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Wildcatting On the Sidewalks Of New York

by Timothy Larkin

Project for Ex-Addicts Stresses Development of Good Work Habits

Wildcatting: to prospect and drill an experimental oil or gas well . . . in territory not known to be productive.
WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY

The stuff was elusive, tantalizing. Here might be a gusher vomiting millions. Fifty feet away not so much as a spot of grease could be forced to the surface.
Edna Ferber, CIMARRON

New York City's Wildcat Service Corporation differs from the wildcat ventures being carried out all over the world in a number of important ways. It is not seeking to tap into oil-bearing sands but rather to find ways of releasing the energy of a group of human beings who would otherwise not have much chance to be productive.

And, where oil wildcatters painstakingly study geologic surveys, rock formations, and other evidence before drilling in territory not known to be productive, Wildcat Service Corporation operates only among those whom conventional wisdom would consider incapable of being productive. It prospects where "not so much as a spot of grease" could reasonably be expected: Among former heroin addicts, of whom most have been arrested, convicted, and served time in jail, 18 percent are on probation or parole, and 80 percent are on methadone maintenance.

"We have certain stiff requirements before we will hire," said Wildcat Manhattan Director Peter Cove. "The applicant has to be an ex-addict, over 18, stabilized on methadone or drug free. The applicant must be receiving welfare in the aid-to-disabled category. And the applicant can't have worked more than 1 year at any one job during the previous 2 years. In short, ours is a business offering jobs to marginally employable people who just happen to be ex-addicts. Otherwise we operate like any other service company, on a businesslike basis."

How businessmen such as Cove came to be wildcatting for untapped human energy on the sidewalks of New York stems from the experience a dozen years earlier of another businessman who rejected the fashionable belief that the individual is powerless to do anything about the course of the world or even the direction of his own life. Louis Schweitzer, a retired chemical engineer and manufacturer, happened to hear at a Manhattan cocktail party that New York City's jails were holding thousands who had not been convicted of any crime. They remained in jail—some of them for as long as a year—simply because they were too poor to make bail. Shocked, but skeptical, Schweitzer toured a Brooklyn jail to see for himself. He discovered that less than half the defendants could post the minimum bond of \$500.

Although Schweitzer was not the first

to feel outrage at this situation, he was—unlike most others—willing to lay his time, money, and reputation on the line to do something about it. From this chance encounter with an injustice to which most Americans were blindfolded, grew the Vera Foundation of Justice, which Schweitzer named for his mother and financed from his own pocket, contributing an average of \$25,000 a year until his death in 1971, and willing to Vera a \$250,000 office building. During its first 10 years Vera attracted general support grants totaling over \$1.5 million, mostly from the Ford Foundation.

Vera's initial goal—to do something about the criminal bail system—has been largely achieved, not only in New York City but throughout the Nation as a result of the Bail Reform Act of 1966, legislation stimulated by Vera's pioneer work. Encouraged, the Vera Foundation, which later changed its name to the Vera Institute of Justice, looked for other ways by which changes in the criminal justice system might make a difference to the lives of the men and women caught up in its machinery.

Inevitably, Vera began to wonder what happens to the prisoner after he "has paid his debt to society." It was obvious society did not recognize that accounts were squared, but rather continued to exact stiff payments from an individual stigmatized by a criminal record. And it became increasingly clear that a major barrier to

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rehabilitation of ex-offenders was lack of jobs on the one hand coupled with a lack of ability to hang on even to marginal employment for certain groups such as recovered alcoholics and ex-addicts.

Vera discovered that many alcoholics in a city-run camp in the Catskills were recruited by resort owners to work during the summer season. Why were these alcoholics able to hold for 2 or 3 months jobs at resorts when they could not hold jobs at all back home? An analysis of the situation showed two key features were present for the alcoholics employed in the resorts that were not present at home: Working in a group of congenial persons with the same problems; and very clear job definition. With these factors as a guide, Vera designed a project in which a small group of out-patient alcoholics worked together cleaning and maintaining a number of New York play-lots.

