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Virginia Beach, Va. – For someone leaving jail and focused on long-term recovery from substance use, the difference between a successful fresh start and returning to old behaviors can sometimes come down to something as basic as having a safe place to sleep.

A new partnership involving the Virginia Beach Sheriff's Office, Oxford House and the Virginia Beach Department of Human Services is designed to help bridge that gap.

The Virginia Beach Sheriff's Recovery Housing Scholarship Program is now available to help eligible individuals transitioning from the Virginia Beach Correctional Center into Oxford House recovery housing. Virginia Beach residents Laura Yager and Mark Blackwell launched the scholarship with a \$5,000 donation from the Robert E. and Phylis M. Yager Charitable Trust, providing financial assistance to help participants cover the initial costs of entering recovery housing.

The goal is straightforward: to offer people committed to recovery a stable place to begin rebuilding their lives. The scholarships will provide brief rental assistance to individuals as they obtain employment and embrace life in the community.

"We talk a lot about second chances, but a second chance has to come with a real opportunity to succeed," Sheriff Rocky Holcomb said. "Someone can leave our jail determined to make a change, but if they don't have safe housing, a job or even the resources to get through those first few weeks, the odds are immediately stacked against them. This partnership helps close one of those gaps for individuals, reducing recidivism, and helping build a safer community. People can and do recover from substance use issues. We're grateful to Laura and Mark for believing in this mission and investing in people who are working to change their lives."

Experience inspires an idea

For Yager and Blackwell, the initiative is rooted in decades of professional and personal experience working with people facing mental health, substance use and reentry challenges.

Before moving permanently to Virginia Beach, Yager spent much of her career in Fairfax County, including work with its Community Services Board and Sheriff's Office. While working in the Fairfax County jail, she oversaw medical and behavioral health services and helped establish an opioid addiction program that ultimately gained national best practice recognition. Her experience reinforced a lesson that stayed with her: treatment inside a correctional facility is only part of the equation. Someone with behavioral health or substance use challenges faces significant barriers to employment and housing once released. Some don't have identification, money, or a safe place to live. For those committed to long-term recovery, returning to the same environment where they previously used drugs or alcohol can make maintaining that recovery even more difficult.

"You can have the best intentions in the world, but if you can't meet your basic needs, it's incredibly difficult to be successful," Yager said. "People are going to leave jail and return to the community. The question is whether we allow them to succeed when they do. Small things like these scholarships can have a huge impact on that success."

Yager and Blackwell saw firsthand in Northern Virginia how recovery housing could provide that opportunity. After she and Blackwell retired to Virginia Beach, they began exploring ways to use their backgrounds and resources locally to support recovery. Blackwell previously served as the director of recovery services for the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, while Yager's career combined behavioral health and corrections.

The couple eventually approached Sheriff Holcomb and VBSO leadership about creating a recovery housing initiative in Virginia Beach as one way to enhance existing services.

"We are believers in second chances — and sometimes third or more chances," Yager said. "If you have the ability to do something that can change someone's life, why wouldn't you? We see this as a small investment to support success for people returning to their community. It's an honor for us to support the Sheriff in this effort."

Bridging the gap

Oxford House is a national nonprofit network of democratically run, self-supporting, drug- and alcohol-free homes for people in recovery. Several Oxford Houses operate in the Hampton Roads area, including in Virginia Beach.

Unlike a treatment facility, Oxford House does not have clinicians overseeing residents. The homes are peer-run, with residents sharing responsibility for the house and supporting one another in maintaining recovery.

For someone coming directly from jail, however, even the initial cost of entering recovery housing can be a barrier.

The scholarship is designed to help cover those upfront expenses, including approximately the first two weeks of rent and applicable processing costs. That gives participants time to establish themselves in the house, seek employment and begin assuming responsibility for their ongoing living expenses.

"This isn't intended to support someone indefinitely," Yager said. "It's that first step — getting someone through the door, into safe housing and giving them a chance to get a job and get their footing back in the community."

The program is voluntary and intended for eligible Virginia Beach Correctional Center participants with substance use disorders who are preparing to return to the community and qualify for placement in Oxford House.

Virginia Beach Department of Human Services Behavioral Health counselors working within the correctional center will help identify potential participants, assist with the application process if needed, and support the individual with discharge planning. Oxford House will conduct its normal screening and determine whether an applicant is an appropriate fit for one of its homes.

No scholarship funds are administered by the Sheriff's Office or the city. The initial \$5,000 has already been provided directly to Oxford House and earmarked specifically to assist eligible individuals transitioning from the Virginia Beach Correctional Center.

Investing in public safety

The program's partners see recovery housing not simply as a social service, but as an investment in long-term public safety.

Stable, substance-free housing can provide structure and peer support at one of the most vulnerable points in someone's recovery — the transition from incarceration back into the community.

"Rehabilitation can't stop at the jail door," Holcomb said. "If we can connect someone who has done the work with resources that help them stay in recovery, find employment and become a productive member of the community, that's good for that individual, their family and Virginia Beach. Ultimately, that's what public safety is about."

Yager and Blackwell say the initial \$5,000 is intended to be a beginning, not the end of their involvement.

The donation was made through the Iowa-based Robert E. and Phyllis E. Yager Charitable Trust, established by Yager's late parents. Yager, her brother, and a family friend now serve as trustees and make charitable contributions each year. The Trust has traditionally supported science and education, along with other important causes to the family.

Yager and Blackwell plan to pursue additional grants and other funding opportunities to expand the recovery housing scholarship program as its impact is demonstrated.

"We're committed to this," Yager said. "I've seen how important stable recovery housing supports can be and there is a tremendous amount of research backing up this approach. This is a way to help create a safer community while giving people a real opportunity for success."

The Virginia Beach Sheriff's Recovery Housing Scholarship Program is available now, with Oxford House funding in place and VBSO, Human Services/CSB and Oxford House coordinating referrals for eligible participants.