

# In the News

## Volunteers Build Homes for Injured Veterans

In the midst of all the political wrangling over the war in Iraq, with everybody claiming to know what's best for the troops, one group has found a way to make a tangible difference. Launched by a contractor from Massachusetts, Homes for Our Troops is a private, non-profit organization committed to providing accessible housing for severely wounded veterans.

Since breaking ground on its first house in December 2004, the group has undertaken at least 36 home-building or remodeling projects in 18 states around the country. "Our projects range from adapting an existing house that a veteran may already own to total construction — purchasing the land and everything," says Kirt Rebello, the organization's director of projects and veterans affairs.

The group's latest success story is in Coventry, Conn., where Sgt. Jared Luce, his wife, and their three young boys are moving into their



These Connecticut framers volunteered their labor to build an accessible home for a severely injured veteran of the Iraq War.



■ Nearly two years after Hurricane Katrina, efforts to rebuild New Orleans remain bogged down in a toxic soup of red tape and foot-dragging. Nevertheless, the new head of the recovery effort is so confident of success he plans to stay for only a year. When questioned this spring during a speech at the University of Sydney in Australia, where he remains a faculty member, renowned disaster-recovery specialist Ed Blakely said, "When will I leave? I'll leave next year, because most of it will be done." Blakely is basing his plan on a long-range \$1.1 billion public-investment plan that targets specific zones for rebuilding; his expectation is that private investment will flow in after the government money has primed the pump.

■ The nation's largest home builder announced in April that its quarterly earnings have plummeted 85 percent over the past year. For the fiscal quarter ending March 31, D. R. Horton says it earned \$51.7 million, a drop of more than \$300 million from the \$352.8 million it reported for the same fiscal period the year before. The company blamed sluggish sales, forfeited land options, and declining property values for its troubles.

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new home. Luce lost both legs when a land mine exploded beneath the Humvee he was driving in Iraq. His home is fully wheelchair accessible and has a separate bedroom for each of the boys.

Earlier this spring, Homes for Our Troops completed a home in Pittsburgh for a veteran who lost both hands and his eyesight as the result of a bomb blast. His house was outfitted with automatic doors, voice-activated appliances, and various controls he can operate by foot.

Unlike Habitat for Humanity projects, Homes for Our Troops houses are built almost entirely by professional tradespeople. (Ninety percent of the labor to build Luce's house was donated, and materials were either donated or provided at cost.)

Pete Robbins, a waterproofing contractor in Vernon, Conn., is one of the volunteers who worked on the Luce home. He didn't stop at donating his own services. "My wife brought the news to the next meeting of our local home builders association," he says, "and she came home with a stack of business cards from dozens of builders and suppliers who wanted to get involved."

Once it turns over a project, Homes for Our Troops places a prorated lien on the property for five years. After that, the recipient owns the property free and clear. "Who better to realize the American dream of home ownership than someone who's sacrificed so much for it?" asks Rebello, a former Marine staff sergeant.

Homes for Our Troops does not receive government funding. Readers interested in donating money, time, material, or land — or in starting a project in their own area — can learn more by going to [www.homesforourtroops.org](http://www.homesforourtroops.org). — *Tom O'Brien*

■ According to *The Sunday Times* of London, a British company, Millennium Chemicals, has developed a spray coating that absorbs air pollution. The product uses titanium dioxide as a catalyst to break down airborne pollutants from vehicle exhaust and convert them to a harmless form that falls on the ground and washes away. When sprayed on the outside of a building, the coating allegedly keeps both the surrounding air and the walls themselves clean, essentially creating what the newspaper calls a "smog-eating" house. Trials are under way at various locations in London. There's no word on when the material might be available in the states.

## Put Down That Doughnut!

Construction workers are apparently seeking a healthier job-site pick-me-up these days. Clif Bar, a leading maker of energy bars

for athletes, has come out with one marketed directly to builders. Unlike a standard energy

bar, the Clif Builder's bar includes a protein supplement that the company claims helps muscles recover from intense physical activity. It comes in five flavors.



## Call 811 Before Digging

Despite the existence of "call before you dig" programs in most U.S. localities, more than a half-million underground line strikes result in damages, service outages, or injuries each year. Now a public-service organization sponsored by the underground utility industry is instituting a nationwide number to reduce accidents and eliminate confusion. Beginning in May, a call to 811 from anywhere in the country will automatically notify local utilities of a planned excavation so that they can mark their underground lines. The organization — called the Common Ground Alliance — urges anyone who's planning to sink a shovel into the ground to call 811, even if the project involves nothing more than digging a footing for a deck or planting a tree. For more information, go to [www.call811.com](http://www.call811.com). — *T.O.*

# Housing Sector Slashes Jobs

Over the past decade or so, many analysts have credited the nation's booming housing sector with propping up a lackluster U.S. economy. Now the tables have turned. According to the outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, job cuts in the overall economy have been steadily declining for months — March's numbers were down 42 percent from February — while housing layoffs are on the rise.

Released in April, the report reveals that in the first three months of 2007, the housing sector — which consists of the real estate, mortgage lending, and construction markets — lost 21,245 jobs. (That figure approaches the total number of job losses for all of 2006: 22,814). Construction was responsible for a majority of the housing sector layoffs (13,958).

Since these figures represent only publicly announced cutbacks, the actual numbers may be much higher. — *T.O.*

## RECALLS

Lamson & Sessions of Cleveland has recalled about 100,000 Carlton Drop-In Floor Boxes. These floor-mounted electrical outlets were wired incorrectly, resulting in



reverse polarity, which can cause electrical shock. Included in the recall are model numbers E971FBDI and E971FBDIB; the products were sold between January 2005 and March 2007. Owners of affected units can receive a free repair kit or find instructions for doing their own repair on the manufacturer's Web site. For more information, contact Lamson & Sessions at 866/636-1531 or go to [www.lamson-home.com](http://www.lamson-home.com).

■ A new San Diego County ordinance mandates the recycling of construction-and-demolition debris. Applicants for a building or demolition permit involving a structure of 40,000 square feet or greater must now submit a debris management plan along with the blueprints. Sponsors of the ordinance hope to divert as much as 90 percent of inert materials — rock, concrete, asphalt — and 70 percent of organic recyclables — cardboard, lumber, carpet — from landfills. If local recycling facilities can handle more volume, the sponsors plan to ask the county board of supervisors to apply the ordinance to smaller building projects, too. More information on job-site recycling (including a downloadable 57-page guide) is available at [www.wastemiser.com/resources.html](http://www.wastemiser.com/resources.html).

■ In April Massachusetts updated its residential building code. Based on the IRC 2000, the Seventh Edition of the Code for Single- and Two-Family Dwellings contains tougher standards for high-wind areas — such as Cape Cod — and for snow loads. Other changes include requirements for glazing and basement egress. Until October 1, builders can choose to follow the previous (sixth) edition of the code when designing or building a one- or two-family house, but they must declare that intent when they file their permit application.