Drawing on this experience with alcoholics and knowledge gained by working with a city-operated methadone maintenance program, Vera developed a number of relatively small "supported" work projects for ex-addicts. These projects, which offered an opportunity to do useful work without displacing other workers, included the Manpower Administration-funded Pioneer Messenger Service (see *Delivering Jobs to Drug Addicts*, MANPOWER, February 1973) and a project in which ex-addicts handled large sums of money in State off-track betting offices. Pioneer was designed to find out if it was feasible to run a rehabilitation project for ex-addicts as a subsidized business, and if the business would cost less than providing full support for the addicts through welfare or institutionalization.

Pioneer and the other projects produced generally encouraging results, and with the help of a \$303,000 grant from the Manpower Administration Vera then set

up an independent nonprofit public service company—Wildcat Service Corporation—to give the supported work idea a large-scale test.

While the grant from the Manpower Administration pays much of the cost of the corporate structure, a major part of the salaries paid to the ex-addict workers comes through grants from other sources plus funds derived from a diversion of welfare payments. As explained by Ken Marion, Wildcat's executive director, "We obtained permission to divert into an employees' salary pool the \$2,160 a year in public assistance payments for which Wildcat employees qualify. The applicant signs a waiver of his welfare payment, permitting the Corporation to disburse the payment to him on the basis of hours worked. If he works full-time, the ex-addict—whom we call a salary pool employee—gets more than double what he would be getting through welfare.

"We bill the welfare agency for \$1.19 an hour for the hours actually worked. If a salary pool employee is off on an unexcused time, we don't bill the agency for that time. So the agency saves the money."

Work Behavior Stressed

Perhaps the most important finding of the supported work program is that for many kinds of work possession of job skills is less important to a prospective employer than the applicant's work readiness. An employer is willing to train an employee, Vera found, if the employee is interested in working, is able to follow instructions, and appears regularly for work. As a consequence, Wildcat follows a strict and carefully devised performance demand and pay structure to encourage the development of acceptable work behavior.

As Manhattan Director Cove put it, "The people coming in here know they

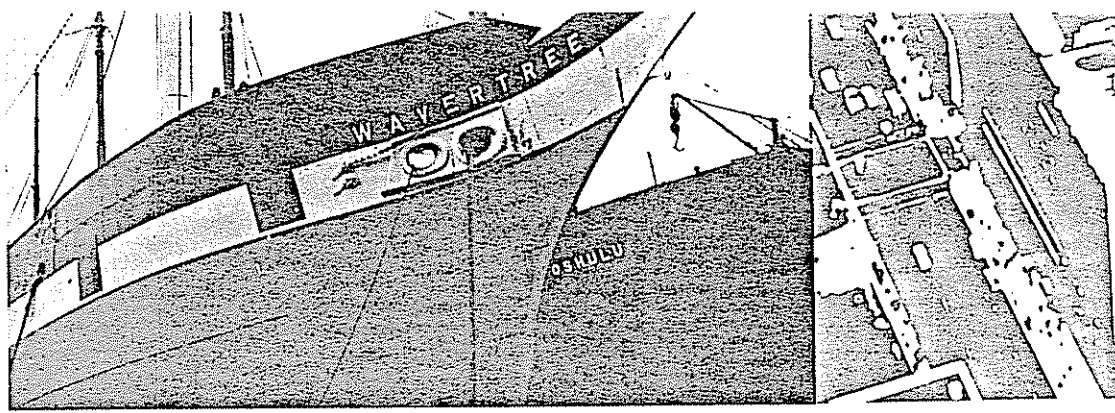
must work and produce. They get \$95 a week to start, with eligibility for a raise after 8 weeks, and within 36 weeks they can increase that to \$115. But it's not automatic. Raises are based on performance, like in any business. There's also a bonus, which can range up to \$15 or \$20 a month. That's based on the worker's performance, attendance, and punctuality. And that's not all; there's a chance for the worker to move on up to foreman at \$125-\$135 a week. And we watch this very carefully."

Exactly how carefully was explained by Cove's Management Information Service Director Jeff Salmon, who pointed out that every individual and work crew is monitored and evaluated regularly. "Each foreman submits a production report every week. From that we know how the crew is doing. We can compare the crew with others to see if it is within the right range. And we can not only keep track of what the employee is doing so that we can tell if he is performing, but there's a place on the weekly report and the monthly individual evaluation report that let's us find out if there's a problem. If it's a problem we can help solve, we try to do it."

