

Storms stall Wabasso help

West area of town struggles to blunt effects of profound poverty

BY LINDA JUMP

WABASSO -- Ardile Black points toward a blue-green tub nearly full of brown water dripping from a sagging ceiling.

Nearly every room and ceiling in her West Wabasso home has severe water damage because the roof couldn't hold against the force of recent hurricanes.

Now, octogenarians Black and husband, Charles, known as "Bishop," are waiting for a temporary trailer from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"It's so unsafe for them to stay here," said Julianne Renck, an environmental health specialist with the Indian River County Department of Health. "Any of these ceilings could come down any time."

Renck has worked with community leaders since January with a federal grant to study the public health needs of West Wabasso and to empower residents to find resources to improve their lives.

But hurricanes Frances and Jeanne have put many of the efforts on hold, as attention had to turn to even more basic needs.

"Now we're worried about their survival needs -- water, food and a place that's safe to live," Renck said.

More than half of West Wabasso's 450 residents, according to Census figures, live below the poverty level. Fewer than half have a high school education or access to county water or sewer service. Still, nearly half live in homes they own, with an average value of less than \$30,000.

Many are retired citrus workers, and most are black.

At town meetings, residents said they needed street lights, water they can drink, sewer systems that work, a communitywide cleanup, paved roads, sidewalks, transportation, better drainage to prevent frequent flooding and park improvements.

Previous newspaper articles about the community brought many people from elsewhere in Brevard and Indian River counties to help in a variety of ways -- from cleanup days and home repairs to replacing dilapidated trailers and bringing families food, clothing and other necessities.

But the storms undid many of the repairs and cleanups -- strewing debris, breaking windows and screens that had been replaced, and postponing plans for water and sewer improvements.

Several West Wabasso residents received a FEMA trailer in recent days or were waiting for one.



Refuge. Margaret Green-Brown chats with a FEMA representative about the trailer she received for temporary housing. (FLORIDA TODAY/Linda Jump)

Margaret Green-Brown can sit on her porch, but the mold and mildew keeps her out of her home. Called "Big Mama" because she cares for her own grandchildren as well as others in the community, she was excited when FEMA delivered a trailer last week.

"I'm glad to have somewhere. There's too much mold in the house now," Green-Brown said. She's been staying with a sister in Gifford a few miles away.

FEMA officials expect to bring in 20 temporary trailers to West Wabasso this week.

"We keep finding people that haven't been taken care of," said Donna Roachford, a FEMA housing disaster worker from Atlanta.

About a dozen homes were red-tagged, meaning they are unsafe to live in. About 75 percent of the 157 homes in Wabasso had at least moderate damage, and every one of the six churches was damaged, most with roof problems.

The Canaan Land Missionary Baptist Church was nearly destroyed, with the roof over the sanctuary missing and holes in both north and south outside walls.

Rencke said portable toilets were set up to ease failed septic systems, and street lighting in the area has been delayed by 90 days. She said paperwork to establish a county water district to serve the residents also has been held up.

The sand roads that the county spent days smoothing are again rutted. And debris that was removed has returned in the form of huge piles of downed trees and branches, twisted soffits and gutters.

Plans to put sidewalks down 64th Avenue also were stopped.

Ironically, the 1989 light blue Chrysler that Freeman Wiggs, 82, has called home for at least two years wasn't damaged at all.

"Not even a window out," Wiggs bragged, showing that his window still rolls up and down.

Wiggs, a lifelong bachelor, moved into his car before the hurricanes, when the roof of his 50-year-old home collapsed and holes developed in the floor. Volunteers had planned to build him a new home, but materials were sent to another location to help with hurricane repairs.

Wiggs is annoyed that Sheriff's Detective Teddy Floyd came with a police car and took him to a shelter to wait out both the hurricanes.

"Heck, I could have stayed here," he said. "The car didn't even move."