



Vol. 26, Fall 2025

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is a program of the
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Church of the Brethren

Brethren Disaster Ministries **BRIDGES**

Rebuilding Homes • Nurturing Children • Responding Globally

20th Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina: Remembering the Church of the Brethren Response

On Aug. 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast as a Category 4 hurricane, becoming one of the most deadly and destructive storms on record. The record-breaking storm took the lives of over 1,400 people across multiple states and is estimated to have caused over \$125 billion in damage. The hurricane caused a storm surge that breached the New Orleans, La., levee system in 50 locations, flooding 80 percent of the city with up to 15 feet of water and displacing tens of thousands of residents. The storm brought to light significant inadequacies and changes needed in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery; infrastructure; and emergency management which influenced significant improvements in both public and private disaster response and recovery work.

Twenty years after Hurricane Katrina, Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM) remembers the impact, response,

collaboration, innovation, and recovery on the Gulf Coast. BDM's response included the deployment of Children's Disaster Services (CDS) volunteers during two different time frames and nearly six years of BDM's Rebuilding Program volunteers serving to build back areas of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. The great need combined with the availability of opportunities to serve sparked a surge of volunteers and supporters committed to serving those who were impacted, with many volunteers serving multiple times.

CDS Responses

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Children's Disaster Services (then called Brethren Disaster Child Care or DCC), a program of Brethren Disaster Ministries, partnered with the Red Cross to provide support in shelters, service/assistance centers. Roy Winter, the executive director of Brethren Disaster Ministries at the time, worked directly from Red Cross headquarters to coordinate the relief efforts. In just a little over a week after the hurricane, DDC began deploying volunteers to care for children in different locations under the leadership of coordinator Helen Stonesifer.

In the largest multi-state response in the program's history, as a testament to their dedication and the immense need for their services, 113 DCC volunteers served in eight states from mid-September to late October 2005, caring for 2,759



Children's Disaster Services volunteers care for children in Mobile, Ala., one of the many locations where CDS responded following 2005's Hurricane Katrina. Photo by Glenna Buchholtz



A CDS volunteer serving in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina shares the wonder of a book with a child.
Photo courtesy CDS

children in 12 shelters and recovery centers.

In January 2007, the program, now known as Children's Disaster Services (CDS), began a new phase of its Hurricane Katrina response. FEMA requested CDS to provide a center to care for children within the Welcome Home Center in New Orleans, La., a "one-stop shop" that provided resources for returning residents. Serving from Jan. 3 to Sept. 11, 2007, 60 CDS volunteers provided a vital resource for families and cared for 2,097 children. CDS had a total of 4,856 child contacts during its entire Hurricane Katrina response.

Rebuilding Program Response

During a nearly six-year response to Hurricane Katrina, 5,737 Brethren Disaster Ministries rebuilding volunteers repaired or rebuilt homes for 531 families along the Gulf Coast. These volunteers served a total of



Hurricane Katrina recovery: A group of volunteers serving with BDM in McComb, Miss., in 2007.
Photo by Lutricia Zerfing

325,008 work hours, giving an estimated value of \$6,776,416.80 in labor (2010 dollar value). Long-term disaster project leaders (DPLs) John and Mary Mueller oversaw this project for more than four years, working with long-term DPLs Steve Keim and Tim Sheaffer, other short-term DPLs, and Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS) volunteers.

From September 2005 through June 2011, BDM volunteers worked in six Hurricane Katrina-affected communities including Citronelle, Ala.; Chalmette (St. Bernard Parish), East New Orleans, and Pearl River, La.; and Lucedale and McComb, Miss. The program also contributed to a New Orleans Ecumenical Build in cooperation with Church World Service and several other Christian organizations.

Digital Photo Album

Brethren Disaster Ministries has created an online photo album providing a look back at the Hurricane Katrina

responses of CDS and the Rebuilding Program. The album may be accessed at www.yogile.com/bdmkatrina20. You are invited to add your own digital photos to help build on this collection of memories of our service together. If you have any questions about how to add photos, please contact bdm@brethren.org or 800-451-4407.

