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Rebuilding Together, Helping low-income families keep their homes in working order

Helen Connelly, 90 has lived in her home in Sunnyside since 1966. She loves her house. She loves her neighborhood. It's the first home she owned, and it'll most likely be the last. The only problem is it's falling apart. The roof is leaking, the paint is peeling, and the doors are on loose hinges.

Connelly's not alone. More than 24 million low-income American families own their homes but can't afford the ongoing, costly home-maintenance upkeep. As such, their homes become wet, cold, and, in many cases, unsafe. People like Connelly can't keep up.

Enter Rebuilding Together Metro Denver, a local chapter of a national organization dedicated to fixing and rehabilitating homes of the low-income elderly and disabled. Although Rebuilding Together is often compared to home-building charity Habitat for Humanity (and the two organizations sometimes partner), they focus on the two different ends of owning a home. While Habitat for Humanity introduces low-income families to homeownership, Rebuilding Together focuses on maintaining and repairing homes already owned by low-income individuals and families. Although Rebuilding Together has been around since 1973, the metro Denver chapter was kick-started in 1999 and has since rehabilitated more than 115 Denver homes.

Connelly, who has owned her home for 38 years, lives alone and couldn't afford to make repairs to her home. On Oct. 2, nearly 130 volunteers from area financial-services companies gathered to repair her home, along with two other Denver homes, as part of Community Build Day 2004.

Connelly's thrill wither freshly painted, clean, and dry home. "What a good bunch of people," she says, seated in her kitchen while volunteers buzz around painting and repairing, amazed total strangers are working so hard for her. "Such a good bunch."

Sidebar: How to get involved

On April 30, Rebuilding Together chapters across the country will throw "National Rebuilding Day," an effort in more than 800 cities and towns across America to rehabilitate more than 8,000 homes and nonprofit facilities. The Denver chapter typically rehabs up to 30 houses during the one-day event, though that number grows every year.

Each house is paired with a corporate or organization "sponsor," which provides the workers (typically employees, family members, and friends), as well as some or all of the funding for the work site. If your company or organization is interested in sponsoring a house, contact the metro Denver chapter at 720-524-0828.

If you can't sponsor a house, Rebuilding Together also accepts donations. For every \$1 received, Rebuilding Together receives \$4 in donated materials and labor, earmarked for future maintenance projects.