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Women's Shelter poised to reopen; Facility to house those hoping to rebuild

By Keith Darcé and Susan Finch, Staff writers

After bouncing around three states and living in jails and tents, Mary Weinenbacher is finally moving into a home.

The 43-year-old Chalmette grandmother soon will become one of the first people to move into the Women's Shelter, a renovated camelback house that is part of New Orleans Rescue Mission's housing complex on the edge of the Central Business District.

The mission's buildings, which housed homeless men, women and families before Hurricane Katrina struck, were badly damaged by the storm. But help arrived several months ago when fair housing group HomeAid, which is based in California, teamed with Ameriquest Mortgage Co. to start repairing some of the structures.

The Women's Shelter will be the first to reopen, accepting tenants in about 10 days.

Officials with the mission, HomeAid and the mortgage company gathered Wednesday morning at the revamped Women's Shelter, on Baronne Street just off Earhart Boulevard, to celebrate the completion of the first in a series of collaborations to help homeless hurricane victims rebuild their lives.

Weinenbacher also was there. She has been living nearby in the mission's main building at 1300 Oretha Castle Haley Blvd. while waiting to move into the Women's Shelter. After evacuating her flooded home in St. Bernard Parish after the storm, she landed in temporary housing set up in a jail in Dallas, then stayed with a church group in Alabama before returning to Chalmette, where she lived at a tent shelter. "I don't know what I would have done without the Women's Shelter. I was down to my last supply of money and did not know where to go next," she said.

The 4,000-square-foot house, built in 1896, is large enough to house 24 women, said mission Executive Director Ron Gonzales. Residents must be able to go to work and must have a written plan for eventually moving into their own housing, he said. Priority will be given to women who own homes and need a place to stay while restoring them.

The shelter sustained significant wind and water damage during and after the hurricane. The repairs cost \$400,000, and much of the materials needed for the project were donated. Among others, Georgia-Pacific provided plywood, and Pella Windows and Doors supplied 31 hurricane-strength windows.

HomeAid joined with Ameriquest shortly after Katrina hit to create the Gulf Coast Rebuilding Fund with a \$3 million donation from the mortgage company based in Southern California, HomeAid President Michael Lennon said. The group sought material and labor donations through the National Association of Home Builders, he said.

The group hopes to increase the fund to \$15 million through additional donations and grants, he said.

The group is working on at least nine other housing projects for homeless hurricane evacuees in Houston, Atlanta and other Southern cities.

The effort is badly needed, particularly in New Orleans, said Martha Kegel, executive director of Unity of Greater New Orleans, a local collaborative of 70 nonprofit and government agencies.

At least 2,000 people are living in emergency shelters or on the streets in the city, she said. The number is growing because more people are being evicted from temporary housing or must leave their apartments because they cannot afford rising rents.

"We have a new class of homeless now," she said.