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HABITAT FOR HUMANITY ADDRESSES AFFORDABLE HOUSING CRISIS

KALISPELL, MONTANA—To Bob Helder, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Flathead Valley, affordable housing means more than a home's price tag. It's how families' futures are affected by the cost of land, availability of contractors and volunteers, the generosity of donors, adherence to state and local regulations, as well as navigating an unpredictable economic landscape. Add to that a surge of new residents settling in Kalispell over the past year, and you have a perfect storm.

"We build with volunteers," says Helder, noting, "During the first six months of this fiscal year, we were down 5,600 volunteer hours and hiring additional staff has become increasingly difficult due to unemployment and the cost of housing. Furthermore, over the past year land costs have increased from \$40,000 to \$100,000 and people are not donating properties as they were before. Without property, we cannot build."

Rebecca Wilson, community outreach coordinator, adds, "Rising prices have essentially doubled the cost to build," citing price increases in lumber, labor, and other building materials. The organization's Lakeside Affordable Housing project, underway since 2019, is delayed due to these constraints. The Creekside subdivision will eventually include 5 Habitat homes— building a successful future for 7 adults and 13 children.

A single dad, Robert Zalewski works at Hedges Elementary and rents a home in Lakeside with his teenage son and daughter. He has put over 1,000 hours of sweat equity into Habitat's Creekside development and hopes to move into a new townhouse by fall. "When we started," Zalewski says, "we had a waiting list of volunteers, but the pandemic shut everything down." He estimates home propane cost the family \$1,500 last winter and looks forward to a more energy efficient home, with heating bills closer to \$200/year. "The outside is almost complete. The siding is done, the roof is done, and the electric and HVAC guys have been in there. Things are flying pretty fast now."

Habitat's volunteers are also returning, though Wilson says, "We're still in catch-up mode with our current homes and there are many more families in need of affordable housing. Local families cannot afford the current rental costs of \$1,400-\$2,400/month for a 2-bedroom apartment."

Habitat for Humanity's homebuying program helps not just Habitat families but the whole community, according to Helder. "Research shows that kids from Habitat homes are 25 percent more likely to go to school, vote, and own homes at an earlier age than their parents did." He continues, "A lot of people are just one crisis away from devastation. We transform lives."

Zalewski agrees, "Habitat changed my life. I can't express in words what this home means to me. I'm going to continue volunteering for the program after it's done. I love helping people, love to see a smile on someone's face."

Habitat for Humanity welcomes community support. For information on the organization or to donate time, materials, or money, contact Wilson at 406-257-8800 or outreach@habitatflathead.org.