"As people arrived, some entered in a state of shock, others chatted idly, but all bore the expression that they were hurting and needed help. As we informed parents of our free children's services, many initially declined—they wanted to hold onto their children. But as they observed the functioning of the DCC center, many would come in and say, 'I would like my child to play.'"

—Roger A. Bennett, DCC(CDS) volunteer serving in Fort Walton Beach, Fla., in October 2005



BDM volunteers rebuilding a home in Pearl River, La., two years after Hurricane Katrina.
Photo by Amy Fishburn



A Desire to Serve

The Summer of 2025 had its share of tornadoes, floods, and fires in a year that had already seen some of the worst disasters in recent history. In their typical fashion, Children's Disaster Services (CDS) volunteers were ready to respond and showed up when called, their desire to serve always being their foremost attitude. In June, two teams of five CDS volunteers each, served a total of 157 children and families following a round of tornadoes that hit near St. Louis, Mo.

It is a testament to CDS volunteers that they are willing to serve with very little notice and often with limited information about the situation they are stepping into. This includes times when they respond to a call but, due to a number of unpredictable factors, they may have no or few children to care for. Regardless of the numbers in their care center, CDS volunteers always have a positive impact on those with whom they serve in centers and shelters.

Such was the case in July, when the Red Cross requested CDS to respond in Kerrville, Texas, where devastating flooding took the lives of 119 people, including 28 children and staff at an overnight camp. A team of four CDS volunteers set up a care center in a disaster assistance center (DAC), staying for 10 days. Though prepared to serve, the volunteers received no

children because the DAC saw very few visitors seeking assistance. In one of her reports, project manager Wanda King reflected that "even though we had no

children ... I am always blessed when I know that I am there to serve others."

In September, a team of three CDS volunteers responded immediately to a request from CAL OES (California Office of Emergency Services) to set up a care center in a Local Assistance Center (LAC) in Sonora, Calif., during fires in that area. The volunteers drove



CDS volunteers play with children in the outside space of a shelter in St. Louis, Mo., after a tornado hit parts of the city. (June 2025)

Photo by Kim Boardman

50 miles from their homes in Modesto, Calif., to the LAC to volunteer for one day. Although they saw no children, their positive attitude was reflected by team member Linda Owen who wrote, "I shared with [my team that] 'They also serve who only stand and wait,' (from John Milton's Sonnet 19, 'On his Blindness')."

CDS Trainings

Children's Disaster Services (CDS) recently held volunteer trainings in Warrensburg, Mo. (Sept. 26-27), and Elizabethtown, Pa. (Oct. 17-18), with a total of 35 participants. The 25-hour training course equips volunteers with the skills needed to understand and respond to children who have encountered both human-caused and natural disasters. As part of the training, participants learn how to set up and operate a CDS care center, and set up and sleep overnight on Red Cross cots.

2026 trainings: If you would like to explore how to serve children following a disaster, there are four trainings currently scheduled for Spring 2026.

- Feb. 20-21: Beaufort First Presbyterian Church, Beaufort, South Carolina
- Feb. 20-21: Oakland CoB, Bradford, Ohio
- Feb. 27-28: Dove of the Desert UMC, Glendale, Arizona
- March 14-15: La Verne CoB, La Verne, California



Warrensburg, Mo.: CDS training participants always enjoy playing with shaving cream—and so do the children they care for as volunteers!

Photo courtesy of CDS

Training and registration information may be found at www.brethren.org/cds/training. You can also contact CDS at cds@brethren.org or by calling 800-451-4407.

Learn more about CDS at www.brethren.org/cds. If you are interested in CDS but cannot attend the currently scheduled trainings, please let CDS know of your interest and keep an eye out for future trainings on our webpage and Facebook (www.facebook.com/cds.cob).

CDS welcomes hosts for future trainings! Please contact CDS if you are interested in finding out how to host a training in your area.



St. Louis, Mo.: Boxes are invaluable resources to encourage child-led play at CDS care centers.

Photo by Kim Boardman

Rebuilding Updates



A two-month rebuilding project in Johnson County, Tenn., began in September 2025, focusing on Hurricane Helene recovery.

