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Volunteers Grab Tools, Get Busy

24 Crews Strap On Belts To Spiff Up Worn Houses

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April 29 2007

Between housekeeping, Bible study, two grandchildren and a son with schizophrenia, there isn't much around the house that 62-year-old Elissa Beckford has the time - or money - to fix.

As she tries to keep up with her 7-year-old grandson Jaquan and 5-year-old granddaughter Nasata, Beckford has hardly noticed the peeling wallpaper, the broken lights and the rickety stairs leading to her basement. Her demanding schedule, she said, has simply turned her 30-year-old house upside down.

On Saturday, National Rebuilding Day, a group of about 65 volunteers worked to turn it right side up again.

Employees of Imagineers, a Hartford-based housing services company that has volunteered every year to "adopt a house," stripped off the brown, flowery wallpaper from Beckford's walls and splashed her three bedrooms with new shades of blue and off-white.

"See, this room's blue because it's the boy's room," said Beckford, shuffling around cans of paint and plastic coverings Saturday to show off her home's new face-lift.

Volunteers also hung new doors, replaced hazardous electrical circuits and built railings along the stairs leading to the second floor. They repaired a leaking toilet, fixed the collapsing basement stairwell and cleared overgrown brush that was covering a backyard garden plot. The volunteers built a back porch and planted a row of peppers and tomatoes in the garden.

"This is a blessing," said Beckford, a part-time housekeeper.

Beckford's house was one of 24 renovated Saturday through an annual program of Rebuilding Together Hartford, an affiliate of the national organization that gathers volunteers to remodel the homes of low-income residents.

Every year, Rebuilding Together Hartford chooses houses in the Hartford area to renovate and finds companies and organizations to volunteer the work.

"Many of Hartford's residents - particularly the elderly, people with disabilities and multigenerational families - often live in deteriorating homes that they do not have the financial means or physical ability to repair," said Greg Secord, executive director of Rebuilding Together Hartford.

This year, the group gathered more than 35 teams, ranging from companies such as Imagineers to church congregations, that adopted homes to repair and insulate.

Ken Schultz, program director for Imagineers, said the company has been volunteering in the program for five years. Employees have come to think of it as a bonding exercise of sorts, he said.

"We kind of use it as a company picnic of team-building and adoption," said Schultz, who served as Saturday's project manager at Beckford's house.

Schultz estimated that his group of volunteers made about \$12,000 worth of renovations to the home, a price tag that Beckford said she could have never afforded by herself.

Beckford receives a monthly Social Security check of about \$900 to cover the expenses of her two grandchildren and their 30-year-old father, Kwame, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia years ago. After paying bills and buying groceries, she said, there isn't much left over to spend on house repairs.

As she scanned the fresh paint on her walls and the new railings, a sense of relief flowed through Beckford. It was mingled with a slight sense of anxiety.

"I dread my house being so nice," she said, laughing. "I just hope I'm able to keep it up."

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