

# Rebuilding Home By Home

*Local non-profit puts a smile on the faces of homeowners throughout the year by helping make their homes whole again.*



Wixom's Mayor Kevin W. Hinkley cooks lunch for a group of volunteers. Hinkley is one of many city officials who helps assist county residents rebuild homes.

Photo courtesy of Jennifer Moore

by Tony Morisset  
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Since 1992, Rebuilding Together Oakland County has helped fix damaged properties for more than 500 homeowners and non-profit facilities. Having done work in 22 of the 83 counties, Rebuilding Together Oakland County makes its presence in the community known each time a resident requests help.

Originally starting in 1988 as a "Christmas in April" event, the group helped aid residents in need in the month of April. At that time, there were 13 loosely organized community service programs, which later took the name Rebuilding Together.

The organization expanded to different counties across the U.S. and made its way into Oakland County in 1992. Currently, there are more than 200 affiliates across the nation helping to rebuild homes in the community. The construction that is done to homes is strictly with help of volunteers.

"You hear over and over again how the volunteers have a continuous smile on their faces," said Al Kaczowski, executive director. "A lot of volunteers will continue to help the family and become extended family members. It is quite amazing and very powerful."

In 2012, the organization worked with approximately 100 homes and helped put roughly \$600,000 in market value back into the community.

They have also helped non-profit organizations so they can use their money to help their mission and not have to spend it to maintain their property.

According to Kaczowski, aid may come in many different areas of the home. Anything from a decaying kitchen that needs to be repaired, which includes things like putting in cabinets, countertops, and sinks.

"They may need a ramp to get into the house," he said. "They may need specific things around the house like carpeting that has become old and deteriorating. Now the person may be 70 or 75 and they walk with a shuffle and the carpet may become dangerous."

Volunteers are also a huge part, and the group is always looking for more. In 2012 alone, the organization rallied 1,400 citizens to land a hand.

No prior experience in home improvement needed, as there are trained helpers to guide during the project. The City Manager of Wixom, Tony Nowicki, even donates his time, as he is highly involved in the program.

"I've done everything from chipping branches and wood to washing siding,"



Nowicki said. "I consider myself fairly handy, but some of the tasks that I have undertaken I've never done before. I think everyone that comes out there learns a little bit of something."

Funding comes from sponsors throughout the community who donate from a range of \$100 to \$25,000. According to Kaczowski, 75 percent of the homeowners the organization helps are senior citizens.

This may mean the home needs massive upgrades, which require phone calls to professionals to assist. When it comes to needing specialized help such as electricians and plumbers, many local businesses donate their certified services.

"We buy materials and they provide the services and work for free," he said.

Children as young as the age of 14 can assist in helping. Students from the Walled Lake Consolidated School District come out for workdays as well to clean up yards.

"They [students] go house to house and help the seniors," Kaczowski said. "It helps the senior citizens by making that available. It helps the community by making the area look nice. They clean up eight to 10 properties in a day. It is well orchestrated and a lot of kids show up."

The impact is visible in each county, especially in Wixom where, Nowicki has heard testimony from residents how the program changes lives.

"Nothing beats the time that the first lady that we did a ton of work to her house came to the city council meeting and was almost in tears because she was so thankful," Nowicki said. "She had a hard time with mobility, but still managed to come to the meeting just to say thanks. That was something."



Last year, Oakland County 2012 National Rebuild Day created 51 projects in the area. More than 1,400 volunteers showed up for the day.

Photo courtesy of Jennifer Moore

## 2012

Was a big year for Rebuilding Together Oakland County. Countless hours of volunteer builders helped the organization assist those in need.

During the calendar year, community volunteers performed 15,500 hours of work. This allowed the foundation to put approximately \$600,000 in increased market value back into the community. The kitchen and repairs at the Common Ground Sanctuary in Royal Oak assisted more than 140 clients who will stay at the shelter annually. The 2012 National Rebuild Day allowed a group of volunteers to complete 51 projects in just one day.

— Tony Morisset

## NEED A HAND HOW TO APPLY FOR AID

To apply for assistance, candidates must send an application to the head office in Farmington Hills. After the request for help is received, a committee decides if they will send their personnel to the site. This visit decides what areas of the home the applicant needs help in. Requirements to receive aid include a history that proves the homeowner has paid taxes and does indeed own the property, and the candidate must also qualify as a low-income individual. From there, a committee looks into the application and decides if they will send their personnel to visit the site and see what the homeowner needs help in. In order to be in the program, the owner must qualify as a low-income individual. At the headquarters, committee members must find proof that the resident has paid their taxes and does indeed own their property. — Tony Morisset



Homeowner hugs a volunteer after a group of volunteers helped rebuild her home.

Photo courtesy of Jennifer Moore