Photo courtesy of BDM

Johnson County, Tenn., Project

Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM) rebuilding volunteers traveled to Tennessee to support the recovery from Hurricane Helene almost one year after the storm. Beginning on Sept. 27, 2024, eight counties in Eastern Tennessee, on the border with North Carolina, experienced intense flooding and destruction from the storm system, causing the death of 18 residents and resulting in a federal disaster declaration.

On Sept. 21, 2025, a two-month BDM Rebuilding project opened to serve survivors and the community in Johnson County, Tenn. Volunteer housing was located at First Christian Church in Mountain City as well as at a nearby parsonage owned by Nelson Chapel Baptist Church. BDM volunteers served survivors identified by the Johnson County Long Term Recovery Group with International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) serving as a work partner. This site supported the area through Nov. 15.



Dusty volunteers: a day well spent on a BDM rebuilding site (Johnson County, Tenn. October 2025)

Photo courtesy of BDM

Letcher County, Ky.: BDM volunteers work to stabilize a new wall for a house in the Chestnut Ridge neighborhood.

Photo courtesy of BDM



Letcher County, Ky., Flood Rebuilding

BDM's partnership with HOMES, Inc. (HOMES) to serve residents impacted by flooding in Kentucky in July 2022 remains the primary project location for the Rebuilding Program. Volunteers and leaders continue to stay at the housing site also owned by HOMES in Fleming-Neon.

Work has been completed on the Thompson Branch Neighborhood. Multiple house blessings have taken place in recent months as families moved into their new, safer homes. BDM teams are now working on building new homes in a second location out of the flood plain.

This new development in neighboring Knott County, called Chestnut Ridge, is also part of the

Higher Ground Communities Program, and is slated to be the new home to over 150 individuals and families who were impacted by the floods. The first 40 homes are currently being built by four non-profit organizations, with twelve of those allocated to HOMES to complete with much of the labor coming from BDM volunteers. This site will continue through at least the end of February 2026.

Keke Phooko's BVS Term Ends

Lieketseng "Keke" Phooko completed her Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS) term with BDM at the end of August 2025. She served on the rebuilding project in Letcher County, Ky., during the length of her time. After leaving the rebuilding site, Keke returned home to Lesotho, a landlocked country in Southern Africa, but is in the process of applying to continue another term with BVS in Ireland.



BVS volunteer Keke Phooko in Letcher County, Ky.
Photo courtesy of BDM

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Would you prefer an email version of Bridges, instead of a paper copy? An emailed PDF is easy to read and save, AND you can forward it on to others who may be interested in our ministry. Electronic mailings help BDM cut down on printing and postage costs, and reduce paper usage which supports Creation Care. If you would like to be added to our Bridges email list, send an email to bdm@brethren.org or call 800-451-4407. Bridges is also available online at www.brethren.org/bdm/updates.

Local Disasters: An Opportunity to Act Quickly

by Denny Skeweris, district disaster coordinator, West Marva district

On May 13, 2025, a rain event brought more than five inches of rain in a short period of time to areas of Allegany County, Md. As I worked that day, I received alert after alert on my phone, warning me of the potential flash flood danger in neighboring counties. In my area in Garrett County, Md., the rain was just a typical shower. It was hard to imagine that only 30 minutes away a devastating flash flood was wreaking havoc. On social media that evening, videos and photos of the flooding filled my newsfeed, showing just a glimpse of the devastation that rattled parts of Allegany County.

As the West Marva district disaster coordinator (DDC), I sent out communications to the three churches in the affected areas. Although the church buildings were not affected, many congregation members were. I knew we needed to get involved in some way.

The hardest thing for me was waiting on return phone calls, texts, and emails. I contacted the Allegany

County Department of Emergency Services (EMS) and was able to find a point person for future communication. What they needed most and quickly were cleaning supplies. In the first 24 hours, Oak Park Church of the Brethren started a cleaning supply drive and delivered the supplies just a few days later. We also hosted a pet food drive and collected hundreds of pounds of food for pets of those affected by the flooding. I secured a fork lift to help unload supplies at the assigned work center. Through a district-wide communication, we were able to bring volunteers in to help with the cleanup.

