

Rebuilding Together Tulsa volunteers assist homeowner

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When Martha Harris has to get out of the house, she has a hard time moving around, particularly on her front porch.

"You'd laugh at me, the way I get up and down the porch," Harris said.

She was recently referred to Rebuilding Together Tulsa, a nonprofit agency doing home repairs for low-income homeowners. Volunteers built her a wheelchair ramp.

"It didn't cost me a dime. Otherwise, it wouldn't have gotten done," she said. "It means everything to me. We just don't have the money to do the things they're able to do."

The agency offers four programs: roofs, energy efficiency, Safe at Home for handicap access needs and ROOT (repairs offered other time) for projects such as carpentry, plumbing and drywall.

Clients must own their home, live in Tulsa city limits and be 60 and older or living with a disability.

"We started with no staff, all volunteers in the late '90s and have really grown to be able to serve the community," said Executive Director Jennifer Barcus-Schafer.

About 500 people volunteer annually, and about 36 people volunteer weekly or monthly. Volunteers completed 163 projects last year, and this year's goal is 175 projects.

"The need is not going away. There's a waiting pool year-round, and it's just a matter of getting the funding and the labor to get those needs met," Barcus-Schafer said.

There are about 100 people on the waiting list. A large number of projects are weatherization repairs.

"We get drafty houses as tight as possible," she said. "These are people who might live on a fixed income and have to choose between bills or their medications."

The savings can really add up, said board member Susan Crenshaw.

"When you have \$10,000 to \$15,000 to live on, and you're heating the world or have leaky pipes, it's like an increase in cash flow when you address those needs," she said.

Many of the clients are living with broken windows and other problems most homeowners would not things most wouldn't live with.

"There's an aging housing stock with years of neglect, and a lot of those people are used to bundling up, cranking the heater and worrying about the bills later," Barcus-Schafer said. "We're happy to tighten it up for them."

The organization will invest up to 10 percent of the value of a home. So if a house is so far gone volunteers cannot make a tangible difference, the homeowner is referred to other organizations.

"You also have to manage your expectations. You might have a list of 25 things, but we might only be able to get to 10," she said.

The average cost per home repair is \$2,300.

“Tulsa has invested so much in building outwards to the suburbs, but we have this pocket around downtown that won’t go away or get better without Rebuilding Together Tulsa,” Barcus-Schafer said.

For more information, go to tulsaworld.com/rtt or call 742-6241.

Associate Images:



Wayne Tremble and Alan Sylvester level a ramp for a house. They are helping Dean Lesikar and Rebuilding Together Tulsa make a ramp for an elderly person earlier this week. STEPHEN PINGRY/Tulsa World

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