



It Takes A Village To Help Our Children Inc., located in Crisfield, is an after-school program that helps kids with homework, tutoring and provides them with educational activities. STAFF PHOTO BY MEGAN RAYMOND

After-school group battles back

Crisfield nonprofit displaced by Hurricane Sandy working to find new permanent location

Susan Parker Salisbury Daily Times
USA TODAY NETWORK - DELMARVA

A group of youngsters burst into It Takes A Village to Help Our Children Inc. in Crisfield on a chilly, damp November afternoon, and began setting up for the gathering.

The nonprofit after-school program helps preschoolers to high-schoolers in the former PNC Bank building downtown, as it works toward a permanent location. The program was displaced after Hurricane Sandy.

It is a merger of two programs: It Takes A Village, established in 2006 by Darlene Taylor, who now serves as executive director of the combined program, and the Help Our Children Foundation, established in 1992 by Pastor Elsie Collier.

"We usually serve up to 80 children through the academic year in our after-school program,

"This is a real challenge when you're a small operation like we are. We have no collateral for loans and we're struggling to find operational funding."

Darlene Taylor

Executive director of It Takes A Village to Help Our Children

moved here," Taylor said. "We have a waiting list now."

The brief, orderly chaos of the bustling children changed within a few minutes with everyone seated, quietly anticipating what was to come.

Crisfield

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"Who's leading Fruits of the Village today?" asked Taylor, scanning the group.

Hands shot up, but daily leadership roles are predetermined, and the day's appointed team leaders were moved to the front of the assembly.

Fruits of the Village is a list of the elements making up a successful community: honesty, integrity, friendship, responsibility, perseverance and respect. Each "fruit" requires an example from the kids. The recitation is part of the daily routine.

"Name a fruit!" called the team leader for the day.

"Honesty!" was the first response.

"Give me an example."

"Tell the truth."

The children were fully engaged and listening intently.

The second part of the opening focused on the Pyramid of Success. At the bottom of that pyramid is "study long and hard", the foundation for a successful life and career.

"Why are we here?" asked the student team leader.

"We're here to learn!" the assembled students replied.

"What will we learn?"

"How to succeed!"

Crisfield serves as a partner

Rick Pollitt, Crisfield city manager, is helping Taylor with grant applications.

"Darlene runs a tight ship," he said. "From everything I've heard from parents and our schools, she does a fantastic job helping equip the kids for life."

The program used to be housed in the former H. DeWayne Whittington Primary School building, which was razed after flooding.

Pollitt said when he arrived on the scene, Taylor had already come to an understanding with former mayor P.J. Purnell on a potential \$3 million grant from Hurricane Sandy money to rebuild. But as it turned out, he said, money was only available to demolish the old primary school and return the site to its natural state.

Jaya Tucker, 14, is a freshman at Crisfield High School. She's been attending It Takes A Village after school since she was a fifth-grader.

"I love to help younger kids," she said, "and I like to help older kids do the right thing ..."

"Kids look up to me as a role model, and I count on them to respect me. Sometimes it's easier for them to hear



It Takes A Village To Help Our Children Inc. in Crisfield is an after-school program that helps participants improve their reading skills and character development.

STAFF PHOTO BY MEGAN RAYMOND

what they need to know from someone like me, closer to their age, than from an adult."

On behalf of It Takes A Village, the city applied for an \$800,000 grant, which was approved. The site has not been officially turned over yet, Pollitt said, because the contract language is not yet complete.

The initial request for proposals issued by the city garnered no bids. A second, revised request has been issued. The city continues working with Taylor to achieve her goal.

"We are trying to find someone to help us design a building using the limited funds we have," Taylor said. "Plans are to rebuild at the old Whittington Primary School site.

"We've outgrown this facility and have a waiting list," she said. "We had to downsize when we moved."

It Takes A Village is funded entirely through grants. To date, all the grants it has received are reimbursable — they require up-front spending, which is reimbursed from grant funds.

"This is a real challenge when you're a small operation like we are," Taylor said. "We have no collateral for loans and we're struggling to find operational funding. Most grants are specific to certain programs. It's hard to find operational funds."

Kids get expanded learning time

The program has helped participants with their reading skills. After a fall reading-level assessment, the post-assessment in May showed "significant

improvement," Taylor said.

"We are here every day working with our kids, doing character development, enrichment with a lesson for them every day. We do Reading Races, which has made a huge difference in their literacy skills," she continued. "We started this just last October. They had shied away from reading before that. We started having them read aloud, made it competitive, and they really started getting into it."

Ian Johnson said he started attending It Takes A Village when he was in kindergarten. He's now 10 and a fourth-grader at Woodson Elementary School.

"I do homework here," he said. "It gives me time at home to play, do electronics or whatever I want."

Many of the students mentioned field trips as a favorite activity. Some are exposed to sights, sounds and ideas they'd otherwise not have an opportunity to experience.

"My favorite field trip was to go roller skating at Crown Sports Center," he said. "I like to skate, to draw, play and talk. Here, I'm learning to stay positive and how to be safe. And we learn how to act when someone is hurt, like how to do bandaging."

