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## WV VOAD quarterly meeting dates

WV VOAD and its member agencies met March 6 to discuss current projects and provide updates on ongoing work. Upcoming meetings, set for 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at St. Thomas Catholic Church, 624 Kanawha St., in Gassaway, are as follows:

- ♦ June 5
- ♦ Sept. 11
- ♦ Dec. 4

Contact:  
WV VOAD  
815 Alderson St.  
Williamson, WV 25661  
(304) 235-2692 Ext. 8

# Bridge Project completes 50th new bridge

The WV VOAD Bridge Project has completed its 50th bridge.

A team of volunteers with Mennonite Disaster Service, under the direction of team leaders Peter and Susan Thiessen (see story on pg. 4), finished building the bridge March 21 in Clay County.

Funded by the West Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church, the Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia and Presbytery Disaster Assistance, the project was for a family whose private access bridge was destroyed in the June 2016 flood. The homeowners have been without safe, reliable access to their home since the previous span washed out and were stretching an extension ladder over a creek to cross.



The WV VOAD Bridge Project's 50th bridge was completed this month in Ivydale, Clay County.

Their new bridge marks a major milestone for the WV VOAD Bridge Project. Fifty completed bridges now have been built in nine flood-damaged counties around the state.

The WV VOAD Bridge Project is a collaboration between voluntary organizations, government agencies, businesses and community groups to rebuild private bridges that were destroyed or damaged during flooding.

The project began in 2015 after several floods in the southern part of the state left more than 500 families

with damaged or destroyed bridges.

"We saw kids missing school, we had situations where ambulances could not get to people in need and we had people who couldn't do basic things like going to the grocery store," said Jenny Gannaway, WV VOAD executive director.

Working with JZ Engineering of Harrisonburg, Va., project collaborators developed an innovative plan to engineer state-of-the-art bridges that would exceed federal standards and withstand future flooding. The WV VOAD Bridge Project began construction of its first span on Dec. 4, 2015. The bridge was complete within a week, setting the standard for what was to come.

*Cont. on pg. 2*

*50th bridge completed, Cont. from pg. 1*

“We looked at every problem that arose and we just found an answer,” Gannaway said. “It really is about the whole community coming together to make these projects happen. We want to thank all the agencies that have helped with funding and we appreciate the help from everyone who has been involved in this successful endeavor.”

In 2016, less than a year after its inception, the Bridge Project was honored as National VOAD’s 2016 Innovative Program of the Year.

The shortest bridge that has been completed was 12 feet long; the longest was a 90-foot-2-inch span in Mingo County that took about two years of planning.

Multiple VOAD member agencies and other organizations, including Mennonite Disaster Service and American Baptist Men, have provided volunteers, often from around the country, to help construct the bridges. Many other agencies and philanthropic organizations, such as Adventist Community Service and Community Lutheran Partners, have provided funding for the projects. Staffing to do permitting and case management has been provided by the Benedum Foundation.

Volunteers with Mennonite Disaster Service have contributed an estimated \$700,000 in in-kind labor, not to mention much more in donated funds and materials.

Even some out-of-state organizations, such as Team Orwigsburg from Pennsylvania, have developed unique programs to help get bridges built. Team Orwigsburg volunteers have prefabricated bridges in their warehouse, trucked the bridges to flood-damaged properties in West Virginia and installed them with cranes.

Additional bridge projects are ongoing this spring, and work on the 51st bridge is under way. Many more projects are in the engineering phase and construction will be ongoing throughout the year.

With the support of member agencies, donors and volunteers, WV VOAD looks forward to continuing to build these bridges that keep communities connected and keep West Virginians safe!







## Letter from the Director

WV VOAD and its member agencies are celebrating yet another triumph for the Bridge Project: the 50th bridge constructed to give West Virginians safe access to their homes and connect them with their communities.

