

Habitat for Humanity launches Repair Corps

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Habitat for Humanity is primarily known for building homes, but now 84 of the organization's 1,500 nationwide affiliates are offering home repairs for military veterans.

Thanks to a partnership with The Home Depot Foundation, Willamette West Habitat for Humanity, which serves all of Washington County, is one such chapter.

According to development and communications manager Hope Howard, the Veteran Repairs Corps program is focused on providing "critical home repairs" for home-owning military veterans. Such repairs might include making a home more wheelchair-accessible.

"If a veteran is mobility-impaired and they need wider doorways or wheelchair ramps, or if their roof is falling down," then they are eligible to participate in the Repair Corps program, which focuses on issues that impact quality of life, Howard said.

"Anything that requires a permit, we will take care of," she added. "(Those repairs) will be done by licensed contractors."

With the motto "It's a hand up, not a hand out," Habitat for Humanity is considered more of a resource than a charity. As Ray Lukens, an AmeriCorps volunteer who trains Habitat for Humanity volunteers in Washington County, explains, qualifying participants will still pay for home repairs.

"Habitat has decided that they're going to use their usual business model, which is a no-interest loan, with structured payments people can afford," Lukens said.

Habitat for Humanity was founded in 1976 to provide affordable housing to families who are generally priced out of home ownership. The largely volunteer program requires that participating families be involved in the construction process: A single parent family is typically required to commit 300 hours to varying stages of building, while a two-adult family must commit 500 hours.

Typically, volunteers range from newcomers to skilled individuals with a background in the construction industry. Coordinators like Lukens train those new to the program in everything from painting to framing.

The family buys the home from Habitat at a price that is approximately half the house's assessed market value, and then carries a zero-interest mortgage. The program is designed to dissuade home owners from "flipping," or reselling the house for profit, so each year about 5 percent of the mortgage is forgiven by the organization, and participants agree that if they should decide to sell the house, they will sell it back to Habitat for Humanity so that it can be resold as affordable housing.

To date, WWHH has helped 86 families by constructing single-family homes, often grouped in developments like Lawson Place, a five-unit community in the 16900 block of Southwest Division Street in Beaverton, which was completed in 2007.

WWHH builds five to 10 homes a year on average, Howard said.

Lukens herself has a background in construction and architecture. Her role in AmeriCorps echoes what she describes as a recent government-level initiative to "deploy some of us like the domestic Peace Corps" in response to the recent spike in foreclosures and barriers to home ownership.

For Lukens, the program is about "making sure our wounded warriors have safe homes." She looks forward to working with what Howard refers to as "a volunteer team that is chomping at the bit waiting for a project" through the Repair Corps program.

"At Willamette West, we have a core group of about 20 people who work here as if it were a job," Lukens said. "They are just amazing. A lot of them are retired. A lot of them are veterans themselves."

The Home Depot Foundation provided \$2.7 million to the national repair program, and provided two \$15,000 grants to WWHH earlier this year.



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