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Training Program Helps Young People Repair Homes, Lives

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Desperate to fix a plumbing problem without busting their meager budget, Dorothy Castille and her husband spotted a young man in a painter's jumpsuit working near their home in Venice's Oakwood neighborhood.

"I thought he might know somebody who could do the work," Castille recalled of that day about three years ago, "and what a blessing that turned out to be!"

The young man was an apprentice in the nonprofit Venice Community Housing Corp.'s HandyWorker program, which provides free minor house repairs for low-income elderly and disabled homeowners. He told the Castilles about the program, and soon their problem was fixed.

HandyWorker, which is largely funded by the city of Los Angeles, employs participants in—and graduates of—the housing corporation's construction job-training program for at-risk young people in the area.

The organization, reachable at www.vchcorp.org or (310) 399-4100, was founded in 1988 to help preserve and expand afford-

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able housing in the ethnically and economically diverse community of Venice, where rapid gentrification was occurring.

In Oakwood, where poverty and crime rates are among the highest in the city, youngsters are at greater risk of dropping out of school and then lacking the skills and even the transportation needed to hold good jobs.

The HandyWorker program seeks to provide residents ages 17 to 24 with the skills and experience they need, while helping the elderly and disabled make their homes safe and more habitable.

Juan Heredia, 18, who has been a trainee in the program for about three months, said it helped lead him away from life in an Oakwood gang. He learned about the program through a former boss who encouraged him to seek a better life.

"I changed myself a lot, and I like what I do," Heredia said, adding that the program "gave me an opportunity to show what I could do."

Now, he takes pride in seeing the effects of a fresh coat of paint and in knowing that he has made a senior citizen's home safer and more comfortable.

"I go home each day feeling good," Heredia said.

Since its inception four years ago, HandyWorker has made improvements to about 600 homes, including 170-some this year, said Terry A. Simons, program supervisor. It would do more, he said, if it had the money. Workers have installed grab bars in bathtubs, fixed electrical problems, put on new doors and weatherstripping, and replaced windows and leaky faucets—just about anything that doesn't require a building permit.