When the Bridge Project began, many challenges arose, but WV VOAD and its member agencies committed themselves to undertaking this critical task. It took dedication of volunteers and donors from many different organizations, and perseverance and innovation from our engineers, the permitting team and volunteer team leaders. The project has improved the quality of life and safety of many families. It also has helped mitigate future flooding in areas where disasters have repeatedly caused widespread damage and left residents vulnerable.

WV VOAD wants to thank all our member agencies and all the financial supporters of the Bridge Project, and especially those volunteers who put in the time and effort to build these life-saving structures. We look forward to many more successful projects to improve access for flood survivors and give them peace of mind.

Sincerely,  
*Jenny Gannaway, Executive Director*

## Plan for severe weather before it happens

Being aware of impending weather events, whether it's a late season snow squall or a severe storm, is critical to staying safe and recovering quickly. Here's how to stay on top of severe weather.

- Sign up for weather alerts from FEMA and local news sources to know which weather events are going to impact your area. The American Red Cross has a variety of mobile apps concerning severe weather, floods and other emergencies.
- Check the weather forecast before leaving for extended periods of time outdoors, and watch for signs of approaching storms. Postpone plans if a storm is imminent.
- Develop a disaster plan for you and your family for your home, work and school. Identify a safe place to take shelter in your home.
- Make sure you have an emergency preparedness kit ready for when severe weather happens.
- Have an alternative way to charge your phone or any device requiring power.
- Check on people who are elderly, very young, or physically or mentally disabled if there are alerts for severe weather.
- Don't forget about pets and livestock. Make sure they are in a safe place and prepared for the weather event. Your own life and safety are priority.



**WV VOAD** is a humanitarian association of independent organizations that may be active in all phases of disaster. Its mission is to identify unmet needs and facilitate efficient streamlined service delivery to those imperiled or impacted by disaster while eliminating duplication of effort through cooperation, coordination, communication, collaboration in the four phases of disaster: preparation, response, recovery and mitigation.

## Voluntary organizations dedicate new homes for flood survivors in several counties

WV VOAD member agencies celebrated the completion of several construction projects this month and watched as some overjoyed flood survivors began the fun work of moving in!

In Rainelle, **Appalachia Service Project** and **World Renew** helped construct and fund a home for a family with several young children who were displaced in the June 2016 flood. Their new home also was made possible by generous donations from the **Cales Foundation**, the **United Methodist Committee on Relief**, **Catholic Charities West Virginia** and the **Greater Greenbrier Long-Term Recovery Committee**.

In Richwood, a senior citizen whose home caved in during the flood became the recipient of the sixth new home in **Faith Villas**, the neighborhood created specifically for flood survivors and funded by **Neighbors Loving Neighbors**. Her new house was built by **Appalachia Service Project** with some funding provided by **United Way of Southern West Virginia**.

And in Clay County, a family of four who lost everything in the flood have a brand new home to call their own after more than a year of living with relatives.

**Miranda** and **Carlos Salisbury** were grateful their children, 14-year-old **Owen** and 19-year-old **Danielle**, were not home June 23, 2016 when the flood hit. Water rushed into their Precious home so quickly the couple didn't have a lot of time to get out. Miranda could only save a couple of things, one of which was her son's prized video game system, his "favorite thing in the world."

"I said, 'It's not going to take everything,'" Miranda said of the flood.

Floodwater eventually reached eight feet into their home, nearly to the ceiling. Everything was destroyed and the home was uninhabitable.

The family had lived there for seven years and had just installed a brand new above-ground pool about two weeks before the flood hit.

"We did lose a lot," Miranda said, "but we kept what was really important — our family. I feel like we gained a lot, too. We have met some really amazing, beautiful people."

A case manager with the Disaster Case Management Program, administered by WV VOAD, has helped the **Salisburys** through the long recovery process. **Appalachia Service Project** constructed their new home over the winter, with additional funding from the **West Virginia University Foundation** and some furnishings provided by **Catholic Charities West Virginia**.

