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Housing assistance on the way

By ANITA LEE - calee@sunherald.com

GULFPORT -- While living in temporary housing, Rosemarie Raboteau spends her days helping others secure homes as part of her job with Habitat for Humanity in Hancock County.

At last, Raboteau, too, will have a home of her own. She is one of three Coast residents already approved for a down payment on a house through Regional Employer Assisted Collaboration of Housing, an unprecedented collaboration of government, business and nonprofit groups trying to help workers unable to afford housing in the post-Katrina environment.

The Gulf Coast Renaissance Corp. announced the launch of REACH, more than a year in the making, at a news conference Monday in Gulfport.

"The biggest obstacle we have faced in our recovery on the Gulf Coast has been available and affordable housing," Coast businessman Anthony Topazi, chairman of Renaissance, told the nonprofit and business partners gathered for the announcement. Renaissance will make available \$40 million in federal funds to help 2,000 families buy homes.

Northrop Grumman kicks off its program next week. The shipbuilder hopes 170 employees will participate over the next year.

Employers contribute \$5,000 to \$10,000, which Renaissance then triples, to give employees the money they need for down payments. Employees who earn 120 percent or less of the median income must participate in homeowner counseling to qualify for the grant money or forgivable loan.

Northrop Grumman has chosen to offer five-year forgivable loans.

Topazi also announced that a \$2 million pool of down payment money will be available for employers who are unable to put up funds. The initial outlay of \$500,000 will go to local governments, nonprofits and school districts.

"We're going to take the opportunity to get as many city employees involved as we can," said Gulfport Fire Chief Pat Sullivan, who pointed out that public safety workers, government employees and schoolteachers often need help with the escalating cost of housing, especially when insurance payments are factored into the equation.

Kimberly LaRosa, president and CEO of Renaissance, said all the pieces have been put into place for a successful program, including partnerships with organizations that will have housing counselors available in each Coast county.

Homeowner loans are being processed for one applicant in each Coast county to test the program.

Workshop details

Businesses can send representatives to Renaissance workshops on the REACH program. All workshops begin at 10 a.m. Because space is limited, those interested should RSVP, indicating the workshop they want to attend, at ssapet@msgcrc.com. **Hancock County workshops:** Sept. 5 and Sept. 8 at the Bay St. Louis conference room, 598 Main St.

For businesses unable to participate in the workshops: call 228-896-3386.

Harrison County workshops: Sept. 4, MGCCC dining room, 21500 B. St., West Harrison County; Sept. 10, D'Iberville Civic Center, 10359 Auto Mall Parkway; Sept. 11, Donal Snyder Community Center, 2520 Pass Road, Biloxi; Sept. 16, Herbert Wilson Recreation Center, 3225 Hancock Ave., Gulfport; Sept. 17, Gateway United Methodist Church, 16020 S. Swan Road, Gulfport.

Jackson County workshops: 10 a.m., Sept. 18, Merchants & Marine Bank, conference room, 3118 Pascagoula St.; St. Paul United Methodist Church, 6716 U.S. 90, Ocean Springs.

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