the authority's staff about nine months ago -- is applying for grants and partnering with local businesses and agencies to help **tenants** transform their lives.

The program she's organizing is similar to a federally funded ROSS program that about 60 **tenants** of the Bradenton **Housing** Authority are going through.

The Bradenton authority freezes rents, subsidizes the cost of textbooks or child care, arranges job referrals and provides other help for those residents to reach their long-term goals, "which is usually home ownership," said Mickey Young, who oversees the program.

Even though federal dollars have not come through yet in Sarasota, Curry is getting the ROSS program underway with volunteers and donors.

She supervised the restoration of the formerly neglected activity center at the Janie Poe **housing** complex into a new training center.

MCC donated five computers, which residents will use to prepare resumes and take classes in how to use office software.

Next, Curry wants to get literacy classes and a course in life skills -- such as budgeting and saving -- under way.

Most **Housing** Authority **tenants** have no checking accounts, because they are unable to maintain minimum balances, and no credit.

The most common obstacles that they face when trying to improve their lives is a lack of education, child care and transportation, Curry said.

Yet Curry told the class that those "barriers" are just "hurdles" that she and others can help them clear.

She is more concerned about an attitude that's common in the projects, a sense of dejection and apathy, that has held most of them down.

If they improve their lives, their neighbors -- maybe even their relatives -- may want to drag them back down.

"Our mindset is what holds us back," Curry told them. "All that mess, all that stuff that goes on in the streets, it holds you back. ... You have an opportunity to become something totally different -- or you can go back to the same old stuff. You have to choose."

When others scoff, Curry said, "you tell them: 'All of you can sit here in public **housing** for the fifth and sixth generation. I want to own a house. I want my kids to go to college. Next year, you may be working for me.'"

INTERESTED?

For more information about the Sarasota **Housing** Authority's Resident Opportunities and Self-Sufficiency program, call 361-6208. If space is available in future classes, the authority may enroll low-income residents who are not **tenants** of its **housing** projects. Child care is available. For information about the ROSS program that the Bradenton **Housing** Authority offers its **tenants**, call 744-1697, Ext. 222.

Caption: STAFF PHOTO / E. SKYLAR LITHERLAND / elaine.skylar@heraldtribune.com
Sheena Denrow, front row center, and Niketress Duncan, right, take a course for low-income residents of Sarasota's **housing** projects. Tuesday's two-hour session covered defining career goals, providing good customer service and avoiding work conflicts.

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