"But there's no mollycoddling," Cove added. "We believe in them. And they sense that belief. Those that want to make it, do make it. But we are dealing with human beings and we have the same problems that other businesses have. If a worker doesn't perform, we know it, and he or she knows we know it. In such cases we first give a warning. If the behavior—say, chronic tardiness—persists, we suspend them. Then we terminate. And when we terminate, that's it. We don't take them back."

Those terminated revert to the city's welfare department. "They aren't penalized for dropping out of Wildcat, just as they aren't coerced to enter it," Executive

As part of their Pioneer Marine Technical School training, Wildcat employees spend half of each day helping to restore ships in New York City's South Street Seaport Museum, such as the steel-hulled square-rigger Wavertree.



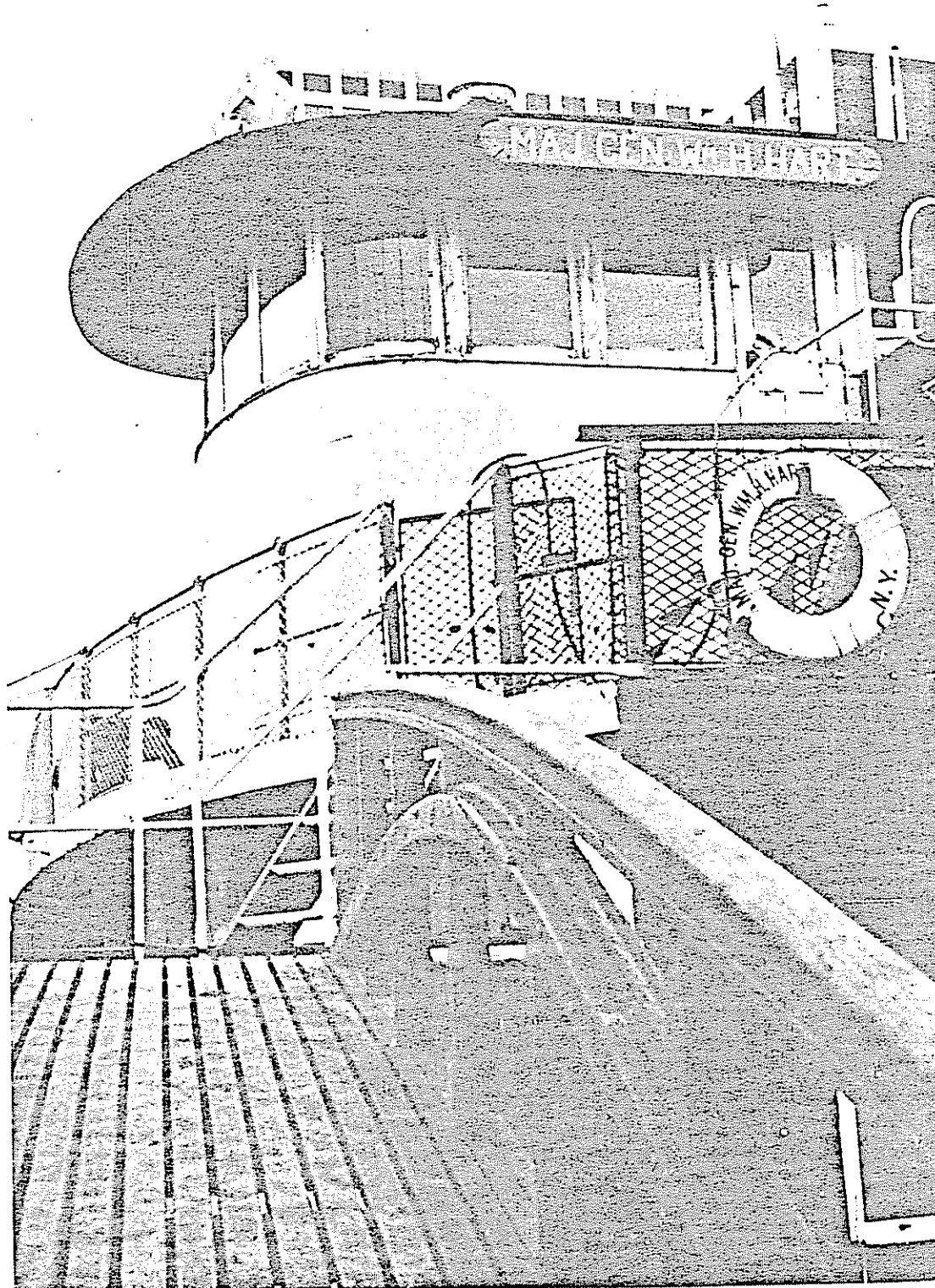
Director Marion pointed out. "One thing about Wildcat we don't want misunderstood is that we are not a substitute for drug treatment program. We are an adjunct to it. There hopefully comes a stage in rehabilitation at which a job is important and in which the ex-addict is ready for a job. That's where we come in."