Tyshaya McKinney, 11, is a sixth-grader at Somerset Intermediate School. She started at It Takes A Village as a preschooler, at age 4.

"I'd rather be here than on my own," she said. "I get help with homework, which keeps my grades up. It's a boost to my self-confidence."

McKinney mentioned a trip to the Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore,

where she saw depictions of African-American slaves, former President Barack Obama and civil rights icon Rosa Parks.

Volunteers help fulfill the vision

It Takes A Village has a variety of partners in the community.

"We have volunteers come from Girl Scouts and 4-H to do STEM activities with our kids," she said.

The county health department does an abstinence program, and the Maryland Food Bank brings a hot meal for the children daily, from Baltimore.

A certified pre-K teacher is funded by a partnership with the local Judy Center and the Somerset County Local Management Board.

Additional funding comes from the United Way of the Lower Eastern Shore and Maryland State Department of Education.

"We are always in need of more volunteers," Taylor said.

Her Next Generation Scholars grant will include funds for tutors who can offer one-on-one help. That grant is designed to help prepare middle and high school students for college, focusing on Grades 7 to 9.

"For now, high school kids come in to volunteer, and we have one certified teacher," she said.

Big plans

With an \$800,000 grant budget, Taylor said the program is looking at alternate construction methods that could yield more bang for the buck.

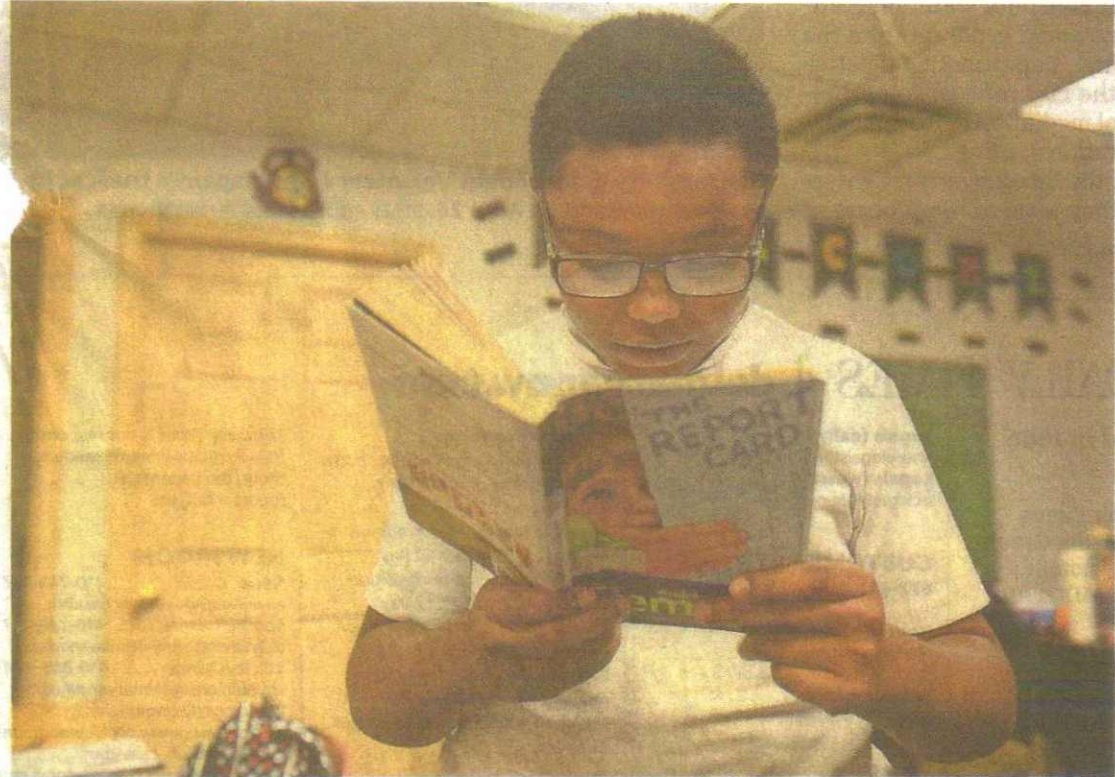
"We may not get actual bricks and mortar," she said. "... Options include steel buildings or a pole building. They are not only less expensive, they can offer more usable space for our money as well."

Space is tight right now, especially for recreation time. And there are other challenges.

"We have elevation requirements because of Hurricane Sandy, and our funding is a state Community Development Block Grant that's tied to hurricane funds," she said. "We also have to worry about the sturdiness of the building. I was told that many of the new steel buildings are hurricane-proof and can be elevated, so that might work."

"And what might take two years could be completed in just one year with alternate construction methods."

Pollitt hopes the new facility will retain the H. DeWayne Whittington name, honoring the first black Somerset County superintendent of schools and first to lead a school system outside of Baltimore.



Fourth-grader Jeremiah Forchion participates in "Reading Races" where they are tested on accuracy, efficiency and speed at It Takes A Village To Help Our Children Inc. located in Crisfield on Nov. 8. STAFF PHOTO BY MEGAN RAYMOND