

# *Self-Help Virginia Helping Communities Help Themselves to Water*

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Running water is a convenience most of us take for granted as we use it for drinking, cooking, cleaning, and other daily activities. Unfortunately, there are still some communities in Virginia without running water in their homes.

Every day, people in these communities must rely on dilapidated wells or cisterns, or they collect water from relatives, neighbors, or public springs, then haul it back to their homes. The worry of not having water for household needs is constantly on their minds. To combat this problem for Virginia's low-income citizens, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) initiated the Self-Help Virginia Program in 1998.

Self-Help Virginia is designed to help smaller communities meet the challenge

of installing affordable water and wastewater systems. This unique program uses a community problem-solving, dollar-saving approach to bring running water to rural areas. The DHCD Community Development Block Grant and Appalachian Regional Commission programs provide funding for Self-Help Virginia. The program relies on neighborhood volunteers, creativity, and dedication to provide water and wastewater services to communities that would not have them otherwise.



Photo Source: Experiments in Sustainable Urban Living

# Collecting Water from Relatives Dilapidated Wells Dilapidated Wells Cisterns Public Springs Public Springs Cisterns

## How It Works

For Self-Help Virginia projects, neighborhood residents act as their own project managers. People of every age and walk of life volunteer to lay water and sewer lines, cook for workers, control traffic, shovel, or solicit donations of money and materials. Self-Help Virginia projects cost about half as much as private ventures and inspire communities to come together to achieve a common goal.

(An article titled "Community Self-Help: Sometimes the Best Helping Hand is the One at the End of Your Own Arm" is available on the National Environmental Services Center Web site at [www.nesc.wvu.edu](http://www.nesc.wvu.edu).)



One community that achieved commendable success was Smith Ridge, Virginia. This small, rural village in Tazewell County served as a pilot community for the program in 1998. The citizens banded together and laid 36,350 feet of pipe in three months. In the process, they set a national record for self-help projects by installing 2,440 feet of pipe—the most pipe ever installed in a single day.

Narcie Smith was the oldest resident of Smith Ridge at the time of the project. This 98 year-old ball of energy says, "Getting water from a faucet makes a world of difference. No longer will we have to go down and wonder if the cistern is dry before we can get the washing out."

Ann Shreve, one of Narcie's daughters, commented on another benefit of the community's hard work. "You got to know everybody. Before, you just knew their names and that was it. People outside Smith Ridge would say, 'You people are crazy!'" Laughingly, she recalls, "They don't know what they missed!"

## Success Breeds More Success

By the end of 2004, there will be 32 Virginia communities serving approximately 3,000 people with clean, safe public water or wastewater systems (or both) thanks to the Self-Help Virginia Program. The cost of constructing these systems conventionally would have been \$17 million. But the price for these 32 projects using volunteer labor was about \$7 million, resulting in a cost savings of \$10 million. All told, nearly 110 miles of pipe have been installed by community volunteers.

Virginia's Self-Help program has garnered a lot of attention for the innovative and collaborative spirit it creates in each community as neighbors come together to improve their quality of life. Virginia's top elected and appointed officials, including Governor Mark Warner, Lieutenant Governor Tim Kaine, and Secretary of Commerce and Trade Michael Schewel have each volunteered their time to self-help projects in Appalachian communities of Virginia.

"The Self-Help Virginia program has allowed us to connect thousands of low-income Virginians with clean and safe water at a fraction of the cost of conventionally constructed projects," says Bill Shelton, DHCD director. "We are very proud of the program's success, and our agency looks forward to bringing Self-Help Virginia to more communities across the state."

Although Self-Help projects have proven successful in Virginia, the techniques may not be appropriate for all communities. DHCD works with interested towns and villages in assessing capacity and readiness to participate in the program. In addition, communities must meet the following program eligibility requirements:



# Collecting Water from Relatives Cisterns



Photos courtesy of Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development

For Virginia's Self Help projects, residents do most of the work—from laying water and sewer lines to soliciting donations and materials. In doing so, they complete infrastructure projects at half the typical cost. By the end of 2004, volunteer labor on 32 of these projects resulted in savings of more than \$10 million.

- projects must use more volunteers than paid workers;
- projects must demonstrate a minimum cost savings of 40 percent compared to a conventional, contracted approach;
- at least one well-attended community meeting must occur early in the process where strong support for the project is demonstrated; and
- at least 51 percent of the proposed beneficiaries must meet low- or moderate-income guidelines. Signed user agreements are required.

DHCD is committed to responding with creative solutions to unique community challenges. The Self-Help Virginia Program has been an incredible asset to the agency by providing quality leadership and innovative thinking to help communities acquire the water and wastewater services they need.

For more information about Self-Help Virginia visit the DHCD Web site at [www.dhcd.virginia.gov](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov) or call (276) 676-5471.💧

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