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NEIGHBORS IN NEED

Local housing group's repair program a friend to disabled, elderly homeowners

By Michelle Wing

Tribune Staff Writer

For Steven Dickinson and his wife Sandra, every trip down the front steps of their home puts them at risk of injury. But Rebuilding Calistoga, a volunteer program to help homeowners make much-needed repairs, is not only going to make their lives safer – it's going to reaffirm that they're part of a community that cares.

Steven Dickinson, disabled and legally blind since an injury in 1999, said that he, like a lot of people in the mobile-home parks, is living close to the poverty level. So when a city building inspector came by a year ago and informed him that his treacherous front steps weren't up to code, he had no resources to deal with the problem.

Then his wife, who volunteers at the Chamber of Commerce, heard about

Rebuilding Calistoga, a program offered by Calistoga Affordable Housing (CAH). The couple filled out paperwork, and they are now among the 30 homeowners who will receive free repair work during a two-week spurt of volunteer activity in April.

Erica Sklar, president of CAH, said three single-family homes are on the list of those scheduled for repairs, with the rest of the projects scattered among the city's three mobilehome parks. "It's a really good representation of the town."

Some pre-work will begin on the weekends of April 10-11 and 18-17, but the bulk of the home repairs will happen on the weekend of April 24-25, Sklar said.

Steven Dickinson explained that the volunteers will build a four-foot landing in front of his porch, relocating the stairs to a safer position, and adding railings. They have been told that the workers will also repair the broken skirting near the front of their home, that raises up whenever the wind blows.

"It's a nice program," Steven Dickinson said. "It helps people that don't have the means to repair things around their house, for safety."

Marilynn S. Clark, 84, went into bankruptcy in 1997 after suffering through several expensive illnesses. She owns a mobilehome in Rancho de Calistoga, where she lives on an income of \$1,400 a month, with nearly \$800 of that going to rent and utilities. "I still owe \$1,200 in medical bills to Calistoga Gardens," she said. "I can only afford to pay \$50 a month."

When the threshold in front of her door gave out, and the lining connecting her covered porch to the home cracked open, filling the space with water, she had nowhere to turn for assistance.

Clark said, "I didn't have the money. I can't keep up with anything." But, thanks to Rebuilding Calistoga, "The repairs will get done."

Her contact with the staff from CAH has been so positive, and such a relief, that she said, "It's a tremendous blessing." She is eagerly awaiting next month, when once again her home will be made whole. "I've been really helped by this community," she said. "It brings tears to my eyes."

Among the other projects scheduled at various homes are repairs to linoleum, repainting, kitchen and bathroom plumbing, and hot water heater replacements, as well as gutter cleaning, minor roof work, concrete jobs, and landscaping.

Sklar said Calistoga Rotary is putting together a team, and the Soroptimists International of Calistoga will be assisting with food. Groups of students from the elementary school and high school have signed on as well. Sklar noted that although many people have made verbal commitments to do the work, CAH has yet to receive many actual volunteer application forms.

Application forms are available online at www.calistogaaffordablehousing.org, and also at the CAH office, at the Calistoga Family Center, and at City Hall.

The Rebuilding Calistoga weekend will end with a Volunteer Appreciation celebration in the Butler Building at the Napa County Fairgrounds at 4 p.m. on Sunday.



PHOTO BY MICHELLE WING

Steven Dickinson, disabled and legally blind, lives in with his wife, Sandra, in Calistoga's Rancho de Calistoga mobilehome park. The couple will get help repairing the steps and entryway into their home.