

Constructing a house of dreams

With the help of volunteers, Habitat for Humanity builds homes for families in inadequate living situations

BY AMANDA BOLSINGER | NEWS REPORTER

Many charities offer food and a temporary place to sleep, but Habitat for Humanity volunteers do more than offer a bed for the night — they build homes for local families. The Springfield/Eugene Habitat for Humanity has built 32 houses in 14 years, and numbers 33 and 34 are almost complete.

The houses are single-family homes that cost on average about \$50,000 plus the cost of land.

"The homes are small, usually about 1,000 square feet," Executive Director Florrie Turconi said. "But land is really expensive. The last piece we bought was \$34,000 for a 4,500-square-foot piece of land. Finding land right now is our most difficult problem. We need flat, level ground, and it's just not there."

Families receiving homes must meet certain criteria to be accepted. They must have lived in the area for at least one year and must earn between 30 and 60 percent of the median income bracket for people in the area. Additionally, the home the family is currently living in must be inadequate. Inadequate housing is housing that is too small for the family's size or that has physical problems that make the house structurally dangerous or unhealthy to live in.

"There are families that rent one room from relatives," Turconi said. "Other houses are moldy and dilapidated. One room is not adequate for a whole family, and people shouldn't have to live in unsafe houses."

Families interested in becoming



TIM BOBOSKY | PHOTOGRAPHER

The Springfield/Eugene Habitat for Humanity has nearly completed this house for a new resident. The group has built 32 homes in 14 years.

homeowners through Habitat must be able to prove a steady income and have fair credit. A common misconception is that Habitat gives the homes away. In fact, Habitat sells them to the families at a zero percent interest rate on a 20- to 30-year mortgage plan. The families must also take part in "sweat equity," which requires the family spend 500 hours helping to build other homes and their own.

"These homes aren't a give away,"

Turconi said. "They have to work for it and pay for it. The family works with volunteers to build their home and other homes. It is a real investment from the ground up."

It usually takes about two years for families to get through the program.

"We have to find land, get donations and organize volunteers. It's a lengthy process," office manager Terri Brown said.

Habitat homes are funded through

private donations, fundraising, government grants and donor options through United Way. Some groups donate money, time, materials or parts of the home. "Sometimes a company will donate the roof," Turconi said. "Others will donate flooring or lighting."

Recently, a young school group held a fundraiser for Habitat and raised just under \$300. The group's money purchased switch plates, plugs and a kitchen light for a house. "The kids had a field day and came out to the house," Turconi said. "We showed them just what their money bought. They had so much fun seeing the house and what they did to help."

Brown became interested in Habitat after her church partnered with another church to build a house. After working on the project, a job opened up at Habitat. She has now been there for eight years.

"I love working with all of the people," Brown said. "Seeing the changes as people develop skills and patience from working toward a goal is great."

Habitat homes are built by volunteers. The organization is always in need of more help for construction, as well as service on various committees. Volunteer orientation meetings are held on the second Thursday of each month at 6:30 p.m. in the basement of the Baptist church on the corner of 12th and G streets in Springfield.

abolsinger@dailyemerald.com

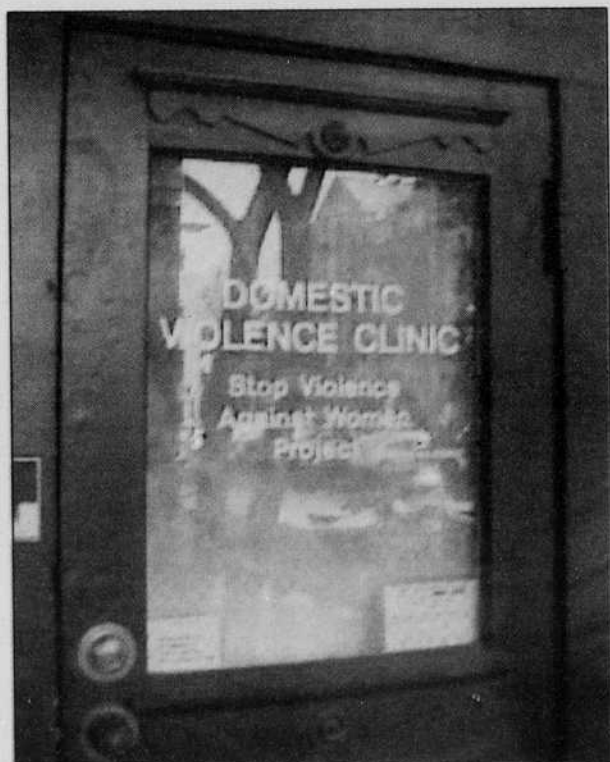
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FLORRIE TURCONI | Habitat for Humanity executive director

Advocating legal liberty

BY AMANDA BOLSINGER | NEWS REPORTER

The Domestic Violence Clinic provides free legal service for low-income domestic abuse survivors in the area



COURTESY

The Domestic Violence Clinic at Lane County Legal Aid Service helps clients with restraining-order and stalking-order cases.

Domestic abuse survivors don't just need help leaving their negative relationships; they often need assistance with the plethora of legal documents required to protect them and their families. Documents, such as restraining orders and stalking orders, come at a cost and require legal aid that many of these survivors simply can't afford.

The Domestic Violence Clinic at Lane County Legal Aid Service is the only local program that provides free, direct legal assistance to low-income domestic violence survivors.

"The population we serve are up against a lot of barriers, and they are high-stakes cases," clinic Director Ann Kneeland said. "We are the only service for many of them."

The clinic's services include restraining orders, stalking orders, divorce and custody filings and hearings.

"Often times the abuser controls the finances," Kneeland said. "Without money it's hard for the survivor to present a case against the partner with more money. Often the outcome depends on how capably the argument is presented."

She added that the survivor sometimes

has emotional trauma or is embarrassed or nervous about the situation.

"They are all at turning points in their lives, finding new homes, caring for families," Kneeland said. "We try to even the playing field."

The clinic works in conjunction with Womenspace, Sexual Assault Support Services and the University law school, according to the clinic's Web site. Third-year law students work with the clinic to advise clients in restraining-order and stalking-order cases.

The students can also receive court certification and may appear in court if necessary. Some of the students work on custody agreements, such as visitation and divorce cases.

Apart from the volunteer law students, the clinic has four attorneys, three advocates and three administrative personnel. Their services are offered at no cost to people who qualify, Kneeland said.

The clinic receives approximately half a million dollars each year from various organizations and various state grants — the federal Violence Against Women Act grants the clinic nearly a quarter of a million dollars annually, while the state's

Department of Justice gives the clinic \$180,000 annually.

These grants cover the clinic's expenses, including employee salaries and litigation costs for cases. Costs for each case vary depending on the hours put into the case and the broad range of services provided.

The clinic looks at approximately 400 intake cases each year, and at least half of the cases viewed receive legal assistance, Kneeland said. Victims receive free legal planning, emotional support and social service referrals.

"Clients come in through legal intake," Kneeland said. "If they meet financial guidelines and pass the conflict check, then we review their application with the criteria we use for all applications to decide which cases we can take."

The law students, who average about 20 to 25 cases each semester, help shoulder the burden of the restraining- and stalking-orders work, allowing the clinic to handle more cases each year, Kneeland said.

"The law students make a very significant contribution," he said.

abolsinger@dailyemerald.com

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ANN KNEELAND | Domestic Violence Clinic director