News
EarthBeat
Destruction left by floodwaters is seen in Letcher County, Ky., Aug. 23, 2022.

Destruction left by floodwaters is seen in Letcher County, Ky., Aug. 23, 2022. (CNS/The Western Kentucky Catholic/courtesy Katina Hayden)

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Nearly a year has passed since a rare "hundred year flood" devastated the Appalachian region of eastern Kentucky, an area known as "the mountains" that was already stricken by extreme poverty and unemployment.

The July catastrophic event hit property owners hard — and cost those who owned even less everything.

But as the psalmist writes, "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done." And so this April, as part of its ongoing relief efforts in flood-stricken Appalachia, the Diocese of Lexington announced another financial aid infusion.

Partnering with two construction firms, Housing Development Alliance and Homes Inc., the diocese is providing money for the building of four new homes for flood survivors.

Joshua van Cleef, director of the Lexington Diocese's peace and justice office, told OSV News, the houses will "offer safe, energy efficient and sustainable housing."

"Beyond providing shelter, these homes reflect our commitment to continue to work with our eastern Kentucky families affected by the historic floods of 2022," Van Cleef said.

As anyone who lives in the diocese — and is familiar with the affected area — knows their walk with those in need will be a long one. Approximately 9,000 homes were damaged by the flood, with 44% of the nearly 22,000 people living in those homes either children or seniors.

This is an area of Kentucky least able to pay for repairs — let alone the $450-$900 million estimated to rebuild these homes.

Six in every 10 damaged households earn less than $30,000 annually, according to a February report from the Ohio River Valley Institute and Appalachian Citizens' Law Center.

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R. Scott McReynolds, executive director of the Housing Development Alliance based in Perry County, Kentucky, told OSV News the nonprofit enterprise "has been providing affordable housing to the people of this region for 30 years, and (is) presently working with the diocese in two different ways."

"The first is providing flood relief through Catholic Charities — assisted by Josh Van Cleef, and Lori Helfrich, parish life director at Mother of Good Counsel Parish in Hazard, Kentucky," McReynolds said.

"The second avenue involves these new donations," McReynolds added, with $107,000 going to HOMES Inc. "for their building projects in Letcher County."

So far, the Housing Development Alliance has provided 19 families with new HVAC units. Seven more families received a "house in a box" of household items courtesy

of Catholic Charities, and five more families were provided with either building materials or appliances, through Catholic Charities and Home Depot.

"Our community works to get things done," McReynolds said, adding that "a normal year finds building 20 homes, and completing home repairs on 50 other dwellings."

The community also held — before COVID arrived — an annual "Repair Fair," which provided 10 clients with home repair help. Both the pandemic and the 2022 flood have sidetracked this effort for now.

The Housing Development Alliance, however, has forged ahead with its home building program, providing along the way both jobs and living wages for unemployed residents.

"Probably our most active venue in this area is home building, where we welcome a half-dozen people at a time from a recovery program who come to us for training in carpentry and construction," McReynolds said.

The program, McReynolds added, "offers skill and employment training, with half of these people staying with us, and others going on to regular jobs."

President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden walk past debris while viewing flood damage and r

President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden walk past debris while viewing flood damage and response efforts in Lost Creek, Ky., Aug. 8, 2022. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

The past eight months has seen the Housing Development Alliance build 14 new houses — concentrating primarily on flood relief victims — where normally the company would do perhaps 20.

Fighting poverty through new home construction, however, is a daunting task.

"As we move forward from last year's flooding, one of our biggest challenges remains a lack of investment, because the kind of houses that we build, you can't make money on," McReynolds said.

"Rural areas do not get the kind of federal money that urban areas do," he said. "Even here we don't receive a lot of grant money, because what happens is disinvestment — not investment."

HOMES Inc. — Housing Oriented Ministries Established For Service — is a nonprofit based in Whitesburg, Kentucky, right in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains.

Seth Long, executive director of Homes Inc., told OSV NEWS the 2022 flood "exacerbated the crisis of an already broken housing market, and made us unable to help our regular customers with their home repair jobs (which previously numbered between 30 to 40 a year)."

Since last August — just days after the July 29, 2002 disaster — HOMES, Inc. has either built, began construction on, or will soon launch a total of 21 new affordable homes.

"When we talk about 'affordable housing', we are also talking about what kind of financing can be put together to get a family into a unit, and having a low monthly utility bill also makes their situation better," Long said.

Long explained that "20 to 25% of a family's income" goes toward "the components that make up a mortgage payment," namely principal, interest, tax and insurance.

Long praised the Lexington Diocese for the help it has provided.

President Joe Biden meets with residents affected by the recent flooding in Lost Creek, Ky., Au

President Joe Biden meets with residents affected by the recent flooding in Lost Creek, Ky., Aug. 8, 2022. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

"They reached out to us since the flood and have been a big help," he said. "We have also done an incredible amount of work here; but no matter how much we accomplish there is always more to do."

"We're hoping to move a large family that is currently living in a 1970s trailer into a new home," he said. But he noted that requests for help — like this family — "have increased 400% since the flood."

Looking ahead, Long told OSV News, "I would like to see our communities focused on a large, future vision where flood survivors have opportunities to mitigate future flood issues, or have the opportunities to move to higher ground out of harm's way."

Fr. Robert Adams, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi in Pikesville, knows well the challenges of ministering to parishes in eastern Kentucky, and noted the need to

build in a better location.

"The reality behind people wanting to rebuild in this area is there is nothing to build on — or it is too dangerous — because of the danger of the floodplain collapsing," he said.

He also noted that "people tend to see this area as 'the end of the world,' when in fact it is the world." He added, "Things such as household items and other basic necessities have to be shipped here from Lexington. And so-called 'affordable housing' is also more expensive."

"This area is not the 'Bible Belt' as some people claim — and it is not an especially Christian community," he noted. He mentioned that the drug epidemic has "devastated all of these communities" and "now you have grandparents raising their own grandchildren."

With the overall Catholic population being "less than 0.1%," this is an area that needs both material and spiritual investment.

"The biggest physical need continues to be money," Adams said. "And people here have long suffered from a sense of hopelessness; they need a reason to get out of bed."