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This nonprofit is repairing Philly rowhouses one block at a time to keep residents in their homes

Rebuilding Together Philadelphia has repaired and upgraded 2,100 owner-occupied homes in the city since 1989.



Volunteers from the nonprofit Rebuilding Together Philadelphia work on houses in West Philly on Friday, April 12, 2024.

Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

by Kevin Riordan

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When a contractor showed up at the rowhouse Deborah Ryles has lived in most of her life, she couldn't believe her ears.

"He told me he was putting on a new roof," she said. "I just stood on the steps and cried."

Along with nine of her neighbors near 53rd and Sansom Streets in [West Philly](#), Ryles, 76, is among the latest beneficiaries of an organization called [Rebuilding Together Philadelphia](#). RTP is a nonprofit and partners with grassroots organizations, such as [the Enterprise Center](#) in West Philly, to identify blocks and residents who would be likely participants in the free home-improvement program.



Deborah Ryles stands in her newly renovated kitchen. Work on her home was done by the nonprofit Rebuilding Together Philadelphia.

Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

More than 100 volunteers, tradespeople, and contractors mobilized for last Friday's Block Build, RTP's signature program, on the 5300 block of Sansom Street. Pop tunes played as teams built planters and carried tools and materials to various houses, lending the event a block party vibe.

"First is the flooring," Jett Biggert, deputy director of programs, told the assembled volunteers just before work began at 9 a.m.

"Get your crew together, get over to the house, be safe, and have a good time," they said.

Health, safety, and energy efficiency

Because wall-to-wall carpeting can accumulate dust and dander that aggravate asthma, replacing it with laminate flooring is a signature element of a Block Build, longtime volunteer Kathleen Maloney said.

"Once the carpet is gone and we put in a new floor, Deborah won't have to worry so much about tripping and falling," Maloney said.

"And she'll be able to breathe a little easier — literally and figuratively."

RTP seeks out owner-occupied homes in economically challenged neighborhoods, mostly in North and West Philly. After the organization confirms the owners have clear titles to their properties, licensed contractors upgrade electrical and other essential systems, while volunteers supervised by trained professionals install new flooring, modernize kitchens, and replace windows where necessary.

The Block Build program also installs grab bars where needed or requested, handrails, lighting, smoke detectors, and easy-to-read street numbers for the home's exterior.

“We’re making Philadelphia homeowners safer and healthier,” RTP board member and volunteer Matt Guinan said, as he paused from pulling up a carpet in another house on the block.

A typical upgrade costs \$15,000 and is intended to enable owners on low or fixed incomes to remain in homes they might otherwise be forced to leave due to mobility issues, fires, chronic leaks, or [gentrification](#).



Wharton student and volunteer Oyinda Alliyu sorts pieces of flooring that will be installed in the home of Linda Smith and Jane Stevens. "There is something very special about making a place a home," Alliyu said.

Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

RTP has assisted 2,100 homeowners since 1989 and expects to upgrade 130 dwellings this year on adjoining blocks in neighborhoods such as [Germantown](#), Fairhill, and [Strawberry Mansion](#). The proximity of visibly refurbished houses can inspire community pride, as well as prompt other residents to spruce up their properties.

Two recent studies, focused on similar programs or efforts in Philadelphia, suggest [neighborhood renovations may be a factor in reducing crime as well.](#)

“Home ownership is foundational to wealth, and to generational wealth,” RTP president Stefanie F. Seldin said.

“But easy access to [University City](#) and [Center City](#) make West Philly ripe for gentrification,” she said. “And one of the reasons we are working in West Philly is to prevent the displacement that can occur.”

Daria Williams, senior director at the Enterprise Center’s Community Development Corp., said her organization has an “excellent partnership” with RTP and shares its goal of helping owners improve their homes and remain in their neighborhoods.

“Considering how much development is coming toward West Philly, it’s really important to keep people in place,” Williams said.



From left: Donnell J. Brown, Francis Menotti, Zeke Hausmann, and Betsy Teutsch build planters and flower boxes during the Rebuilding Together Philadelphia event in West Philadelphia.

Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

One house at a time

In older homes like those in West Philly and many other city neighborhoods, age, weather, and deferred maintenance can threaten otherwise sound residential structures.

“Everybody in these neighborhoods knows somebody who had to move because the roof started leaking and mold started growing,” Seldin said.

New or professionally repaired roofs, as well as masonry work and window replacements, can stop water infiltration that, left unchecked, can dissolve the structural integrity of a house and render it a candidate for demolition.

“Because of rising inflation and construction costs, many families can’t afford to fix their leaky roof or replace their faulty water heater. Basic home repairs stabilize our neighborhoods and help us defy displacement,” Jamie Gauthier, who represents the area in City Council, said in a statement.

Aging residents are sometimes forced to leave their homes because they can no longer live there safely.

Occupational therapist and RTP volunteer Jean DelFerro said falling is “one of the greatest risk factors” for older people.

A Block Build provides homeowners with “a whole bunch of tools,” including motion-activated lighting on stairways, she said.

“We need partners like Rebuilding Together Philadelphia who answer the call and give homeowners the help they need to keep their house in order,” said Gauthier, who attended the recent Block Build.



Jane Stevens (left) and Linda Smith box up dishes in their West Philadelphia dining room to make space for the installation of new flooring.

Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

A founder who still volunteers

Robert Bellinger was attending the Wharton School of Business in the late 1980s when a Midland, Texas, program called “Christmas in April” inspired him, along with other grad students, [to establish what is now RTP](#).

“It’s the 35th anniversary of our first house in Philadelphia,” Bellinger said, standing outside a rowhouse on the 5300 block of Sansom. He’s lived in Washington, D.C., for many years but said he “never misses” a spring Block Build.

“One of the greatest crises that faces America is affordable housing, and we’re losing homes every year because a roof fails and the house starts taking water,

which destroys everything,” he said. “Once a house is demolished, it’s gone. And the price of replacing it is astronomical.”



Volunteer Guy McKhann pulls nails from the steps after removing the carpet in the home of Deborah Ryles. Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer



Kevin Riordan [✉](#) [🐦](#) [📷](#)

I cover business and real estate stories in Philadelphia's New Jersey and Pennsylvania suburban counties.