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Monday, June 29, 2009

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Helping hands repair homes for Franklin County residents

About 250 volunteers from around the country made a recent trip to Franklin County to help with home repairs for those who can't afford them.

By Janelle Rucker
981-3159



ERIC BRADY The Roanoke Times

John Perry, 16 (from left); Kyle Wisniewski, 16; and Brendan Cottrell, 14, apply skirting to a home in Franklin County last week as part of a volunteer partnership between STEP Inc. and Group Workcamps.

GLADE HILL -- Retired farmer Hue Smith sat outside his house Tuesday, watching a dozen teens tear off siding, dig up red dirt and apply a fresh coat of sea-green paint to his mobile home.

Next door, another group performed similar work, and farther down Golden View Road, even more teenagers tore off an aging front porch.

About 250 volunteers from around the country went to work across Franklin County last week, performing much-needed home repairs for those who can't afford them.

STEP Inc. in Rocky Mount formed a partnership with Group Workcamps to fix homes for the elderly and disabled at no charge to the homeowner. Together, the two nonprofits repaired 41 homes by week's end, even though the donation drive to support it came up far short of its goal.

"If you look at our aging housing stock and demographics, there's a real need for people to have this type of assistance," said Rocky Mount Town Manager James Ervin.

The town has other housing rehabilitation programs, but "this program is so much more responsive," he said. "It's paperwork-free. Boots on the ground. This is a breath of fresh air in terms of its simplicity," he said. And in rural Franklin County, homes are not as accessible -- or as concentrated -- as those in urban areas.

As Smith wandered around his mobile home, he admitted that if it weren't for the program, the much-needed repairs would have gone undone.

"I can't afford it," he said.

Katie Eberhardt traveled from Hartland, Wis., to help people such as Smith.

"It feels great to come get it done since they can't," she said. "And I never thought it'd be so much fun."



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Walter Loper (left) paints trim on the top



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side of Hue Smith's home last week while others build a back porch.

Smith's problem is common around Franklin County, said Jon Morris, executive director of STEP Inc.

"We get a lot of calls from the elderly and disabled for things like porches," he said.

But because of program guidelines that allow only for home weatherization, "we can't help those folks. They're basically helpless."

Homeowners had to apply for the program, and STEP Inc. staff went to the properties to evaluate them and decide what work needed to be done. Very few, if any, were turned away, Morris said.

Both STEP Inc. and Group Workcamps contributed \$20,000 to make the work possible. The money went toward supplies and fees, such as paint and building permits.

Morris approached different organizations and individuals, including local governments and churches, asking for donations last year. But in the end, the agency put up \$13,000 of its own money because the donations stopped coming in.

"I was a little disappointed that we didn't raise half, let alone the entire amount needed," he said. "It's a hardship on the agency because we're a nonprofit. We're willing to be the lead agency and take this on, we just need more support."

Ferrum College officials pitched in and opened up the school's residence and dining halls to the group through Saturday.

Other than the labor they performed, the participating teens also bought food and other donations for the local food bank.

Group Workcamps is a nonprofit Christian group that organizes short-term mission trips for 12- to 20-year-olds. Started in 1977, the group says on its Web site that it has facilitated more than 6 million hours of volunteer work around the world. Trips focus on different types of community service, including home repair.

While residents benefit from the work, the teens -- and adults that accompany them -- are able to "live their faith through service," Morris said.

"It's not about our construction skills," said Rick Barker of Greensboro, N.C., who is spending the week working on Smith's home. "It's more about the fellowship."

The teens arrive with their church youth groups but are separated and paired with others from across the country.

Cathy Stangler and Peter Grau, both members of St. Timothy Catholic Church in Chantilly, have attended numerous work camps through the years.

"It's a wonderful experience for kids and adults," Grau said.

"And it's great to see kids giving of their summer breaks," said Stangler, who has been on four other similar trips.

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