Possible resumption of drug use by participants is viewed as a job problem. "We don't do 'head things' with the employees, such as forcing them to take counseling or group therapy," Cove said. "The employee must know that productive work and good work habits, not personal therapy, are the reasons for his employment. And we don't go in for estabapo tactics either, checking everyone over to see if someone is back on the job. But if a worker is, it's obvious. He's late or he's absent or he's 'nodding off.' We look at it as a job-related problem. We are interested in their performance on the job. And if that doesn't come up to standard, then we take action."

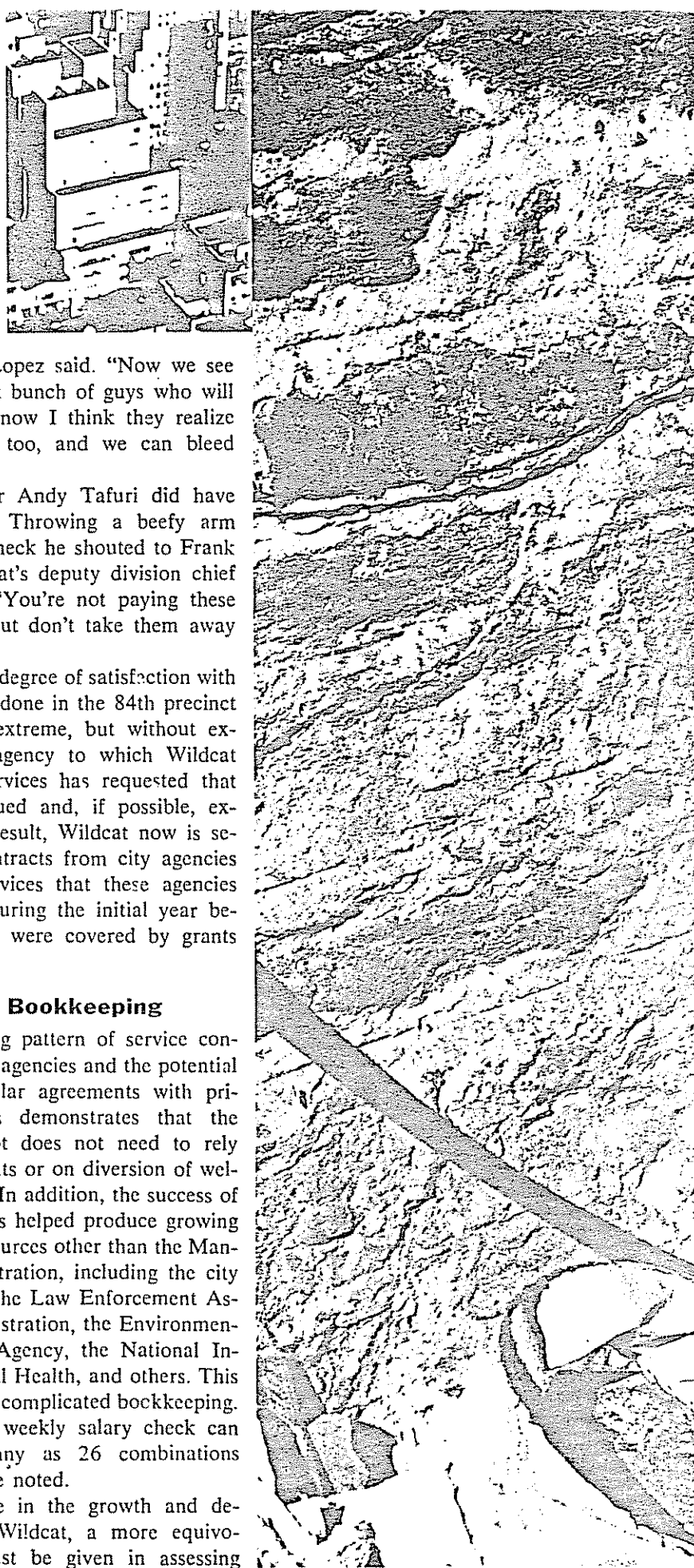
Basic Goals Established

During its first year of operation, the Wildcat Corporation established certain basic goals for itself:

