ROOF OVER THEIR HEADS



Joshua Buck/Times-Call

Stephanie Collier and her son Esiah Lucero, 18 months, will start the new year with a roof over their heads. The two recently moved into an apartment owned by the First Evangelical Lutheran Church and remodeled by volunteers. The apartment is one example of how local churches are working to help the homeless population.

Churches work to provide housing for the struggling

By Magdalena Wegrzyn
Longmont Times-Call

LONGMONT — Stephanie Collier, 20, will start 2010 with a roof over her head.

Now she can focus on what really matters: her 18-month-old son, Esiah Lucero.

"It felt like before I wasn't giving him as much attention as he needed," she said. "I needed a place for me to sleep. I needed a place for him to sleep. I needed a place to wash my clothes. I needed gas. It feels really good to get all of my stuff out of my car and lay it out. I've been living out of bags it seems like forever."

Collier and her son are the first residents of an apartment First Lutheran Church recently refurbished to serve as transitional housing for local families.

Several local churches, including First Lutheran, are revving up their efforts to assist the homeless and individuals struggling to find — and keep — housing.

In 2009, a count identified 414 homeless people in Longmont, according to the Longmont Housing Opportunities Team. That's slightly more than double the number in 2000.

The OUR Center's rent assistance program has increased 80 percent this year. The food program has nearly doubled, said the center's executive director, Edwina Salazar.

The center has an average of five families daily who are waiting for placement in local transitional units.

"In the midst of this economy, we hope that the government and government agencies help us work through these tough economic times ... but the church can be the place on the corner where people receive care," said the Rev. Paul Judson, an associate pastor at First Lutheran Church.

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> — STEPHANIE COLLIER, 20, WHO RECENTLY MOVED INTO A CHURCH-OWNED APARTMENT WITH HER SON

Two church ministries — the Fixer Uppers and the Social Ministry Committee — began retooling the apartment a year ago. Volunteers gutted the bathroom, put down new flooring, painted the walls and replaced the fixtures.

The apartment, on the northwest side of the parish house, was used for office space, Sunday school classrooms and, most recently, as housing for the church's custodian.

"It made sense to have somebody live there," Judson said. "It just seemed to say it needed somebody to live there."

The church paid for the renovations and rents the apartment to the OUR Center, which places families in the transitional unit and charges them nominal rent.

Collier moved into the two-bedroom apartment about two weeks before Christmas. Before that, she stayed occasionally with friends and family, sometimes relying on motel vouchers to get through the night.

Having a place to call home — even if it is temporary — offers her peace of mind. And that means little Esiah is also content.

"He's probably more happy than he has been," said Collier, who has returned to school and is studying to become a medical assistant. "All of his toys and stuff used to be in the car, and now I can set them out and play with him."

First Congregational United Church of Christ has also increased its effort to help the homeless. The church's annual Christmas Home Tour this year, titled "Homes for All," served as a fundraiser for nonprofits that serve homeless residents.

The Rev. Rick King said the church also has worked closely with Boulder County Housing First, which provides housing for individuals with chronic mental or physical disabilities. The congregation supplied furniture and household items to furnish three apartments for the organization.

"It was almost a simple idea — let's furbish an apartment. And it worked," said Marilyn Decker, who coordinated the project through First Congregation's Peace, Justice and Whole Earth Ministry. "It had to be the hand of God, as far as I'm concerned."

The church plans to furnish another apartment this spring, Decker said.

COrES, the Christian Outreach Emergency Shelters ministry, is planning to start a new ministry to house single mothers and children, a homeless population that is often ignored, said program founder Richard Honey.

COrES, an outreach ministry of the Practical Christian Living Center, houses homeless at three locations — The Well and two churches. Honey declined to identify the churches because of concerns about privacy. Volunteers from 22 local churches staff the overnight shelters and provide both an evening and breakfast meal.

More churches have gotten involved in homeless ministries in part because they have the resources — fellowship halls, classrooms, willing volunteers — to help, Honey said. But "for 80 percent of the week, most churches are underutilized," he said.

"You can call it a move to God. You can call it friends of the homeless jumping up and down and calling people," Honey said. "From a spiritual standpoint, I think it really is a call to the church communities to just get out of the pews and start helping people.

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