

# Tulsa groups focus on improving lots

## City's initiative on cleaning up dilapidated areas serves as a rallying point

By **GINNIE GRAHAM**  
World Staff Writer

From demolishing homes for new construction to fixing holes in walls, a variety of groups in Tulsa have focused on substandard housing.

The Tulsa Housing Authority purchased properties in the former Village Square area near 61st Street and Riverside Drive for \$1 in the mid-1990s. It used Community Development Block Grants to demolish the properties. An agreement with developer Jim Beale allowed the agency to sell the lots for \$5,000 each with a promise to rebuild with affordable housing units.

Roy Hancock, executive director of the Tulsa Housing Authority, called the project a successful partnership between the city and a private developer that "has not been duplicated since."

"There is a role in each of us," Hancock said. "We each did what we did well, and it lets the private sector step in if we help minimize the risk."

But THA's purchase of 66 homes in the Northgate neighborhood, near 61st Street North and North Cincinnati Avenue, has not been as promising. Only a couple of homes have been sold. Most qualified buyers look elsewhere, citing safety and security reasons.

"We haven't given up, but we are a little discouraged," Hancock said. "We've not come up with anything substantial to help turn that area around. I think there has to be an investment by the city."

Mayor Bill LaFortune said the city has been committed to a pro-



KELLY KERR / Tulsa World file

**Habitat for Humanity in Tulsa was established in 1988 and has built 108 homes. For the past four years, the volunteer group has constructed 15 houses a year.**

gram of cleaning up dilapidated properties. The city Neighborhood Inspections Department ordered 175 structures demolished last year. Since 1999, the city has spent over \$1 million to demolish dilapidated structures.

The city also spends about \$630,000 a year in federal grant funds for emergency repairs for ex-

tremely low-income homeowners and even more to rehabilitate structures.

Habitat for Humanity in Tulsa was established in 1988 and has built 108 homes. For the past four years, the volunteer group has constructed 15 houses a year.

Executive director Gary Casteel said the group will continue to

work while joining the city's initiative.

"We can keep building while we talk and plan," Casteel said. "We can do two things at once."

Neighbor for Neighbor provides many services to low-income families, including repairs and maintenance for homeowners in need. The nonprofit also works with rent-

ers to encourage absentee landlords to improve properties.

Rebuilding Together Tulsa completes repairs at no cost for low-income homeowners who are older than 60, disabled, or cannot physically do the work. Since 1998, the group has worked on 89 homes using hundreds of volunteers and donated materials.

To eliminate substandard housing for people with mental illness, the Mental Health Association in Tulsa operates several housing properties comprising 181 units. With grants and a capital campaign drive, the association plans an expansion to offer 300 units by the year 2007.

Community Action Project of Tulsa County has purchased homes in the Valley View and Suburban Hills neighborhoods with the goal of eliminating poverty housing and gaining more homeownership. The neighborhoods are near 46th Street North between Cincinnati and Peoria avenues.

The agency also has 45 rental homes available and several other housing programs.

CAP Executive Director Steven Dow said the agencies did not have a rallying point until LaFortune announced an initiative to eliminate substandard housing.

"We've not had a cohesive, agreed-upon master plan," Dow said. "There are different people doing important, good, valuable work. . . . I'm not the least bit worried that there is enough work for all of us to do."

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# Lack of money is the common denominator

► Some worry that getting rid of substandard housing could leave poverty-ridden residents with no place to live.

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For some, it is a lack of money for home repairs. For others, substandard housing is part of a life of financial desperation.

Residents of substandard homes include a range of people: children, the elderly, parents, healthy people, the disabled, those working and those unemployed, educated and high-school dropouts.

"The overarching issue is poverty; there's no doubt," said Tulsa Mayor Bill LaFortune. "With that, as a community, certainly as mayor, is the obligation to address that issue."

By ridding the city of substandard housing by 2025, Tulsa could reap benefits of higher property values, increased businesses and an overall boost to the community.

Rental properties with eyesores and safety hazards may exist because they are filling a need and making money for landlords, said Roy Hancock, Tulsa Housing Authority executive director.

For homeowners eking by on a tight budget, a major roofing or plumbing repair could spell disaster. So they wait in the rubble.

Getting into subsidized housing in Tulsa is a challenge. The waiting list for public housing has more than 2,200 names.

Section 8 is a federal program to help low-income families, the elderly and disabled people afford housing. Eligible participants use vouchers to rent from any owner willing to participate in the program.

But, applications for Section 8 vouchers are no longer being accepted until the waiting list of more than 9,000 names can be whittled down.

THA operates about 2,600 units of public housing and administers 4,161 Section 8 vouchers. THA can reject an applicant for certain past criminal convictions, poor credit or a history of problems at THA properties.

In addition to THA, nearly all nonprofit groups offering housing report waiting lists.

Hancock worries that eliminating the substandard houses without providing services to the residents living in those homes would just displace people and increase homelessness.

"Clearly, the people are not going to go away," Hancock said.

Michael Brose, executive director of the Mental Health Association of Tulsa, shares that concern. For people with mental illness



**Roy Hancock**

Tulsa Housing Authority executive director

or substance-abuse problems, the paperwork and process to find appropriate shelter is too complex.

"By definition, the illnesses they are dealing with cause delusions, hallucinations and disorganized thought," Brose said. "They can't focus and concentrate. So how do you hold a job and develop an income?"

Millard Fuller, co-founder of Habitat for Humanity, said a decent home has a "positive effect" on people who may be working through other issues.

