

## **Community Action Team: The First 50 Years**

### **Part 3: Making Columbia County Homes Safer and Healthier**

*By Leanne Murray, Community Action Team, Human Investment Department*

Community Action Team (CAT) is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. For 38 of those years this local non-profit agency has been in the business of helping Columbia, Clatsop and Tillamook county residents make their homes healthier, safer, and more energy efficient. One of CAT's primary strengths lies in the fact that there are three "sides" to the organization. Staff members are able to refer clients internally to multiple programs, ensuring as many of their needs are being met as possible. This article introduces readers to the impact CAT has had in Columbia County through four of their Community Investment Department programs. Affectionately known as the "sticks and bricks" programs, this department assists clients in the three-county area with their physical structures.

The Lend A Hand Program provides minor repairs and necessary accessibility upgrades that increase livability and safety for senior, disabled and veteran homeowners and renters who do not have the financial capacity to complete the work on their own. That may not sound like a lot, but for CAT client Jan Rogers\* in Scappoose, "the changes it made in my life were astronomical."

Rogers has lived in Columbia County for almost 40 years; five years ago she purchased a single-wide manufactured home just a few months before becoming quite ill. As her health declined so did her mobility. It wasn't long before she was limited to moving through her home in a wheel chair. For three years the wheel chair prevented her from getting to any part of the house except the kitchen and living room. Because the door opening was too narrow, Rogers could not get to her bedroom, and more importantly, the bathroom. She recalls that her home, "was not livable before CAT came in to help me."

Rogers' therapist at Columbia Community Mental Health reached out to see if there was something CAT could do to help make the home livable. Through the Lend A Hand program, Rogers' life and health was transformed. The CAT team took out a cabinet, linen closet and ancient gas furnace so the hallway and bathroom entrances could be widened to accommodate the wheel chair. They also installed a raised toilet and grab bars that help Rogers navigate the bathroom safely. Because they had to remove the furnace, they installed a ductless heat pump that also cools the home in the summer. Rogers is comfortable and no longer feels trapped in her home. She even has creative plans for the newly opened space. Because of her health challenges Rogers still spends the majority of her time at home. However, now she can enjoy watching the countless birds that visit her feeders and beautiful flowering bushes from every room in the house. She has reconfigured the kitchen a little so she can reach the important things: her teas and spices, and her vast supply of bird seed.

While the Lend A Hand program was able to help make Rogers' home wheel chair accessible, CAT also called in its Weatherization program team to address issues with the home's ineffective heating system. In the winter the home stayed so cold that there was ice on the inside of the windows; in the summer it felt like an oven. After conducting a thorough energy audit, weatherization specialists installed insulation under the home and above the ceiling, added a highly insulating roof, repaired the electrical wiring for the water heater, replaced all the windows, and sealed the home tightly. They even added a fan in the back of the house that automatically keeps the air circulating throughout. The goal of the Weatherization program is to increase health and safety while reducing energy costs for low-income

households. Of the weatherization upgrades Rogers says, “There is no comparison. Now I’m always comfortable, day or night, summer or winter. I am so very grateful for the work CAT did for me.”

\* Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals featured.

Most of the home-related services offered by CAT are available to low-income households, whether they rent or own their home. This is true for Lend A Hand, Weatherization, and Healthy Homes. For the Housing Rehabilitation program, however, only home owners are eligible to receive assistance with health and/or safety-based repairs or upgrades. Just in the last 20 years of rehab projects CAT has served over 500 homeowners.

One of those clients is Gene Hoffman who purchased his St. Helens house about three years ago. He went through the conventional home purchase process, but the inspector missed several important problems that have made home life difficult and unsafe for him. He shared that before CAT’s help he was afraid to touch anything attached to the house for fear of it breaking off in his hand. The entire plumbing system had been cobbled together under the house without proper drainage; the toilet was not connected to the plumbing, so he had to bring in a portable toilet; the water heater was dangerously old and the furnace didn’t work at all; there were tears in the worn carpeting that were a trip hazard; and the front porch was missing steps. He had already stretched his fixed income to purchase the house and was not in a position to pay for the necessary repairs.

CAT’s Housing Rehabilitation team came in and, according to Hoffman, “put the house like it should have been to begin with.” Hoffman financed the work through a zero percent interest loan. Repayment of the loan is deferred until the title of the house is transferred due to sale or refinance of the home or the homeowner dies, so it doesn’t add a monthly burden to a client’s bills.

CAT’s team completely gutted the bathroom and remodeled it with all new plumbing, fixtures and flooring. He also got a new kitchen sink. The team replaced the carpet with a sturdy and attractive laminate floor that has also relieved some of Hoffman’s breathing symptoms. In addition, CAT constructed a ramp at the front door that allows Hoffman to enter and exit his home more safely. Similarly to the weatherization assistance also provided to Rogers, Hoffman’s water heater and furnace were replaced, a new roof was installed, and insulation was added. Hoffman is happy to say his house is, “worth living in now.”

There are two more related Community Investment programs to help make homes safer and more affordable to heat. Furnace repair or replacement is available to households that meet the energy assistance requirements. The Healthy Homes program provides repairs and remediation measures that improve a home’s environment for high-risk low-income families and individuals who have respiratory conditions or mobility issues in their home.

To find out more about CAT Housing Rehabilitation, Healthy Homes and Lend A Hand programs, please contact Dayle Shulda at 503-366-6552. For Weatherization program information, please call Kim Buhner at 800-325-8098.