- To see if the supported work techniques devised for Vera's small projects for up to 50 ex-addicts would be effective when expanded by several hundred percent.
- To test whether a private, nonprofit corporation would be able to provide satisfactory services for municipal agencies using supported work employees.
- To determine whether Wildcat could develop sources of funds other than grants in order to continue the supported work program.
- To determine whether large numbers of supported work employees would be able to move through the program and



The terry Major General William H. Hart used to bob across the busy waters between Manhattan and Governors Island. Now it provides classroom space for the Pioneer Marine Technical School, where young ex-addicts learn marine engine repair and boat maintenance.



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into nonsupported, nonsubsidized jobs.

By the end of Wildcat's first year of operation, most of these goals had been met. By June 1973, there were 302 supported work employees on the payroll, involved in such projects as painting the city's 103,000 fire hydrant zones, translating for Spanish-speaking patients at Mt. Sinai Hospital, recycling waste paper, controlling rodents in Harlem and other areas, helping to run the mid-Manhattan branch of the N.Y. Public Library, cleaning masonry in public buildings, repairing tires on police department vehicles, and 23 other public service projects. By late 1973 plans were well advanced to expand the total operation from 300 to 3,000, with units in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens, as well as Manhattan.

One of the most dramatic examples of the kind of reaction encountered by Wildcat's service operations occurred when it was asked by the city of New York to send a crew to handle maintenance at the 84th Police Precinct Headquarters in Brooklyn. When the police learned that ex-addicts would be moving around lockers containing guns, and storage rooms with evidence, including narcotics, they were appalled. Their hostility was matched by the apprehension of the ex-addicts, who would be working right in the heartland of "hassledom." As one-time addict and now Wildcat Staff Supervisor Valentine Lopez put it, "After so many years running from them, there we were right in the middle of them."

The mistrust between the two groups was reflected by the requirement that the ex-addicts be escorted by a police officer whenever they cleaned a locker room or other sensitive area. After a few months, as the once shabby station began to gleam, and as the ex-addicts demonstrated their trustworthiness, the attitudes of both groups began to change. "We spent years thinking these guys were not human, and

hating them," Lopez said. "Now we see they are a great bunch of guys who will help you. And now I think they realize we are human too, and we can bleed too."

Police Officer Andy Tafuri did have one complaint. Throwing a beefy arm around Lopez' neck he shouted to Frank Rasbury, Wildcat's deputy division chief for Brooklyn, "You're not paying these guys enough! But don't take them away from us."

Tafuri's high degree of satisfaction with the work being done in the 84th precinct may be a bit extreme, but without exception every agency to which Wildcat is providing services has requested that they be continued and, if possible, expanded. As a result, Wildcat now is securing paid contracts from city agencies to continue services that these agencies obtained free during the initial year because the costs were covered by grants to Vera.

Complicated Bookkeeping

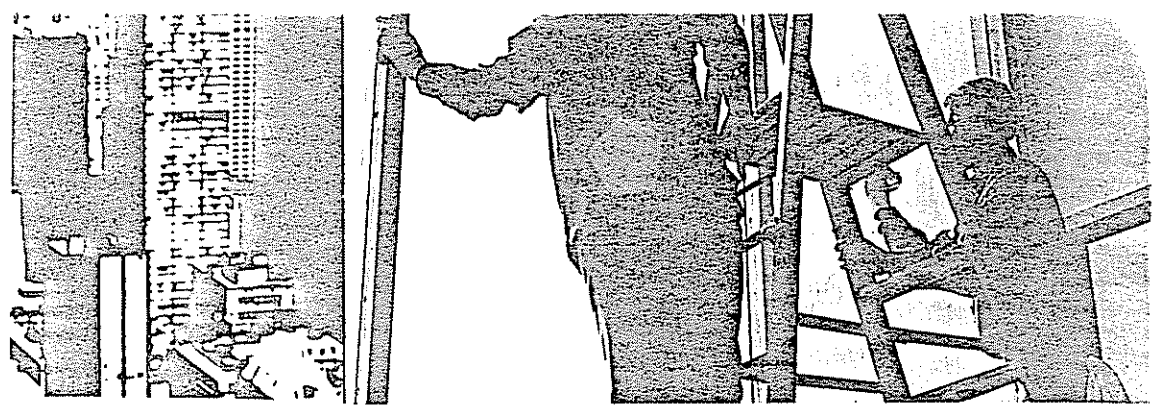
This emerging pattern of service contracts from city agencies and the potential of gaining similar agreements with private businesses demonstrates that the Wildcat concept does not need to rely entirely on grants or on diversion of welfare payments. In addition, the success of the program has helped produce growing support from sources other than the Manpower Administration, including the city of New York, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Institute of Mental Health, and others. This can cause some complicated bookkeeping. "A single \$95 weekly salary check can contain as many as 26 combinations of funds," Cove noted.