Maryland Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), along with Allegany County EMS, conducted an assessment six to eight weeks after the flood. In response to a call by Brethren Disaster Ministries, Judy and David Braune (Mid-Atlantic district) and I volunteered to help with the assessment. We were assigned up to 14 homes to visit. We talked to the

homeowners to find out what recovery work had already been done and what remained. While some had finished their repairs, others were still in the process, while a few were still waiting on financial assistance.

As a member of the Western Maryland Long Term Recovery Group, I am able to help communities affected by disasters. And while I wasn't fully prepared for the disaster to be in my own back yard, this was a first-hand learning experience for me. A few months later, when another remarkable flood hit the Wheeling, W.Va., area, I knew who to call and what questions to ask. Four days after the flooding in that area, West Marva District delivered a trailer load of supplies for flood survivors.

I couldn't have gotten as far as I did without the help of the Brethren Disaster Ministries office. Thanks to Jenn Dorsch-Messler and Kim Gingerich for their leadership and support. Special thanks also to Jeff McKee, DDC of the Mid-Atlantic district.

Brethren Connections Lead to New Partnerships in Tennessee

The Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM) Rebuilding Program uses its connections to help identify new project locations to serve survivors of disasters. Those connections are often through previous partners or organizations they suggest, or through national, state, and territory networks.

In September 2025, BDM opened a two-month rebuilding project in Johnson County, Tenn., to support recovery from the devastation caused by Hurricane Helene in 2024. The partnerships in this new project location, specifically with International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) and First Christian Church in Mountain City (where the project is based), were developed through positive relationships that BDM and the Church of the Brethren had with other faith connections as well as

BDM's reputation as a reliable and steadfast partner.

BDM has partnered with IOCC in several ways in recent years. It has been a long-time global partner in locations where local Orthodox churches serve their communities, providing a way for BDM to support humanitarian work where it has no Brethren connections or other partners with which to work. This has included Emergency Disaster Fund (EDF) grants supporting IOCC's responses to the Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Hamas wars. Domestically, through a \$30,000 EDF grant in 2023, BDM supported IOCC's 2021 tornado recovery work in western Kentucky, allowing survivors in Marshall County, next to the BDM Dawson Springs, Ky., site, to get the help they needed.

IOCC has also had positive connections with the Church of the Brethren through the Material Resources (MR) program at the Brethren Service Center in New Windsor, Md. IOCC requested Orthodox churches to make and deliver Church World Service (CWS) kits to the center which were then processed and shipped upon request by IOCC to locations in the US and around the world.

In response to Hurricane Helene, IOCC has supported survivors by working with local recovery groups in three counties in Tennessee, with their volunteers based in Unicoi County. In early 2025, IOCC requested that BDM join their work in nearby Johnson County, having repeatedly shared that they were excited about

continued on next page

partnering with BDM based on its reputation, previous collaborations, and the skill and consistency provided by the faithful Church of the Brethren network.

Knowing that BDM needed a housing site in Johnson County, IOCC introduced it to First Christian Church, which has been housing various volunteers, sometimes over 100 at a time, to work on the rebuilding needed in the area. Pastor

Dwayne serves as both the church's lead pastor and as a leader of the county's Long Term Recovery Group. He and the church worked cooperatively with BDM to establish the housing site, motivated partly by their dedication to bringing help to the area, but also by Pastor Dwayne's special connection to and place in his heart for the Church of the Brethren. His father lived in the Pacific Northwest and had a close

relationship with a Brethren pastor who brought him to Christ, baptized him, and later officiated at his memorial service. Pastor Dwayne was very interested in partnering with the denomination that helped build his father's faith.

BDM's positive reputation, project leadership model, and openness to collaborate have once again been the way the Lord has opened doors to the communities where BDM is needed.

Waging Peace in South Sudan

In South Sudan, the contrast of growing violence escalating toward civil war with the Church of the Brethren programming building peace, meeting human needs, and planting churches reminds us of what God can do when a few faithful people persevere. Recent key updates in South Sudan, supported by Emergency Disaster Fund (EDF) grants, include:

Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in Northern South Sudan

- Two **Roundtable Dialogues for Peace**, facilitated in the communities of Mayom and Abiemnhom Counties, engaged 110 participants (70 men, 40 women, including 25 youth), and culminated in the **Joint Community Peace Declaration**, signed by community leaders, demonstrating that grass roots community-based activities can help foster a shared commitment to reconciliation and collaboration.
- Chiefs, elders, religious leaders, women's groups, and youth associations participated actively, ensuring broad representation and legitimacy.

