How does Habitat for Humanity affect women who partner with the program? In what ways are they more content with their new housing? Are they more attached to their houses following the move? And are they more attached to their neighborhoods? Do the participants experience improvements in psychological well-being? A “Blitz Build” construction marathon provided an ideal opportunity for Nancy Wells, an environmental psychologist and housing researcher, to explore these questions. Families in several urban areas throughout Michigan were invited to participate.

1. How does Housing Quality Change?

To measure and compare the housing quality of the original and the new Habitat housing, researchers used a detailed room-by-room checklist. This helps document specifically how housing quality improves.

Figure 1: Changes in Housing Quality

As shown in Figure 1, all five aspects of housing quality significantly improved from pre-move to post-move.

2. Are the Women More Satisfied with their Housing?

A second set of questions explored how women’s attitudes about their home environment changed from prior to the move to after the move. Following the move, women were more Content with their home environment, experienced more satisfactory levels of Privacy, and felt more connected or Attached to both their homes and their neighborhoods than they did prior to the relocation.

Figure 2: Changes in Women’s Satisfaction

3. Do Changes Occur in Women’s Mental Health?

A third set of questions examined how the women were doing psychologically. For example, were they frequently lonely? Did they often feel anxious? Or nervous? Results indicated that such experiences were much more common prior to the move than after. Overall, levels of psychological distress dropped significantly from pre-move to post-move. Furthermore, follow-up questions, asked two years later, revealed that improvements in psychological well-being were stable two years later.

Figure 3: Reduced Levels of Psychological Distress

Conclusion

This study provides research evidence of what many involved with Habitat have personally witnessed – that improved housing can have a profound impact on individual lives.

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