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Rotary Clubs, Non-Profits Looking to Help At-Risk Youth

A partnership between local Rotary clubs, My Brother's Workshop and the Minnesota-based nonprofit Network for Better Futures is taking shape in the territory and aims to give at-risk young men the chance for a brighter future.

Speaking at the Rotary Club of St. Thomas Sunrise meeting on Tuesday, Network for Better Futures representative and V.I. Source columnist Frank Schneiger said his organization works with inmates about to be released from prison and gives them many of the resources they need to successfully reintegrate into society.

Frank Schneiger talks to Rotary Members about how to cut the cost of crime in the territory.

Once released, an individual in the network is given a success plan that would give them immediate work on a trade crew, housing and even health insurance; but Schneiger said, most importantly, they are also given a complete behavioral assessment to pinpoint substance or mental health issues that can be addressed.

Schneiger said the network has been given some funding to adapt the program to other communities, and in the territory, will be building



on the foundation laid by My Brother's Workshop, a vocational program for young men ages 16-24. My Brother's Workshop is run by retired mechanical engineer Scott Bradley, who brings in trades and business men across St. Thomas to help his team learn the construction, plumbing and electrical skills they need to get an entry-level job.

A large part of the My Brother's Workshop program is also volunteer work, which has included everything from fixing up local classrooms and community shelters to rebuilding V.I. landmarks, such as the step street on Bred Gade.

Schneiger said the impact of evolving the My Brother's Workshop program in the territory is threefold.

"First, you've changed the lives of a large number of young people whose futures maybe don't look bright," he said. And, along with bringing peace to some of the more "violent and unsettled" local communities, bringing more opportunities to newly released inmates helps to reduce the numbers of young men returning to jail and the associated cost of paying for them to stay in prison.

"For the Virgin Islands, a partnership between Rotary and My Brother's Workshop with support from the Network for Better Futures, can have a tremendous impact on the community," Schneiger said. "One thing that's clear, there are numbers that show that these kinds of initiatives saves people's lives and saves lots of money. And I think you can really make the Virgin Islands a model for this kind of organization."

V.I. Source Publisher and Rotary Sunrise member Shaun Pennington will be working with Schneiger and Bradley on some short-term ways of working with the young men and exposing them to new opportunities until the program has fully taken shape.

"There's going to be a core group of about 40 people from the community, from the executive branch, nonprofits and the Rotary that will be really focusing on the plan," Pennington said. "These are people who care about

this and will take advantage of any opportunity to engage these kids in a social experience they've never had before."

While in the territory, Schneiger will be meeting with a few government departments, such as Human Services and Labor, which will also be able to lend a hand and provide expertise. Attending the Rotary meeting this week, Gov. John deJongh Jr. said that the partnership between Schneiger, Rotary and My Brother's Workshop will help to address some of the territory's major youth issues, while tying into the government's efforts to provide a foundation for students through early childhood education initiatives.

"There's no doubt that we have a lot of youth violence, and the crime and homicides happening among our young people is tremendous," deJongh said. "So, we do need more aggressive programs dealing with employment and educational opportunities, particularly focusing on individuals that didn't come up through the traditional route. It will help them in the long term because they'll begin to see that there are opportunities for them in the future where they can make money, have a family and make the system work for them."