"It took longer than we expected — we had to overcome the weather and other obstacles," said **Chris Schroeder**, flood recovery coordinator with ASP. "It really was a humongous team effort."

Miranda Salisbury said, "We are very blessed and excited to have our own space. We know everyone worked so hard to make it happen."

The family's new home sits high up on a hill off Maysel Laurel Ridge Road, near a family member's property and about 15 minutes from their old home in Precious. It has an expansive view of sky and trees.

"That's my favorite thing about living up here," Miranda said. "We aren't anywhere near the water."



A Clay County family moved into their new home this month after living with relatives since their Precious home was destroyed in the June 2016 flood.



Multiple WV VOAD member agencies, along with other local community groups, contributed funding and helped with the labor on this new Rainelle home.





## UMC project gives Kanawha County family a fresh start

A Clendenin family whose lives were turned upside down after the June 2016 flood has moved into a new home thanks to the work of the West Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church and a groundbreaking rebuilding project.

Miranda Nabers, a case manager working through the conference to help survivors of the June 2016 flood, has assisted a family of four through the recovery process since they lost their Cobb Avenue home in

the flood.

The family was visiting relatives out of town when the flood hit. Their entire home was submerged, their two dogs perished and all their belongings were destroyed.

"It was terrible timing," Nabers said. "They had just bought that land right before the flood."

The family, which includes two young children, lived with relatives for more than a year and a half after their home was destroyed.

They now are the owners of a brand new mobile home, the product of a unique partnership between the United Methodist conference and a technical school in Upshur County.

Each year, students at the Fred W. Eberle Technical School in Buckhannon build and auction off a manufactured home. The conference purchased the 2017 model and had it transported and placed on an elevated foundation on the family's Clendenin land.

The conference also paid for the 10-foot foundation to be constructed to get the home out of the floodplain. A crane then moved the home, in two pieces, onto the foundation.

"The family was there, and that was a great thing for them to see," Nabers said. "That was a cool experience to watch the kids get to see that. They were pretty pumped. They said, 'They're putting our house on a crane! It's in the air!'"

Volunteers from Cross Lanes United Methodist Church and Clendenin United Methodist Church, as well as the conference's own disaster response team, helped finish construction on the home and build stairs and decking to make it accessible.

"It was a great partnership," Nabers said of all the volunteers and organizations that helped get the family moved into their new home. "They wanted a clean slate. They're very excited."

# Spotlight:

## Canadian couple donates months each year to help West Virginians rebuild

When Peter Thiessen retired from a career in construction, he couldn't imagine spending his time lounging around a pool in Palm Springs.

But working in the mud and muck of flood-damaged, rural West Virginia, about 2,100 miles from his home in Okotoks, Canada? He signed right up.

Peter and his wife, Susan, a retired dental assistant, are volunteer team leaders for Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), a WV VOAD member agency and a major contributor and collaborator for the WV VOAD Bridge Project.

When Peter contacted MDS back in 2015 looking for volunteer opportunities, he heard the group might be attempting to rebuild some of West Virginia's flood-damaged private bridges.

"I was keenly interested," said Peter, who had previously done relief work in rural Kentucky for three years in the 1990s.

"I knew the region, I knew what the mountains meant and I said, 'That's the place for us.'"

With his background in commercial and residential construction, Peter and Susan traveled to Lincoln County in 2015 to help MDS determine, "Can we do bridges with volunteers? Can it be done?"

The faith-based group has for decades done relief work in many locations around the country, but most of those programs involve rebuilding houses.

"We did a pilot project, and it worked," Peter said. "We had no idea where this story would go two and a half years ago. We innocently said we'd commit to five bridges, and here we are."



The Thiessens met with Sen. Joe Manchin at a bridge site in 2017.



Susan and Peter Thiessen have been traveling to West Virginia since 2015 to help manage projects for the WV VOAD Bridge Project.

The WV VOAD Bridge Project has completed 50 bridges now, and the Thiessens have helped with at least 47 of them.

