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Ready, Willing and Able's "Men in Blue" Empower Themselves While Cleaning Communities



By Andy Sharpe

Andy Dalzell, programs coordinator at the South of South Neighborhood Association, standing with Ready, Willing, and Able employees at corner of Washington Avenue and Broad Street.

It was a sea of blue last Thursday at the Old Pine Church (<http://www.oldpine.org>) in Society Hill as 32 Ready, Willing, and Able (<http://www.rwaphiladelphia.org/>) employees, suited in their token uniforms, graduated from a program that employed and sheltered them despite histories of addiction, crime and homelessness. This was the nonprofit's ninth annual graduation, with speakers including Mayor Nutter as well as staff and board members from the program's parent organization, The Doe Fund (<http://www.doe.org>), based in New York.

As the ceremony showed, Ready, Willing, and Able offers programs designed to empower individuals by giving them a second chance. But by partnering with community organizations across the city, these programs are also helping to improve the city as a whole.

The organization's Community Improvement Project has been working with CDCs since it came to Philadelphia in 2001 to clean up commercial corridors. The following neighborhoods have been cleaned by the "men in blue."

- ✓ Washington Avenue Property Owners Association (http://wapoaphilly.com/Washington_Avenue_Property_Owners_WAPOA/About_us.html) along Washington Avenue in South Philadelphia
- ✓ ACHIEVEability (<http://www.achieveability.org>) on the 60th Street corridor in West Philadelphia
- ✓ Tacony CDC (<http://historictaconyrevitalization.com/>) throughout the Torresdale Avenue commercial corridor in the Northeast.

One recent example of the nonprofit's successful clean-up efforts is on Washington Avenue, between Broad Street and Grays Ferry Avenue. The employees at Ready, Willing, and Able began their work along the corridor in February under the direction of the Washington Avenue Property Owners Association, with financial support from the South of South Neighborhood Association (<http://www.southofsouth.org>) and Councilman Kenyatta Johnson's office.

"Washington Avenue, without fail, was the dirtiest part of our neighborhood, [as] trash would blow north from the Avenue into the residential core of the neighborhood," said Andy Dalzell, programs coordinator at South of South. "That has ceased entirely."

This corridor is very close to where all Ready, Willing, and Able employees are housed, at 12th and Bainbridge.

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Typically, 40-45 workers are assigned to the Community Improvement Project, according to Javier Rivera, deputy director of the program. Some sites, such as those in Fairmount Park, require the employees to clean five days a week. Mayor Nutter mentioned these workers in his graduation speech, saying he often notices them when driving to work. Other sites, such as the Torresdale Avenue corridor, only require cleaning two days a week.

While the Community Improvement Project is not the only work the organization does — it also does cooking, security, and maintenance work — it is a crucial element.

"Our Community Improvement Project is the backbone of Ready, Willing & Able," said Rivera. "Residents and businesses... are able to see the hard work of our trainees first-hand."

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