"A house is not a panacea that is going to solve everything," Fuller said. "But the house is basic and fundamental. If just getting a house is all you do and the other problems are not addressed, then you've only solved part of the problem."

Credit problems among the working poor

often keep them out of nicer apartments or rental homes.

Jerry Goodwin, president and chief executive officer of the Metropolitan Tulsa Urban League, said his organization is in the process of getting recertified as a housing counselor with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The group can help people understand how credit plays a role in lending, ways to improve bad credit and the process of buying a home.

David Blatt, public policy director for the Community Action Project of Tulsa County, sees only good effects from eliminating substandard housing.

The improved properties will have higher tax values and businesses will be attracted to those areas, Blatt said.

The initial investment will have multiple effects in construction costs, Blatt said.

"That will result in more money flowing to the entire community and used throughout the whole city and county," Blatt said.

Fuller said a community should back an initiative to eliminate substandard housing.

"When you eliminate poverty housing, everybody benefits, not just people who get the housing," Fuller said.

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## HOUSING:

Some homes may be suited for rehabilitation, while others need to be demolished and replaced.

FROM A-1

most basic part of life, which is a home, a place to live, the American Dream," LaFortune said.

**Defining the problem** — Defining substandard housing is tricky.

"Is it substandard in whose eyes?" said Roy Hancock, executive director of the Tulsa Housing Authority.

In January, LaFortune convened housing representatives to hash out the definition. The legislative definition is "a structure which is unfit for human occupancy due to the lack of necessary repairs and is considered uninhabitable or is a hazard to the health, safety and welfare of the general public."

A working definition presented by LaFortune's aides goes further in specifying substandard housing units that are occupied, unoccupied or abandoned. The city's definition includes structures posing a threat to public safety and violating state law or city codes.

Some homes may be suited for rehabilitation, while others need to be demolished and replaced.

Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat

for Humanity, said his organization focuses on a home that meets a basic inspection: a sound framework, roof, indoor plumbing and a kitchen.

"It is true that substandard housing is a subjective thing and adequate housing is subjective," he said in phone interview from his Americus, Ga., office. "But the bottom line is that there has to be a basic minimum standard of housing that you don't want any family living below."

The U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development also have definitions of the problem. Common characteristics are a lack of hot or cold piped water, a lack of adequate electricity and heat source, and holes or open cracks in walls or ceilings.

"Those are just the basic things people need," Fuller said.

The campaign to eliminate substandard housing has hit home for Lonnie Collier and his family.

The Collier family has owned a home at 4120 W. Eighth St. since the early 1980s. Earlier this year, the city targeted the 80-year-old, vacant, 512-square-foot home for demolition.

"I admit it looks bad," Collier said.

Most of the problems are in the back of the house, including a missing back door. Plywood nailed over the entryway is peeled back, revealing rotted and missing flooring and dirt under the house.

"It's open and unsecured, and that constitutes a dilapidated structure," said John Rogers, an inspector for

the city Neighborhood Inspections division.

The city notified the Colliers in March to correct the problems. A family member didn't contact the city until mid-June, after it had approved demolition of the structure.

But Collier said the family doesn't have the money to afford the needed improvements. Now the family just wants the city to give them more time to fix up the home.

The city on Monday authorized a contractor to demolish and clear the property.

**Genesis of a crusade** — It was a Habitat for Humanity ribbon-cutting that led to the Tulsa focus on ending substandard housing. Fuller came to Tulsa for the opening, and LaFortune joined in welcoming a family to its new home.

Before the ceremony, Fuller began chatting with the mayor about Fuller's program to eliminate substandard housing, called the 21st Century Challenge.

"The wheels started turning in my mind," LaFortune said.

LaFortune was intrigued by the program because it has been successful in other cities. After reflecting on the success of passing the Vision 2025 economic-improvement package, LaFortune decided to target substandard housing.

In his 2003 State of the City address, LaFortune said the effort was in the formative stages.

"I pledge to you today that I will put together a similar umbrella organization facilitating all of our af-

fordable housing agencies that will set a deadline to renovate all substandard housing in the city and county by, how about by the year 2025?" he said in the 2003 speech.

**'A matter of conscience'** — The city Neighborhood Inspections division based its estimate of 6,000 homes in part on the percentage of structures that do not have utilities.

The Tulsa chapter of the Habitat for Humanity assessed the number of substandard homes at 6,348 homes about five years ago. A home was considered substandard if it would not pass a basic inspection after spending \$15,000 rehabilitating the structure, said Gary Casteel, executive director and president of Tulsa's Habitat for Humanity.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that Tulsa has 180,994 housing units, including apartment complexes and single-family structures. Of those, 156,876 are occupied.

About 702 housing units had incomplete plumbing, and 889 units lacked full kitchen facilities, according to the 2000 census.

Based on the poverty housing estimates, about 3 percent of Tulsans live in substandard conditions.

"Our goal is to make housing a matter of conscience for all citizens to make sure our fellow citizens are not living in squalor," Casteel said.

World staff writer Curtis Killman contributed to this story.

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## Writer bios



Graham



Killman

Tulsa World reporters Ginnie Graham and Curtis Killman have spent the past four months examining issues involving substandard housing.

Graham, 32, has been a reporter at the Tulsa World since 1994 and covers social services. In the past, she has written projects about the death penalty, immigration and education. A native of Perry, Okla., Graham earned a bachelor's and a master's degree from the University of Oklahoma. She is married and has an 8-month-old son.

Killman, 43, has been a reporter at the World since 1995 and is on the newspaper's investigative team. Before that, he spent eight years as a city hall reporter. Killman earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Central Oklahoma, is married and has two daughters.