'Operation Backyard' betters Knoxville by repairing homes

• By Jennifer Brake
• Posted October 22, 2012 at 4 a.m.

PHOTO BY J. MILES CARY // BUY THIS PHOTO
Christ United Methodist Church members Andrew Lee, left, and Noah Hayes paint James West's home during an Operation Backyard project Friday in North Knoxville. The church team, part of Operation Backyard's labor force of 1,000 volunteers, built a deck, an accessibility ramp, and painted the exterior of the house in two days of work. (J. MILES CARY/NEWS SENTINEL)

When 78-year-old James West lost his wife, his favorite place to go to feel close to her again was the back porch of their North Knoxville home.

But when time and weather wore down the porch's original structure, it became dangerous for West to use.

With a little help from "Operation Backyard," West has a brand-new, sturdy deck to walk out on.
The house, which he bought in 1969, needed several repairs that he wasn't able to do himself, so West signed up to have it revamped by Operation Backyard, a Neighborhood Housing program that is part of the Knoxville Leadership Foundation. The program provides home buyer educational training and makes free repairs to homes of low-income families.

The city of Knoxville's Community Development Department has made Operation Backyard a community partner the past several years in its Minor Home Repair program.

"There is definitely a need for housing repairs in Knoxville, and these are focused on low-income homes," said Becky Wade, department director.

"These are folks who are struggling to stay in their house. Without programs like this, a lot more people would be living in sub-standardized housing," Wade said.

The city gets community development block grants from the federal government, and part of the money goes to community housing development organizations such as the foundation's Neighborhood Housing to develop affordable housing options, she said.

The home repair assistance program encompasses roofs, gutters, siding, plumbing and electrical problems and yards and can even include installing handicap-accessible ramps.

In the last fiscal year, Operation Backyard used $60,000 in block grant funds for improvements to 27 homes for low-income homeowners with 14 new roofs, 10 plumbing repairs, 12 electrical repairs and other maintenance needs such as exterior painting and porch and deck repairs, according to Jesse Mayshark, spokesman for the city.

Operation Backyard uses a volunteer labor force, allowing the city's funds to be spent on building materials and contractor services.
The organization has already had more than 1,000 volunteers help with projects this year from local churches, colleges and corporations.

Helping build the deck for West were youths from Christ United Methodist Church in Knoxville. The team built the deck and an accessibility ramp, and they painted the exterior of the house in two days.

"What drives us to participate in Operation Backyard is we get to know the owner of the house. So it's not only doing the hands-on work to the house, but also helping to build a relationship there," said Charla Sherbakoff, associate pastor at Christ UMC. "... We get just as much out of it as the homeowner."

David Ault, vice president of the Knoxville Leadership Foundation, said, "One of the reasons I think the city likes working with us is we really stretch our dollars. For every dollar they invest, we pretty much match it dollar-for-dollar."

"We started out with the funding to do 15 or 20 projects a year, and this year we'll probably be near 100. We're wonderfully blessed with funding and volunteers, but despite that the need continues to grow. The need is still substantial," Ault said.

Ault said there is a constant waiting list of around 200 people requesting repairs for their homes, but the organization is doing its best to stay on top of the home repair requests.

To learn more about Operation Backyard, visit www.klf.org.