Humanitarian Relief Distribution in Northern South Sudan

- Emergency non-food items were distributed to 4,500 vulnerable households, reaching an estimated 33,000 individuals. Beneficiary selection was conducted transparently with community committees, enhancing fairness and reducing grievances.
- Items included blankets, cooking utensils, soap, plastic sheets, sleeping mats, mosquito nets, and buckets.

New Programming in Southern South Sudan

- New initiatives started in September 2025 for vulnerable South Sudanese refugees returning from Kenya, Uganda, and Sudan to the Mangateen displaced persons camp near the South Sudan capital of Juba.
- Emergency distributions to 2,428 households included household kits (bedding, cooking supplies, plastic sheeting, blankets, sleeping mats) and food (maize, oil, salt).
- Livelihood skills training was provided for women and girls.
- Other areas being addressed include women's health, peacebuilding, trauma healing, and counseling.
- Similar programming supports families from Magway, Torit State, who are returning after their crops were destroyed and homes were burned by nomadic cattle herders.



Participants of the roundtable discussions in Mayom and Abiemnhom Counties (northern South Sudan) celebrate the signing of the Joint Community Peace Declaration "which ... stands as a powerful symbol of unity, demonstrating the willingness of the communities to embrace reconciliation and sustained collaboration."

Photo courtesy of the Church of the Brethren South Sudan Mission/Brethren Global Service

BDM Program Survey

Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM), including Children's Disaster Services, the Rebuilding Program and Global Response, is undergoing a program review that includes a survey (see information below), stakeholder group meetings, interviews with program volunteers, and discussions with church leaders. Input is needed from anyone who engages with Brethren Disaster Ministries or the Church of the Brethren on any level.

The goals of the review include program improvements, increasing the number of program volunteers, improving the volunteer experience, exploring other initiatives that could enhance the BDM ministries, and bolstering the connection between volunteering and faith. The information gathered will also assist BDM in writing a domestic program development grant proposal for the Lilly Foundation.

Survey: Will you please help us by participating in the survey and providing your perspective and suggestions? As much feedback as possible is important for this information gathering and strategic look forward. Visit www.brethren.org/bdm/survey or click on the QR Code to find the survey. **The survey deadline has been extended to December 15, 2025.** If you miss this deadline, you may still email your thoughts to bdm@brethren.org.



DR Congo Update: “(A) story of hope, compassion and shared humanity”

The Winter and Summer editions of Bridges detailed the invasion of Goma and other parts of the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo or DRC) by M23, a well-armed militia supported by the government of Rwanda. Earlier EDF grants provided emergency food and shelter for displaced and refugee families. During a May 2025 trip to Burundi, Roy Winter met with leaders of the Eglise des Freres au Congo (Church of the Brethren in Congo) to develop a larger coordinated response program to address the needs of families in the occupied territories in DRC's North and South Kivu provinces as well as Congolese refugees in Burundi.

The following quotes, translated from French, are excerpts from the mid-term report of the DR Congo Church disaster response team covering programming from June 1–Aug. 31, 2025.

“This report testifies to the commitment of the Church of the Brethren in Congo, the Church of the Brethren in Burundi, and their international partners, to pursue a common mission: that of saving lives, restoring dignity and strengthening the resilience of populations affected by crises. In an environment marked by violence, forced displacement, hunger and invisible trauma, this humanitarian program has become a refuge of hope for thousands of families.”

“At the halfway point, the fruits of this mission are already palpable. [In Burundi] refugee mothers in Bujumbura and [the] Musenyi [refugee camp] in Rutana province have been able to feed their children, pay rent, or perhaps buy essential medicines with the help of modest cash assistance. Displaced families in Uvira [DRC],

after days without meals, have regained food security thanks to food distribution. In Rutana, the purchase of land [near the camp] and the construction of a building that will serve as a church for refugees from the Church of the Brethren is not only a material asset: it is a strong symbol, that of a lasting community anchorage, of a space where faith and solidarity build resilience.”