At this stage in the growth and development of Wildcat, a more equivocal answer must be given in assessing



One of Wildcat's most successful assignments in terms of productivity, high morale, and attendance is the Harlem Pest Control Project. Crews spend at least 2 weeks a month inspecting for litter and health violations, removing debris, exterminating rats, and doing similar block maintenance work. The balance of the month they perform such tasks as presenting slide shows and antidrug programs in neighborhood schools.

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Wildcat maintenance crews perform a variety of chores, including washing windows at a city court building and cleaning and burnishing the walls of a Brooklyn sewage disposal plant.



Hostility and suspicion were evident on both sides when Wildcat workers first showed up at Brooklyn's 84th Police Precinct Headquarters to handle building maintenance. But the ex-addicts' job performance helped break down the barriers. Project supervisor Valentine Lopez and police officer Andy Tufari symbolize the new relationship built on trust and mutual respect.

progress toward its ultimate goal of moving ex-addicts from supported employment into regular jobs. After 6 months in the project, each participant's job readiness is evaluated. "We are not and do not consider ourselves to be an 'employer of last resort,'" Marion emphasized. "We are as concerned with out-placement as we are with recruitment.

"We recognized early on that this would be one of our major problems, and that it would require a great deal of our attention. Though we did develop some jobs and placed about 60 people, we came to realize that our managers already were fully committed to running the growing Wildcat program, and we couldn't ask them to solve this problem as well. So Vera has built a job development and placement capability for us."

Wildcat will not depend entirely on Vera and its network of contacts, however. Nonsupported jobs will continue to be developed in places where Wildcat people are working. "And, of course, we are using all the other resources available to us," Marion said, "such as the New York City Department of Employment."

"One of our problems," Cove continued, "is to try to maintain a balance between opportunity within the corporation and encouraging outward movement. A basic part of the supported work idea is the use of the target population—here ex-addicts—as foremen or first level supervisors. But we don't want to offer careers in Wildcat. On the other hand, we don't want to discourage talent either. So we make it possible for people to move up to foreman, but the next step, to supervisor, is much more difficult. Our people have to compete with those recruited on the outside and the decision is made strictly on the basis of ability."

Since Wildcat considers that it has two products to sell—people and services—it aggressively promotes both. A brochure

lists the skills available, tells where employers should call to place job orders, and carries several impressive testimonials. Police Commissioner Donald Crawley reports that his department has "been able to take on about 40 or 50 Wildcat people. I think it's significant that these employees are now allowed into the police locker room where they work—without an escort." And Chemical Bank Assistant Vice President Douglas Ades states that the 12 Wildcat graduates now employed by his bank form "a highly motivated group with a real feeling of enthusiasm."

Marine Skills Taught

Sometimes, Wildcat employees don't have to be sold to employers at all—they are eagerly snapped up. This happy experience awaits the 36 ex-addicts now passing through Wildcat's Pioneer Marine Technical School, located at the South Street Seaport Museum. In a 6-month program divided between training and work, they learn to repair boat hulls and marine engines, skills that are in short supply. Charles Rapson, Pioneer Marine School placement director, says proudly, "We are not unique in promising 100 percent placement for our graduates. We are unique in delivering on that promise. So far there's been a good job offer for everyone of our 43 graduates—and we've placed them from Florida to Canada."

That is cheering news to Pioneer trainees like John Bullock, who sees the program as opening the way "to a decent job with decent pay. Otherwise," he adds, "I would probably been out there scurrying around, maybe still on drugs. You have a low-paying job and you get discouraged, so you quit and try something else, going from job to job."

