

Housing rehab program changes lives

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Janel Rauso of Wheatland stands on the wheelchair accessible ramp that was built as part of the borough's housing rehabilitation program. The doors, windows and siding also were installed during the project.

HERMITAGE – There's nothing like throwing open a window on a warm spring day. Janel Rauso appreciates that a housing-rehabilitation program made that possible. "I wasn't able to open a window before," the Wheatland woman said. Speaking of her new windows, she said, "They're wonderful." Rauso qualified by her income for the rehab program funded by the state from a grant secured cooperatively in 2013 by the borough and the city of Hermitage.

The two governments are pairing up again to ask for another \$500,000. If the grant is awarded, the money would be split 60 percent for the city and 40 percent for the borough with \$80,000 for administrative expenses related to the grant and delivery of the program. The rehabs bring owner-occupied homes up to building-code standards, often allowing the replacement or addition of doors, windows, electrical wiring and fixtures, insulation and plumbing.

The city has run a housing-rehab program largely through Community Development Block Grants for more than 30 years. However, CDBG money has steadily declined and city officials went looking for more money to address a continual need. There are 45 owner-occupied homeowners on the city's waiting list and officials expect to be able to rehab 18 homes if the new grant is awarded, said Jeremy P. Coxe, assistant director of planing and development.

A single person living in a home has to make \$31,200 or less to qualify, said Chris Conti, senior planner for Mercer County Regional Planning Commission, which administers the current grant for the

municipalities and would continue if more money is secured. The number goes up according to the number of people in the household. Wheatland has rehabbed houses on-and-off over the years when funding was available. It has 11 people on the waiting list and expects to do nine or 10 projects with more money, Conti said.

The city will invest up to \$22,500 per house for verylow- income families and \$17,500 for low-income families. The borough's limit is \$20,000 per home. Officials occasionally have been able to tap other pots of money to stretch the grant further. The Rauso project also used money available through Mercer County to address accessibility issues, and Lawrence County Community Action Partnership, which has handled intake and inspection for the municipalities, has federal funding to address lead-based paint when found in homes with children.

Rauso was able to have a wheelchair-accessible ramp and a walk-in tub and shower with hand rails installed, and siding put on her home. A Type 1 diabetic, Rauso has a history of falling and breaking bones. "My needs come and go," she said, noting she currently is able to walk. "It depends on what my health is in that week." A former medical transcriber and medical office secretary, Rauso said the officials and contractor were easy to work with, once she got over her anxiousness to get the work done. "It took a little longer than I contemplated when I got the approval," she said. "They had to get the right contractor for the scope of work."

The majority of households who have their homes rehabbed under the program are elderly with one person living there, although the needs of homes with couples and families also have been addressed, Conti said. Conti said he enjoys meeting homeowners when he accompanies auditors on their visits to homes. "I get to see what a difference it makes to these people," he said. "It allows some to stay in their homes."

Rauso said she looks forward to many more years in her home. "I wouldn't have lasted another 15 years on my own," she said of her home prior to the rehab.