Each year, the Thiessens devote four to six months of their lives — several months in the spring and several months in the fall — to spearheading bridge construction in West Virginia.

The couple, married for more than 40 years, have specific roles.

"She's the administrator and I do the field work," Peter said. "We are a team."

Each Sunday evening, Peter gets a new team of volunteers, usually about 10.

"MDS knows my needs for bridge-building, the kind of people I need," he said. "They don't have to be skilled. I give them leadership and they come ready to work."

Volunteers come scattered from states all over the country and sometimes Canada. Often the Thiessens and a crew can construct a bridge in as little as a week.

*Cont. on pg. 7*



*Spotlight: Canadian volunteers, Cont. from 6*

In February, the Thiessens led volunteer teams to build two new bridges in the Alkol area of Lincoln County, where homes and bridges were destroyed and damaged during flooding in 2015. They are now tackling bridge projects in Clay County and the Clendenin area of Kanawha County, all which sustained major damage in the June 2016 flood.

They spent the first couple of weeks of this year's visit sleeping at the Duval Volunteer Fire Department in Griffithsville, Lincoln County, before setting up a base at the Stillwaters Ministries Church in Clendenin. That space, which was severely damaged in the 2016 flood, was specifically renovated to house volunteers.

"It is always a bit of a challenge to go into a disaster, to these areas that have been flooded, and find places to stay," Peter said.

It's the coordination of WV VOAD and its member agencies to secure funding, volunteers and materials that makes the Bridge Project work.

"This is what is unique about these kinds of things," Peter said. "We drop into an area and we have to learn to work as a team. They don't know our ways; we don't know their ways. It becomes a juggling act of learning how to harmoniously work together—that's typical of a disaster. It's a setting under stress. We come in and put the team together.

"Now, two and a half years later, we look back and say, 'Those were interesting beginnings.' But we are working well together."



This volunteer team, under the direction of Peter and Susan Thiessen, spent two weeks in late February and early March building bridges in the Alkol area of Lincoln County, which sustained flood damage in 2015.

## Team O heading back to West Virginia to build more bridges



Volunteers with **Team Orwigsburg** from Pennsylvania have wrapped up prefabrication of several bridges and will head to West Virginia next month to install and complete them. They will be working at several properties in Clay and Kanawha counties where bridges were destroyed and damaged by the June 2016 flood. Team O, a multi-denominational nonprofit group, has volunteers who construct the bridges in a warehouse on the weekends. Last year, the group funded, built and installed two bridges in Clay County. This year, with funding from the **West Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church**, the **United Way**, **WV VOAD** and the **Kanawha County Long-Term Recovery Committee**, they will install two new spans and replace the decking on another damaged bridge. The work is planned for mid-April.



Many WV VOAD member agencies played a part in the completion of this Clendenin home for a flood survivor who lost his residence in the June 2016 flood. Through the disaster case management of the **United Methodist Committee On Relief (UMCOR)**, funding partnerships with **Neighbors Loving Neighbors**, **WV VOAD** and **UMCOR** and volunteer labor provided by **Mennonite Disaster Service**, **UMCOR** and several **Lutheran** volunteer teams, the homeowner was able to move in this month!

A group of volunteers with the **Ohio Amish Anabaptist Service Program** spent about four weeks this winter working on home projects for flood survivors in the Clendenin area, doing everything from painting, plumbing and electrical work to major elevation projects.



**WV VOAD and its member agencies are always working to help West Virginians recover and rebuild after disasters.**

**For more information and photos, visit our website, [www.wvvoad.org](http://www.wvvoad.org), and [facebook.com/wvvoad](https://facebook.com/wvvoad).**



Volunteers with **Brethren Disaster Ministries** spent a week in Kanawha and Clay counties repairing homes damaged in the June 2016 flood. This group of about a dozen traveled from Pennsylvania to help flood survivors. They painted and did cabinetry work, installed drywall and flooring, and renovated bathrooms.