



U.S. Rep. David Trone, left, who represents Maryland's 6th Congressional District, talks with former U.S. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan on Monday at a luncheon that focused on Gatekeepers. Trone, a Democrat, and Ryan, a Republican, both praised the work of Gatekeepers in helping formerly incarcerated people re-enter communities. MIKE LEWIS/HERALD-MAIL

Ex-House speaker praises program for former inmates

Gatekeepers is among 5 to get foundation grants

Mike Lewis

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Through his foundation, Paul Ryan scours the nation, looking for effective programs that help people escape poverty.

He thinks he's found one in Hagerstown.

"I am here for just a basic reason, to bring praise to what Bill (Gaertner, executive director of Gatekeepers) and all the folks at Gatekeepers have done and to bring some money to make sure that Gatekeepers stays successful," Ryan said during his visit to Hagerstown this week.

Ryan, a Republican from Wisconsin,

served in the U.S. House of Representatives for two decades and was House speaker from October 2015 to January 2019. He was the GOP's vice presidential nominee in the 2012 election, running with Mitt Romney. The duo lost to incumbent President Barack Obama and Joe Biden, who was vice president at the time.

Ryan met with people in the Gatekeepers program during a forum and a luncheon Monday at the Horizon Goodwill facility on North Prospect Street. He was joined by U.S. Rep. David Trone, a Democrat who is running for reelection for Maryland's 6th Congressional District; Maryland Commerce Secretary Mike Gill, several representatives of city and county government, local business leaders and people who have returned to the community after spending time behind bars.

After retiring from politics, Ryan

started the American Idea Foundation. Its goal is to invest in evidence-based programs that fight poverty and promote upward mobility, then replicate them around the nation.

"I'm just here to see how Gatekeepers works and why it's so successful at getting people to stay out of prison once they've returned to the community," Ryan said before the luncheon.

What is the 'Business of Living' program?

Gatekeepers is something of a clearing house for people who have spent time behind bars. It focuses on re-entry and reducing rates of reoffending and recidivism.

Among other things, Gatekeepers has developed what Gaertner has

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dubbed the “Business of Living” program. It’s a process designed to help formerly incarcerated people get on their feet and pursue their goals.

That program is taught inside Roxbury Correctional Institution and the Maryland Correctional Training Center south of Hagerstown as well as the Washington County Detention Center and the county Day Reporting Center.

Since mid-March, a digital version of the Gatekeepers Business of Living program, with videos, has been put on tablets that are inside more than 250 correctional facilities around the nation. At the end of September, more than 1,200 inmates have completed the tablet version of the program, according to statistics from Gatekeepers.

So far this year, Gatekeepers has helped 12 people get jobs and has had an average attendance of 32 at its Saturday morning Resource Club meetings.

Gatekeepers also helps people with basic needs, from housing and clothes to cab fare (to get people to and from work) and bus passes.

Now the organization is working with the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities at the University of Notre Dame to develop evidence-based data for Gatekeepers. A multi-year study will examine the Business of Living program’s impact on the local recidivism rate.

Saving ‘a lot of taxpayer money’

Gaertner, a former college basketball coach, speaks from experience. He spent more than eight years in prison for domestic violence. When he got out, he founded Gatekeepers. In 2020, Gatekeepers received a national prison ministry award.

At Monday’s luncheon, Gaertner recognized several formerly incarcerated people who were in the audience.

Helping them be successful is a good investment, he said.

“Did you know that 70% of the inmates in Washington County, in our jail, go back? Seventy percent,” Gaertner said.

“It’s \$35,000 a year to house one of us in the detention center. That’s a lot of taxpayer money. My goal is to find a



Paul Ryan, foreground, looks to see formerly incarcerated citizens stand as Bill Gaertner, background, points them out during a luncheon Monday.

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way for everyone to understand that we don’t need to do that anymore.

“In our (luncheon) program, we unabashedly listed a lot of us who were locked up,” he told the crowd. “We’re back. We’re paying taxes. We’re going to church. We’re going to the grocery stores. We’re paying rent. We’re raising children. And we’re volunteering.”

‘Track records of success’

Gatekeepers was one of five nonprofits in the country to receive financial and strategic support from the American Idea Foundation this year, according a news release the organization issued in September.

The release did not disclose the amounts of the grants.

The others are Corner to Corner in Nashville, Tenn; Child First in Connecticut and North Carolina; Merit America, a national nonprofit; and The Joseph Project in Milwaukee.

“With polarization, partisanship, and cynicism on the rise in America, we have an obligation to strengthen civil society and support organizations that are making a tangible difference in people’s lives,” Ryan said in the release.

He said the grants “will help create bodies of evidence and grow bodies of evidence. They will promote innovative strategies and solutions with track records of success. And hopefully, they will take some of the politics out of fighting poverty.”

Mike Lewis covers business, the economy and other issues. Follow Mike on Twitter: @MiLewis