Near Northside homeowners benefit from revitalization grants

By Jamie Swinnerton, Staff writer
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Around 120 volunteers spent Saturday helping to revitalize several homes and a playground in the Near Northside.

The volunteers, who wore dark blue shirts printed with “Good neighbors building strong neighborhoods” were recruited by Republic Services, the country’s second-largest...
Republic Services awarded $250,000 to Avenue late last year for the renovation projects after the not-for-profit applied for funds from the company's foundation. Republic Services is trying to show the community that they are not just a service provider, but part of the neighborhood, officials said.

“Naturally, we want to be a part of this community,” said Calvin Ray, general manager for Republic Services of East Houston. “We service this community, we live in this community, so naturally there's an opportunity for us to help revitalize and re-energize the community, and that's what we're here to do.”

The money that Avenue was granted from the charitable giving arm of the company has already been used to build a basketball court at Adele B. Looscan Elementary, just up the street from where Ray was volunteering. This will not be the last time that Republic will be volunteering in the community, Ray said, as he expects the day of volunteering to become an annual event.

Among the five projects that were completed Saturday, four were homes and the playground at Looscan. Efforts to find the homes that would be revitalized started about two years ago, after Avenue received a different grant through the national BUILD Health Challenge, which aimed to fund projects that would address the root causes of health issues found in the area. Avenue chose to use the money to help Near Northside homes that might still have lead-based paint.

“Out of the houses in the neighborhood, there were about 5,000 that could have lead, just because of the year they were built,” said Maria Aguirre, director of Community Initiatives for Avenue.

While going door-to-door in the neighborhood looking for homes that could qualify for lead abatement from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, there were a lot of homes that falling through the gaps.

“You could qualify to get lead abated, but because you had a bad roof, or bad foundation, or bad electrical system, they wouldn't abate you,” Aguirre said. “We wanted to figure out
When applying for the Republic Services grant, Avenue asked for help repairing homes that could then qualify for abatement. By the end of the year, Avenue will have 10 homes in the neighborhood repaired to the point that they can receive abatement.

Avenue has been part of the Near Northside community for a decade and has seen its efforts of improvement succeed in increased literacy, park access and safety, among others. Now the battle is in advocacy, health, and housing.

“This neighborhood is gentrifying, there’s not enough affordable housing,” Aguirre said. “So what do we need to do to keep the homeowners here? This is one of the ways. Let me fix up your home so you can live here and be healthy and be OK.”

Juanita Najera is one such homeowner. She has lived in her house on Robertson Street for over 50 years and sent all of her children to Looscan Elementary. Now, her granddaughter, Marina, lives with her and is a fourth-grader at Looscan this year. For several years Marina has written an annual essay about the one thing she really wants: her grandmother’s home to be repaired. After Saturday, Najera's home had a new roof, new paint on the outside, new flower beds in the back, a new drainage trench and new gravel in the driveway.

Through the Republic Services National Neighborhood Promise project, which is where the funds for Saturday’s revitalization efforts came from, the local Republic Services workers choose a day to work with local not-for-profits to give back through volunteer labor. The foundation and the Neighborhood Promise has funded 23 projects across the country, including the Avenue project.

“The impact that this group (Avenue) has here in Houston was so impressive to our foundation team and to our leadership, and even to our local team, that we couldn’t imagine not supporting their work,” said Kelly Hurter, senior manager of charitable giving for Republic Services. “We’re just really proud to be partnering with them.”

The foundation is relatively new, Hurter said, but is deeply committed to its mission. The company is already in the neighborhood, picking up the trash and servicing the
said. “We don’t just write a check and walk away, it’s not something that Republic does.”

As part of their commitment to the neighborhood and continuing community partnerships, Hurter said that there is a chance Avenue will receive more funding from the foundation. Last Thursday, Republic demonstrated this commitment by bringing its new K-12 recycling education program to Looscan, the first group in the country that this program has been tested with.

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