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Rebuilding Together assembles disaster preparedness kits for veterans



Volunteers Jim Anderson, left, and David Hoffman give a “Disaster Safe at Home” box to retired Navy civilian officer Cliff Cooper of Vacaville, right, as Cooper packs a combination carbon monoxide/smoke alarm. Rebuilding Together distributed 200 of the kits to veterans, active military members and their families at Vacaville Veterans Memorial Building Friday. (Nick Sestanovich/The Reporter)

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In recent years, Solano County residents have become too accustomed to seeing fires and flooding on the news and even in their own backyards. What this has resulted in is a reminder to be prepared in the event of power outages, evacuations and all the things that come with extreme natural disasters.

That includes low-income veterans and their families, and that is where Rebuilding Together Solano



The kits contained various necessities for natural disasters, all donated by local organizations and businesses.

Elizabeth Hoffman, executive director of Rebuilding Together Solano, said this was the first year the nonprofit had done its “Disaster Safe at Home” kits. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, she said volunteers would go into veterans’ homes to do repairs, but once the quarantine went into effect in 2020, the focus was shifted to creating boxes that would allow veterans to feel safe at home. Approximately 100 of these boxes were created and distributed in the Vallejo area in 2020, which jumped up to 1,000 boxes in 2021.

This year, Rebuilding Together put together disaster preparedness kits and brought them to Vacaville for the first time.

“With all the changes in our environment with the wildfires and floods and everything else, we wanted to come up with something particularly for our homebound veterans and veteran widows,” she said.



Rebuilding Together Solano County volunteers Barbara Schneider, left, and Margaret Haffner arrange combination carbon monoxide/smoke detectors into sealable bags at Rebuilding Together’s “Disaster Safe at Home” distribution at Vacaville Veterans Memorial Building. The alarms were included in the kits by request of veterans receiving the kits. (Nick Sestanovich/The Reporter)

The kits feature American Red Cross-approved first aid kits, fire extinguishers, LED nightlights, glow sticks, masks, hand sanitizer, trash bags, dish soap, emergency blankets, combination carbon dioxide/smoke alarms and printed guides on what to include in to-go bags in the event of an evacuation.

One standout item was a hand crank-powered radio that also doubled as a cellphone charger and LED flashlight.

“We particularly wanted to make sure that veterans...could not only get information but also could communicate with somebody through their cellphone,” she said. “They can at least make a call, if they need to to 911.”

Items for the kits were donated by local organizations such as Bank of the West, Costco Vallejo, CSAA, First Bank, Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, M&M Sanitation, Medic Ambulance, Minutemen Press, Philips 66, The Nimitz Group, Valero Benicia Refinery and Vallejo Community Presbyterian Church.

The two biggest donors were the Home Depot Foundation and Wells Fargo, which also had volunteers on site Friday. Jim Anderson, who does compliance with Wells Fargo, said his company offers volunteer opportunities.

"Wells Fargo is probably one of the last people that gives us paid time off to go and volunteer," he said.

Anderson helped pass out boxes to veterans who visited. Although he lives in Contra Costa now, he grew up in Vallejo and came to Vacaville often, so Friday was a bit of a homecoming for him.

"It's nice to come back home and help the people that have given so much," he said.

American Legion Post 165 sponsored the giveaway, so plenty of veterans from throughout the area volunteered.

Jeff Mech, a retired Air Force sergeant first class from Vacaville, joined the American Legion a few months ago and already volunteered for the Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve meal distributions. On Friday, he helped unload trucks, set up tables and helped people to their cars.

"I just like helping everybody," he said. "It's just wonderful to see everybody coming out and being able to help them."

Arles DeMayo, post commander for American Legion Post 603 in Vallejo and a retired Air Force master sergeant, helped sign people in and have them provide proof of service so they could pick up boxes. From there, they went to stations to have the carbon monoxide/smoke alarms included in their kits, pick up the kits and even be entered into a raffle to win hoses and one of six garden boxes handmade by Rebuilding Together.

DeMayo said American Legion hosted a similar distribution Veterans Day at the Marina Vista Memorial Park behind Vallejo City Hall, which had a turnout of more than 100.

"It's always good to do these events, especially with veterans," he said.

Jeff Jewell, adjutant with American Legion 165, said Hoffman had reached out about a location for the event, and he was happy to help out.

"We want veterans to be safe at home, to be prepared," he said.

Jewell was happy with the turnout, which saw a long line within the first 15 minutes. He attributed it to the word being spread through social media, especially Facebook and emailing American legion members.

"On Facebook, it got shared 50 or 60 times and those people shared it with other people," he said.

The boxes were available to any veterans, active military members and veterans' widows who reside in Solano County and show proof of service. A particular emphasis was on low-income veterans.

Cole Addy, a staff sergeant with Travis Air Force Base, stopped by with his wife, Cheyenne, and 1-year-old daughter. Rilev. after learning about the event through an American Legion email. A recent power outage

Addy felt like the flashlight radio would be particularly helpful, as would the supply of bandages and ointments.

"The first aid kit's nice, especially with having a little one," he said.

Wilfred Alexander, a chaplain at Veterans of Foreign Wars 1123, Navy veteran and volunteer with Rebuilding Together, just liked the thrill of being able to help others.

"I enjoy doing this just to see the difference in people's attitudes and hope," he said. "It gives me joy."

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Nick Sestanovich

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