



Volunteers with Rebuilding Together Southwest Illinois work at a home in Madison. The group recently finished building a wheelchair ramp at this house, allowing the homeowner to get out of her house without being carried for the first time in almost a year.

For The Intelligencer

GIVING BACK

Rebuilding Together seeks volunteers, sponsors for another busy year

By Scott Marion

STAFF WRITER

For Rebuilding Together Southwest Illinois, 2022 was a

successful year, but it fueled the determination of Chris Azar, president of the nonprofit, to help even more people in need.

Last year, the local Rebuild-

ing Together worked on 90 different projects at 52 different homes. It was by far the most since Azar took over the leadership of the group in 2019, when

the organization transitioned to an all-volunteer format.

The goal of the group is to provide essential home repairs

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that enable people in need to stay in their homes.

Of those 90 projects last year, 22 were wheelchair ramps, a trend which Azar expects to continue.

Last year was the first year that Rebuilding Together partnered with the Agency for Community Transit (ACT), which funded most of the wheelchair ramp program in 2022.

"Wheelchair ramps are probably the biggest item that we get feedback on because they make such a big life difference," Azar said. "When folks can't get out of their house, they don't feel safe. I've had people tell me they haven't been to the doctor because every time they need to leave the house, they must call the fire department to help them get out."

Rebuilding Together also had a banner year in partnering with volunteers from different groups. The organization had more than 160 volunteers from Scott Air Force Base, Olin Winchester, Phillips 66/Wood River Refinery, Gateway Family Church, FGM Architects, Valvoline Oil, Home Depot and others.

In all, volunteers donated more than 1,000 hours of their time to help the community.

"It's a good feeling knowing that so many people are willing to help us," Azar said. "I just talked to an organization that wanted to send out 80 people for a build day, which is more than we can handle. We talked it through and what we're going to do is we're going to get together on April 29 and build two wheelchair ramps on the same street."

Azar noted that historically, Rebuilding Together was called "Christmas in April," where volunteers got together on the



Volunteers from Rebuilding Together Southwest Illinois gather for a photo after working on a project at a house in Edwardsville.

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last Saturday in April and had a Rebuilding Day.

Now, Rebuilding Together Southwest Illinois works on projects year-round due to the ongoing needs.

"April 29 is a Saturday and it's when we're going to do those two projects in Collinsville, but the need is there year-round," Azar said. "Last winter we took six weeks off because it was during the bitter cold, but other than that, we have projects going on the rest of the year."

Azar added that Rebuilding Together Southwest has already done about a dozen projects this year. It already has 14 applications for wheelchair ramps plus a myriad of other home repair/modification requests.

"I think the word is getting out," Azar said. "People see our posts on Facebook or our website or they are referred to us by their hospital, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, United Way or churches. We work a lot with Collinsville Faith in Action, the Faith Coalition, the Veterans Administration

and other nonprofits that refer folks to us. They ask if they can help us with things like wheelchair ramps."

In addition, Rebuilding Together is partnering with Home Depot to help a local veteran in Collinsville redo his bathroom on April 15, plus a wheelchair ramp for a veteran in Alton on April 20.

The organization normally doesn't take on big projects such as bathroom renovations because they are particularly expensive, but sponsorship from Home Depot makes such projects possible.

"Home Depot takes pride in giving back to the community, and they were used to going across the river to work with Rebuilding Together in St. Louis," Azar said. "We kind of found each other. The folks in St. Louis are doing magnificent things, but a lot of the Home Depot employees live over here and they want to help their neighbors in need."

"Like any other nonprofit organization, Rebuilding Together only does what it can fund and is al-

ways seeking new opportunities for grants and sponsors. As an all-volunteer organization, every penny goes to help people in the community.

"We have some different projects that need some special professional expertise and we're reaching out to the trades," Azar said. "I recently heard from a retired electrician who said he was getting a little bored in retirement and he wants to help."

"He has already helped on three or four of our projects. Those are the kind of skilled people that we can really use."

For more information about Rebuilding Together Southwest Illinois, visit <https://rebuildswi.org/> or go to Rebuilding Together Southwest Illinois on Facebook.

"There are a lot of developers in Edwardsville and other areas of Madison County who are trying to find ways to get involved with the community," Azar said. "Those are the people that we want to reach out to, especially if they want to give back."



The homeowner at this location in Madison was able to get out of her house without assistance for the first time in about a year after Rebuilding Together Southwest Illinois finished this wheelchair ramp.



Volunteers from Rebuilding Together Southwest Illinois work on a project at a home in Granite City.



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