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Thanks to your continued support, despite significant challenges posed by necessary social distancing measures, Habitat is getting the job done.

Resilience Through Safe Housing



Damon Shelton and Holly Wood, Habitat Homeowners at Lochlyn Hill

As the community-wide shelter in place period moves into its third month, Habitat is seeing disproportionate impacts on families, largely attributable to housing conditions.

“So many of our neighbors are struggling to cover the costs of unsafe and crowded conditions,” says Habitat’s Community Engagement Manager Kim Purdy. “These spaces, with countless unaddressed issues ignored by landlords, are now doubling as childrens’ classrooms. **This health crisis has only compounded the injustice of not being able to afford a safe place to live.**”

Purdy is a member of the Habitat Family and Community Partnership team that has, since day one of our [Interim Mission](#), stayed in close contact with the more than 400 local families that are applicants to the Habitat program, Habitat homebuyers working toward homeownership or families already in Habitat homes.

The difference between families in new, healthy and stable Habitat homes and the others is stark.

For Holly Wood and her family, moving into their new Habitat home last summer was a timely means of ensuring her children wouldn't have to experience the lockdown as a prison sentence.

"We lived on a pretty remote... farm in Nelson, a pretty dilapidated home," says Wood. "Issues with electrical work, there was inadequate heating and cooling, we had water and well issues. It was a struggle. We lived there for five years."

Wood and her husband, Damon Shelton, put in sweat equity hours of volunteer work well beyond what was required to qualify for a Habitat home. They spent three years in Habitat's homeownership program, improving their financial situation. The result was a home in the Lochlyn Hill neighborhood that has allowed them to safely shelter in place.

"We actually live happier than ever and don't even see [lockdown and social isolation] as bad," Wood says. "It's a blessing to be here. I'm very grateful. We're using the trail behind the house here... It's a slice of heaven right here in Charlottesville."

Wood was able to set up a home office to work remotely during the early weeks of the pandemic. Shelton is employed as a construction crew leader with Habitat. Finding child care during the pandemic has been challenging but the couple are optimistic about their situation.



Holly and Damon in front of their home in June 2019

"We frequently talk about how different it is to live in a nice home, in a forever home," Wood says. "The rooms being the same temperature. Ever since COVID-19 has happened we've had to hunker down... We feel safe and secure. We hated being in the other house! We've just been enjoying it so much. We planted flowers out front."

As funding for affordable home ownership programs are threatened by cuts by state and local governments, Wood would like more to be done to provide the resilience of safe housing to others in the community.

"The government should be stimulated to see that we need more of this," she says. "Safe shelter. All we can do is keep on doing what we're doing. Keep building houses, keep volunteering, keep that mission going."

Habitat is committed to rallying the community to invest in both immediate COVID housing relief and longer term investments so that more families like Holly and Damon's can find resilience.

"Being able to safely shelter at home should be everyone's reality," concludes Purdy.

We're Still Building

Habitat's primary mission of building houses in partnership with people in need has not fallen behind even as we've pursued our [interim plan](#) to provide other immediate forms of relief during the pandemic. From completing homes that were in the home stretch, to building accessibility ramps, to planning new projects, Habitat is still hard at work and getting results.

"The last seven weeks have shown us many things but one thing that stands out is how important it is for everyone to have a safe and decent place to go home to," Habitat Director of Construction Dom Fowler wrote in a message to volunteers.

The onset of the COVID crisis prompted Fowler and his staff to prioritize work on homes that were closest to completion in order to immediately provide families the resilience of safe, secure housing in the face of the pandemic.



Without the support of volunteers to paint, Habitat Construction Crew Leader Cole learned to use a spray painter to complete interior walls on Nassau Street more quickly

One of those prioritized homes, being completed right now in the new Harmony Ridge Neighborhood in downtown Charlottesville, will be owned by Mohammad Shafiqi. He is looking forward to moving in with his wife and their three children, probably in late June or early July.

"We are gonna have big changes for my children and my wife," Sahfiqi says. "We've been waiting for a long time. Day to day we wonder when we're going to move to the new house."

By the end of June, six homes at Harmony Ridge will be occupied by Sahfiqi and his new neighbors. Additionally, four homes being built on Nassau Street in the Belmont-Carlton neighborhood are also nearing completion. While maintaining safe social distance and observing a strict safety protocol, Habitat's staff construction crews are priming, painting, and close to installing doors and trim.

While Habitat is prioritizing finishing almost finished homes, it also is doing the critical work of preparing the next sites for home building, even in the face of significant headwinds. Mandy Burbage, Habitat's Land Development Coordinator, describes the challenges of launching new construction during COVID-19.

"It's just slowed down a bit because some of the materials we can usually get have had their supply chain backed up," Burbage says.

For example, storm sewer structures and manhole covers were needed for site work on Cleveland Avenue. The original supplier had a COVID-19 related staffing shortage and couldn't make them on schedule. Although it took an extra month to source those materials, she remained undeterred.

"You kind of re-sequence," Burbage says. "We are still within our original target dates for lot turnover to construction." In order to keep the current queue of homebuyers on track to purchase their homes, Burbage is preparing to deliver twenty-one lots to construction in the coming year. And she was able to share good news on that front.

"The site plan for Piedmont was finally signed by the city on Tuesday," Burbage says. "We just contracted to begin work in late June or early July, That's an eight unit project!" And it's a desperately needed increase in affordable housing adjacent to the University of Virginia where more than thirty percent of Habitat's partner families work.

And, it's a significant shot in the arm for equity.

"During title work on these lots, we discovered that they were restricted as 'whites only' in their deeds," said Habitat President and CEO Dan Rosensweig.

"Although these deed restrictions were invalidated by the Civil Rights Act, the neighborhood has remained largely homogeneous, not reflective of Charlottesville's amazing diversity and potential. We feel great to be able to work with families to build 'forever homes' here."



Outside of the City of Charlottesville, Habitat's work continues as well.

Habitat's Louisa County chapter is moving closer to finishing work late this summer [on two houses on Blueberry Lane](#) and in Greene County, volunteers have been hard at work building accessibility ramps for people who are elderly or disabled. Their most recent project was in support of an eighty eight year old US Army veteran

and father of seven children who uses a walker for mobility and needed the ramp to be able to get to his doctors appointments.

"Different communities and families have different specific needs," said Rosensweig. "But access to safe, decent shelter is fundamental. Not only do we as a community need to help folks remain safely housed, but we need to keep our eye on the ball. **We need to continue to plant housing seeds now that will bear fruit in future years. That's the only way that we can build long-term community resilience.**"

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