

FRESNO BEE

Dozens of Fresno families become first-time homeowners by building their own homes

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For Esmeralda Melecio López, her family's journey to homeownership went beyond the construction of a house — it was the opportunity to build a better future.

"We didn't just build a house, we built a community and a future," said Melecio López.

Melecio López and her brother were one of the 22 families in southwest Fresno who recently became first-time homeowners after building their own homesthrough the Mutual Self-Help Housing (MSHH) program. The program is led by Self-Help Enterprises, a nationally recognized housing and community development organization whose mission is to work together with low-income families to build and sustain healthy homes and communities.

Having no experience in building homes, Melecio López said she and her brother Max Melesio López learned everything from the ground up with the support of their construction superintendent, Benny Zurita. “My family was my motivation. Their support kept me focused on the bigger picture and reminded me what we were working toward,” Melecio López said.

The completion of the housing project located near East Annadale Avenue and South Elm Avenue in the Annadale neighborhood next to West Fresno Elementary School, involves a \$1.46 million investment from the City of Fresno to address the city’s housing crisis.

The city has invested about \$4 million to build homes for more than 60 families when combining phase one and phase two of the housing project in the Annadale neighborhood, according to the city.

Fresno Mayor Jerry Dyer said the project “is the latest example of the impact of increasing our affordable housing pipeline by 1,644% over the past four years.” He said there is not only a house shortage, but a gap in the inability for people to be able to afford their own home.

Southwest Fresno, a predominantly African American community in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, has endured decades of neglect in housing and infrastructure development, according to Self-Help officials.

“Two-thirds of American wealth is based on home equity in real estate,” Dyer said. “We’re giving 22 families the opportunity to be able to achieve the American dream and to be able to take part in America’s wealth.”

The 22 homes are the results of countless hours of “sweat-equity” and dedication from the families who worked side-by-side under the guidance of Self-Help construction staff. The hands-on approach of tasks — such as pouring foundations, framing walls, wiring and painting — not only helped reduce costs but also fostered a sense of shared responsibility and camaraderie among neighbors.

“It’s a model for the future,” Dyer said.

City Council vice president Miguel Arias said the completion of those new homes mark “a new chapter for Southwest Fresno, bringing long-time residents the opportunity for homeownership.”

Arias said the city is investing \$34 million in fixing the neighborhood around the project, from repaving the streets to building sidewalks to investing in the community center across the street as well fixing parks in the neighborhood and building a health clinic nearby.

“We are making investment the whole region that was lacking for decades,” Arias said.

The MSHH program empowers low-income families to collectively build homes, offering training and supervision from SHE. Instead of traditional down payments, participants invest their time and energy into every step of construction, strengthening both their homes and their community bonds.

Since 1965, SHE has helped more than 6,600 families to build their own homes, rehabilitated over 7,000 unsafe homes, developed over 2,900 units of affordable rental housing, and provided technical assistance for reliable access to safe drinking water and sanitary sewer infrastructure to over 34,000 individuals in 175 small communities.

“This is about more than just homeownership, it’s about dignity, equity, and opportunity,” said Tom Collishaw, president and CEO of Self-Help Enterprises. The families have completed construction of their homes. Self-Help team is currently working with them through the final steps, including utility connections, before moving in.

Read more at: <https://www.fresnobee.com/news/local/article306032056.html#storylink=cpy>