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“Mennonite Disaster Service Coming to Norfolk”

Five new houses built in Pilger in a six months span is the goal for Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) teams that will start rotating into Norfolk in the next few weeks.



Pat Mrsny, City of Norfolk Park and Building Maintenance Superintendent, discusses Norfolk City Auditorium access with Mennonite workers. Left to right: Mrsny, Al Kroeker, Roy Smith and Jan Kroeker.

Jeff Koller, MDS Disaster Response Coordinator for the western US, said that up to 450 volunteers will be coming to Northeast Nebraska from all over the United States and Canada in teams of 18-24 to construct homes for families in Pilger who lost theirs in the devastating tornado that destroyed much of the town last June.

On February 1, the first crew of volunteers will arrive at the base station located at the City Auditorium in Norfolk that the MDS has temporarily rented. Koller said the first work team is a little unique in that about 14 Amish men

will stay for the first four weeks while the rest of the time, groups of Mennonite short term volunteers will

each week arrive in Norfolk on Sunday, work through the week and leave the following Saturday. Four or five long-term project directors will stay for up to six weeks at a time overseeing the recordkeeping, cooking and management of the project.

“Some of our volunteers are new and will train on the job while we will always have some volunteers skilled in construction work,” Koller said.

Although the first group of Amish men are used to traveling by horse and buggy, project leaders will transport them to and from Pilger in passenger vans. The schedule for the work day includes packing their own lunches at 6:30

am, devotion and breakfast at 7:00 am, traveling to Pilger for work from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, 5:00 pm put away tools and shower, 6:00 pm eat, and 7:00 pm discussing highlights of the day.

“On Wednesdays we invite the home owners to eat supper with us and tell us their stories. It helps to convey the importance of their work to the volunteers and to see who they’re helping,” Koller said.

Koller had been in Northeast Nebraska this winter looking for potential places for the volunteers to live. The auditorium turned out to be the ideal place to stay.

This week a truckload of supplies will be coming from Pennsylvania and workers will be putting in bunk beds in the former City offices. A couple of refrigerators, microwaves, freezers and ranges will be brought in for the cook to prepare food for the volunteers.

“It takes a lot of groceries. We fund ourselves completely and buy our supplies locally. We don’t ask for donations as we don’t want to be a burden wherever we are,” Koller said.

Right now the MDS is working in ten different sites across the United States including building projects in Florida, Mississippi, Colorado and Kentucky where flooding or tornados have destroyed homes.

“There were some members of our group from Beemer, Henderson and South Dakota who were in Pilger the day after the storm hit to help with tree removal and make that initial contact. We have since worked with members of the (Pilger) long term committee to let them know we were available if we should be needed,” Koller said.

The homes that the MDS volunteers will be building include one house with two bedrooms and one bathroom and four houses with three bedrooms and two bathrooms.

“They will all be ranch style and very energy efficient with two by six stud walls and high grade windows,” Koller said.

Koller said all the volunteers coming to Norfolk will be able to speak English although many of the Mennonites also speak German and the Amish group speaks Pennsylvania Dutch. He said they don’t mind having their picture taken if it’s taken from a distance. If a local church or civic group wants to help the MDS volunteers, Koller said they always appreciate dinner or snacks for the volunteers in the evening and they like the opportunity to interact with the community.

For more information about the MDS, go to mds.mennoite.net.