I want the public to know that they live in a safe place and that we are all working hard to keep it safe, while respecting and upholding the rights of all.

Bob Schwartz’s Here to Help Foundation offers assistance to Oakland and Wayne County residents and returning citizens. See page 14.
If you go to the “About Us” tab on the website of Here to Help, a local foundation that gives direct grants to Oakland and Wayne county residents in need of one-time assistance, you can find the “Starfish Story.”

In the story, a young man is throwing beached starfish back into the ocean, one by one. When an older man comes across the sight, the younger man explains he’s trying to keep the starfish alive. The older man responds that there are so many starfish — he’s never going to be able to save them all.

“It made a difference to that one,” the young man said as he threw another starfish back in.

This is the idea behind Here to Help, started in 2006 by Bob and Robin Schwartz of Huntington Woods.

The couple was looking for a change and decided to explore philanthropy. After reading up on private foundations, which commonly give grants to public charities, they decided they wanted to do something different: They wanted to help individual people.

“We wanted to be direct, hands-on,” Bob Schwartz, a former lawyer, told the Jewish News, a “saving-one-person-at-a-time approach.”

The Schwartzes got IRS approval to establish Here to Help, and soon the family-funded foundation was up and running with five main grant programs: Roof Over Head helps with security deposits and rent assistance; Working Cars for Working People gifts grantees a used vehicle; Let’s Keep the Lights On offers grants for utility and water bills; Home Sweet Home aids with furniture purchases; and Road Ready Repairs assists with vehicle maintenance costs.

In June, they announced the creation of a sixth program called Returning Help to Returning Citizens, which helps formerly incarcerated individuals furnish their homes. The program can also help pay for job training, assist with the housing search, act as a referral source for other programs and more.

“We’ve worked with returning citizens since conception,” Schwartz said. “Many times when we assisted with furniture, we would visit their apartment or home they were renting, and we were somewhat astonished initially at the holes that needed to be filled just to have the basic necessities of pots and pans and microwave.”

According to Schwartz, Here to Help’s one-of-a-kind, direct-to-recipient grant model has allowed them to directly help more than 9,000 people since their founding. Here to Help usually gives grants to 500-600 people annually, he said.

Their services are even more important this year, as the COVID-19 pandemic has
upended people’s lives. April and May saw an increase in requests for help from the Roof Over Head program, which helps with rent payments. Requests for transportation assistance also increased as people who relied on public transportation or rideshare apps to get to work began to feel unsafe with their options.

“If we spend the next six months also attracting more returning citizens, then the year will be our highest by far, I’m sure, for grantees,” Schwartz said.

Because of the unique nature of Here to Help, prospective grantees need to meet several requirements before receiving assistance. For example, if they’re able to work and they’re applying for a grant, they must be employed and able to show pay stubs for the last four weeks. As Schwartz says, the organization gives “hand-ups,” not hand-outs.

“We can’t give someone help with back rent if they don’t have any income because next month they’re still going to need rent, and where are they going to get it from?” Schwartz said. “So we look at what we’re doing as an investment in the grantee — that they’ll be fine moving forward.”

Not all the same requirements apply to grantees for the Returning Hope to Returning Citizens program. They do hope to see that applicants have an income, but “we don’t list any particular requirements on that page, per se,” Schwartz said. “We just want them to email us and we’ll take it from there.”

Here to Help used to work with state agencies and local nonprofits to connect with people who qualified for their grants. Schwartz said they’d go through what he calls the “qualified advocate” — a Department of Health and Human Services employee or a social worker. But several years ago, Here to Help decided to put their grantee requirements in plain text on their website. Now grantees can email Schwartz and Here to Help staff directly to apply for assistance.

“I can usually tell once we get that initial email with the initial information whether we’re going to be able to help or not, and nine times out of 10, if they qualify … we’ll be able to assist them,” he said.

RETURNING CITIZENS

Lionel Smith of Detroit is one of those people who reached out to Here to Help. He was connected with the organization last summer through the Center for Employment Opportunity to apply for a grant through the Working Cars for Working People program. A returning citizen himself, Smith had found a job but couldn’t afford to purchase a car.

Working with Here to Help couldn’t have been easier, Smith said. There were less than two weeks between the day he initially applied for the grant and the day he got to drive his car off the lot. And he
was able to go to the lot himself and test drive a few different cars, then pick the one he wanted.

“Before [Here to Help] had given me the car, I used to actually ride a bike or bus to work,” Smith told the JN. “I was very, very humbled but elated that they chose to help me begin to get my life going back in a positive way.”

Smith, who was incarcerated for 29 years, was glad to hear about the new Returning Hope for Returning Citizens program.

“Being formerly incarcerated, I understand the need for having a support system,” he said. “It’s not often you get people who are willing to help formerly incarcerated people with an open heart with no strings attached.”

Smith has an associate’s degree and currently works at a factory that manufactures trucks for Ford. He said readapting to society after incarceration felt both exciting and challenging.

“You’d be so excited and happy to come home, and then everything has changed. It’s really like [being] a child all over again, having to learn everything,” he said. “I’ve still got a long way to go, but I think I’ve done a great job adapting to society, keeping myself around the right people, involved in the right stuff.”

Removing roadblocks to success for Smith and more than 9,000 other grantees is the ultimate purpose of the Here to Help, Schwartz said, and he hopes to expand the organization beyond southeast Michigan one day.

“What we’ve learned over the years is that there are obviously a lot of roadblocks and a lot of difficulty in breaking a cycle of poverty,” Schwartz said. “And there’s a lot of hardworking, determined individuals … who run into emergency situations where, with a simple hand up, they can keep moving forward on this path to success.”

To donate to Here to Help, visit heretohelpfoundation.org/active/donation-a30. Donations can be made to the general organization or earmarked toward a specific program.