

Local homes get needed upgrades in nonprofit's renovation marathon

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The Frias family's home in San Diego's Emerald Hills needed some major repairs, the type that would require a lot of time and money.

Mold grew in the walls, forcing the two children to sleep in the living room for the past several months. Their father, Roberto Frias, who has been in a wheelchair for 23 years, struggled to maneuver through the cramped house, especially the bathroom, where he had broken the door and banged into the walls.

For Rebuilding Together San Diego, the home was the perfect candidate for its annual home renovation marathon, which concludes tomorrow. "You have your house for a while and there are things you wanted to do, but things come up," said Frias, who lost the use of his legs from injuries suffered in a motorcycle accident.

His was one of 13 homes selected from throughout the county by the nonprofit organization, which helps seniors, disabled and low-income homeowners with renovations. The group matches volunteers and donated supplies with homes in need.

Much of the work has been done and will culminate tomorrow as part of a nationwide Rebuilding Together Renovation Event Day. Locally, about 1,000 volunteers will be painting, cleaning and finishing projects.

"While Habitat (for Humanity) builds, we renovate," said Pamela Thorsch, executive director of Rebuilding Together San Diego.

The group, which has been around locally for 11 years, selects projects based on household income and needed repairs. Recipients' annual income must fall below 60 percent of the area's median income, or about \$24,150, Thorsch said. Most survive on about \$15,000 a year, she added.

Since 1996, Rebuilding San Diego has completed more than 275 projects, including renovations at schools, women's shelters and a fire station. The organization values the work at more than \$4 million.

The number of homes selected for the annual renovation day depends on how many service groups and corporations "sponsor" a house by paying \$3,000 for supplies and providing volunteers.

Rebuilding Together received and reviewed 65 applications this year before choosing the 13 homes and a community center. The organization also works on other projects throughout the year, including one at North County's Mountain Shadows, a residential care facility for the developmentally disabled.

Mountain Shadows partnered with Rebuilding Together earlier this year to renovate its 18 homes in Escondido and San Marcos. Residents, of which there are 117, help out if possible.

"It's a long-term commitment," said Doug Cook, executive director of the foundation that owns Mountain Shadows. "We have 18 houses in various stages of need."

The North Park Community Association has joined the effort for the first time this year. The group adopted the home of Patricia Laughlin, a longtime community volunteer.

The house on Pershing Avenue was in need of plumbing repairs, new carpet and other renovations. North Park businesses have provided everything from pizzas for volunteers to carpet and other supplies for the home.

"All the businesses are really coming together," said Susan Tinsky, a member of the association. "It's really extra special that the community could give back to her."

Clark Construction is overseeing the work done at the Frias home, on Creston Drive.

Work began about two weeks ago, and by tomorrow the only thing left should be some landscaping, said Mark Granger, a project engineer for Clark. The major improvements included tearing out a wall and reworking the plumbing and electrical system to make the bathroom wheelchair-accessible, and removing the mold and adding insulation to the walls.

"We've had a lot of vendors who have contributed," Granger said. "It's come together real nicely."

Frias, 42, said he repaired the roof, which leaked water into the walls, in February. But he didn't know when he would have enough money to remove the mold.

A friend referred Frias to Rebuilding Together.

"We didn't expect to be picked," Frias said. "It's worth a lot to us."

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