“During the trauma healing and awareness-raising workshops on gender-based violence in Uvira and Rutana, the victims of violence, long locked in silence and shame, found words, liberating tears and, above all, a community ready to listen and support. These moments are not only measured in numbers, but in lives transformed.”

“None of this would have been possible without the support already provided: US\$130,000 disbursed by ... Brethren Disaster Ministries. These funds have helped to lay the solid foundations of the program, to hire staff, to secure logistics, and to give concrete responses to the most urgent needs.”

“But the road is not yet complete. Challenges remain: the closure of banks in North Kivu, UNHCR’s administrative delays in [the camp in] Burundi, and regional insecurity. Yet, none of these constraints have broken the momentum of the program. On the contrary, they have revealed its adaptability, rigorous management, and

transparency. The small part of the funds not yet used are secured, the beneficiaries are identified, the operational plans already ready.”

“This mid-term report is not just an accountability: it is an invitation to continue a story of hope, compassion and shared humanity.”

Through September 2025 EDF grants totaling \$215,000 have supported this ministry. Key programming included:

- Hiring and training staff to implement programming
- Cash distributions completed for:
 - 1,000 urban refugees in Bujumbura, Burundi
 - 3,100 refugees in Musenyi Refugee Camp in Burundi
- Food distributions completed for 475 households in Uvira, South Kivu Province, DR Congo
- Psychosocial activities:
 - Three trauma healing workshops, two in Uvira (DRC) and one in Musenyi, reached 90 participants, helping survivors of violence begin their journey toward recovery
 - Two workshops on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) trained 40 facilitators to raise awareness and support victims, creating safe spaces for expression, solidarity, and resilience
- Land acquired and temporary community building/church built beside the Musenyi Refugee Camp



During the first trauma healing and awareness-raising workshops on gender-based violence in Uvira (DR Congo) and Rutana (Burundi), “victims of violence, long locked in silence and shame, found words, liberating tears and, above all, a community ready to listen and support.”

Photo courtesy Eglise des Freres au Congo

BRIDGES is published three times a year by the
Brethren Disaster Ministries of the
Church of the Brethren.

Executive Director for Service Ministries: Roy Winter

Editor: Sharon Franzén

Design: Debbie Noffsinger



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Brethren Disaster Ministries

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Kentucky Partner: More Than Disaster Recovery

Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM) Rebuilding Program's local partner in Eastern Kentucky's Letcher County to support the recovery from July 2022 flooding is HOMES, Inc. (HOMES). Originally a project of Mennonite Central Committee, HOMES began in the 1980s and has always focused on more than just initial disaster recovery by working to repair homes in the area and to provide affordable rental properties.

HOMES approaches its disaster recovery work with an eye toward the future. It has made mitigation a priority to make sure that survivors, whether returning to their homes or moving to new homes on higher ground, are not impacted by flooding in the same way again. Before making repairs to a home, it is raised above the flood level. BDM has worked on some of these homes to build the decking that is required to enter the elevated house. HOMES is also part

of larger projects such as the Higher Ground Communities which allow families to move into a new house on reclaimed coal mining land far from the flood plain. This includes the homes in Thompson Branch and Chestnut Ridge, supported by the work of BDM volunteers.

HOMES has developed many initiatives in its efforts to look beyond construction work on houses to support the community and their ability to afford to live and work there. One such initiative is its solar program, developed as a "social enterprise" to address the growing cost of electricity. For some families, including those who own the new houses that BDM volunteers have helped to build, this allows them to stay in

their homes with a monthly electricity bill of around \$25. HOMES is able to use the profits from residents and businesses who can afford to pay the full amount for the solar installation to support the other work that they do for lower income families needing housing support.

Find out more about the work that HOMES is doing in the community, in addition to the work BDM is supporting, at their website www.homesincorporated.org.



Solar panels can be seen on the roofs of several Thompson Branch (Letcher County, Ky.) homes on which BDM volunteers worked.

Photo courtesy of BDM