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Dave Newhouse: Rebuilding homes and lives

By Dave Newhouse
Oakland Tribune columnist

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Dorothy and Robert are elderly and experiencing the hardships of aging. They also live alone, and their only child, a daughter, predeceased them.

Thus feeling vulnerable, they don't want their last names and home address in Oakland made public.

But they have a heartfelt story to tell about a benevolent group that has made their lives, and many other elders' lives, easier to manage.

"They've been wonderful," Dorothy said of Rebuilding Together Oakland.

"I'm not too scared to take chances I didn't (dare to) before," said Robert.

Rebuilding Together Oakland is a volunteer nonprofit that's focused on Oakland residents who are homeowners of low or moderate income, and who must be 62 or disabled.

Rebuilding Together Oakland serves these mostly seniors in two ways: making homes safer by adding modifications, and by rebuilding homes and community centers.

And it's all done at no cost.

More than 480 homes and 110 facilities have been upgraded locally, with up to 3,000 volunteers painting 30 to 40 homes yearly, as well as installing kitchen floors, solving plumbing and electrical problems, building fences and whatever else is required.

For the disabled, bathroom handrails and grab bars are installed along with door knobs, faucets, raised toilet seat adapters, shower chairs, handheld shower heads, night lights, antiskid tub safety mats, smoke detectors and fire extinguishers.

Desperately needing

help were Dorothy, 87, and Robert, 88, who have been married 65 years, and who spend more time at home because of age and infirmities.

Dorothy suffered a stroke 10 years ago that left her paralyzed and in a wheelchair. But spunky by nature, she's back on her feet and ambulatory.

Robert, a World War II veteran, began having lightheadedness 18 months ago, which resulted in his losing his balance and falling multiple times before Aug. 3.

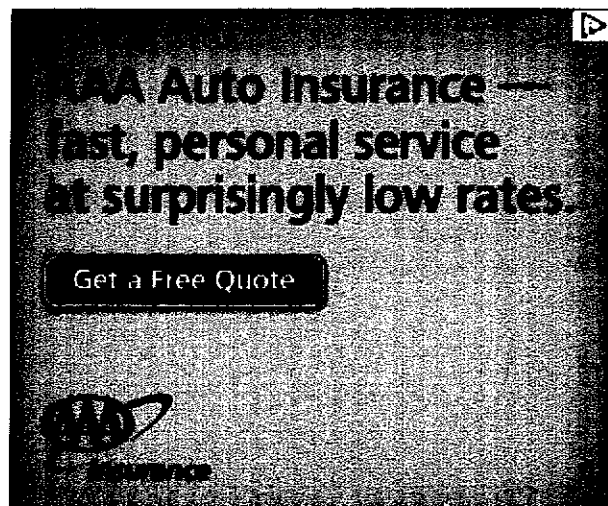
Then on Aug. 3, Ed Leahy of Rebuilding Together Oakland installed two stainless steel grab bars in the shower, plus adding a shower chair. Now Robert feels more confident in terms of his personal hygiene.

It was 1993, Rebuilding Together Oakland, which began as Christmas in April, launched specifically to help people in need. The Oakland nonprofit was one of 200 affiliates of a national organization, also known as Christmas in April, that started in Texas in 1973.

"We are the largest volunteer organization across the nation that helps fix up existing housing for the poor, elderly or disabled," said Leahy.

"We run parallel to Habitat for Humanity, which builds new housing."

Christmas in April evolved nationally into Rebuilding Together (fill in the city), to reach a wider base.



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Volunteering has been staunch hereabouts. Oakland financial planner Tom Green has doubled as a carpenter since 1993.

Leahy, 59, left the real estate business three years ago to become a full-time carpenter and installer, calling it "a natural fit." Rebuilding Together Oakland operates, he said, on donations from private foundations and corporations, plus federal money that comes through the city of Oakland.

Overall, local requests number "in the hundreds per year," said Leahy.

"And we've averaged about 125 (repaired) houses a year over the last three years. A lot of people have told us they didn't know there was help out there for them."

To get an appointment, those qualified should call 510-625-0316, ext. 103.

Dorothy and Robert were visited by a social worker who recommended them to Rebuilding Together Oakland.

"Last week, he fell twice," Dorothy said of her husband on Aug. 8. "I couldn't pick him up. He crawled a little bit, and I cleaned up the blood. He's got gout. He couldn't take a bath because I couldn't get him in and out of the tub."

The grab bars in the shower solved that problem.

"Now it's easier to get in there," said Robert.

"Fantastic," Dorothy said of the improved safety.


Life has been made easier for those who, largely, need it the most.

Dave Newhouse's columns appear Monday, Thursday and Sunday, usually on the Local page. Know any Good Neighbors? Phone 510-208-6466 or email dnewhouse@bayareanewsgroup.com.

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