When ex-addict students like Bullock finish the Pioneer training, they'll be moving into jobs that offer average starting

pay of \$2.50 to \$3 an hour, with good prospects for moving up to \$5 to \$6 an hour within a year. One of the best features of working in the marine industry, Rapson points out, "is that they don't pay much attention to what happened in a worker's past. If a worker produces quality work that's what's important."

Since Wildcat operates like a business, project supervisors watch the balance sheet closely. At present, the outlay for each Wildcat participant is \$8,250 a year, including the salaries paid to participants for the work they do. Part of this is offset by direct income from service contracts with city agencies. Overall, a Vera analysis indicates that benefits from the program just about offset costs. For every dollar spent, according to the analysis, the taxpayer gets back 92 cents.

Benefits calculated in the analysis include the value of goods and services produced by Wildcat participants, the taxes they pay on their salaries, a reduction in crime costs (police records show that the project reduces arrests among participating ex-addicts), health resources freed for other uses, and a reduction in welfare through accelerated movement of participants off relief rolls. "And," Vera analyst Lucy Friedman pointed out, "this does not include the future benefits that will go on year after year as the ex-addict works, pays taxes, and contributes to society."

Wildcat Supervisor Val Lopez may not have seen the cost-benefit analysis, but he has his own kind of bookkeeping: "Before this I was 12 years on drugs. Now I'm working. Now I can go home at night to my family. I pay taxes. I'm self-supporting. I love Wildcat."

Wildcat Foreman Fred Cordero summed it up another way:

"The only work I ever did before was 15 years in jail. Now I can look you straight in the eye." □

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Service Through Organized People (STOP)

Health and Hospitals Corporation

Community Council of Greater New York

New York Public Library

Greater Jamaica Development Corporation

Legal Aid Society

Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

The following pages are reprinted from the U.S. Department of Labor's "Manpower" magazine. We're grateful to the Department for the interesting story about us, for permission to reprint it, and for the help they have given us throughout the development of what is known as "supported work."

Wildcat could not have come into being or have reached the present day without the support of several levels of government—federal, state and city. Our funding agencies are listed on the facing page.

One particularly interesting and important source of funding has been the diversion of our employees' welfare benefits into the Wildcat salary pool, an arrangement which was made possible through the efforts of the City's Human Resources Administration, the New York State Department of Social Services, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and the Social Security Administration. We are especially grateful to the Social Security Administration for their cooperation during the changeover of our welfare diversion program from city to federal administration.

As the following article indicates, Wildcat is in the midst of a substantial expansion, thanks to the success of the first year's experiment. The expansion has been made possible primarily by the New York City Department of Employment. DOE Commissioner Lucille Rose assisted Wildcat in briefing City officials before the Wildcat-DOE expansion came to a vote before the Board of Estimate, and she has continued to work with us. She and her deputies are frequent visitors to our work sites.

We have been fortunate to gain the support of Mayor Abraham Beame and his predecessor, John V. Lindsay. The Bureau of the Budget, particularly the Project Management Section, has helped us to join forces with many City agencies, develop work projects in which we serve those agencies, and put the projects into action.

But it isn't just the "powers that be" who have made our program possible. From the director of operations in the Department of Public Works to a foreman in a City park, we have found the City's employees to be most understanding and helpful. Many Wildcat employees who perform tasks for City agencies are supervised directly by City personnel. The acceptance and encouragement displayed by these City supervisors has enabled our employees to do their jobs and do them well. We believe we have been able to perform many worthwhile services for the City, but it was the City that helped us to do it.

A project like Wildcat naturally raises concerns in the unions, but we have been fortunate in being able to talk to union leaders whenever problems have arisen. While we have not been able to undertake certain projects because they would have challenged union prerogatives, the unions' understanding and cooperation have enabled us to undertake the more than 40 projects now in operation.

Although we realize that many problems lie ahead, particularly in expanding our work force to more than twice its current size, we have been greatly encouraged by support we have received from all levels of City government. With so many good people behind us, and with a group of employees of whom we are very proud, we think we've got a good chance of demonstrating what we set out to demonstrate: that ex-addicts and ex-offenders can be productive, self-supporting members of society.



Lucille Rose, Commissioner
New York City Department of Employment

Kenneth Marion
Executive Officer
Wildcat Service Corporation