

## Richland County's Onsite Mobile Permitting Initiative

### *It's Never Too Late to Mitigate!*

**Richland CO, SC:** On an ordinary day, Brittany Hutcherson can be found in the comfort of an air-conditioned office, sitting in front of her computer, providing guidance on safe building practices and obtaining building permits; but on this day the Richland County Permits Supervisor is seated in a metal folding chair, behind a makeshift counter, in the front yard of a storm-ravaged home.

With her feet planted in soil still damp from the remnants of October 2015's historic flood, Hutcherson is focused on helping homeowners on the road to recovery. "It was outdoors, so it was a little uncomfortable for everyone," said Hutcherson. "But it didn't matter as long as we're helping people," she added.

Hutcherson was asked by Richland County Housing Official, Kecia Lara, to assist with the onsite mobile permitting operation. With prior training and experience in customer service, her priority was to tend to the needs of property owners in the process of rebuilding their homes and lives from the devastation. This initiative was particularly imperative because many of the area's homeowners are elderly and have transportation challenges, which prevented them from visiting the permitting office in person to get the help they needed.

During the event, "the homeowners association was meeting with everyone and introduced our Director of Building Inspections, Donny Phipps," said Hutcherson. "He explained what we do at the county, and how we were going to assist them."

Residents then filled out Boarded-Up -Structure Registration Forms, which allowed them to board up windows and doors to their homes in order to prevent vandalism, and they were provided information on Residential Building Permits. Once the forms were filled out, they were issued the Boarded-up Structure Permits on the spot, free of charge.

The event offered Hutcherson and her colleagues an opportunity to spread the "mitigation message" about safer building practices, such as installing flood vents and elevating a home and its utilities, as well as the importance of purchasing a flood insurance policy. They also distributed flyers with helpful federal and state websites that included FEMA.gov and Floodsmart.gov.

When asked about the challenges an outdoor operation presented, Hutcherson admitted, "We had some issues with technology. We had a generator out there, but sometimes the generator would go off, which would disconnect the printer and computers. The network was hooked up to a hot spot on the cell phone, so the



Permits Supervisor, Brittany Hutcherson and Housing Official, Kecia Lara issuing residential boarded-up-structure permits to residents

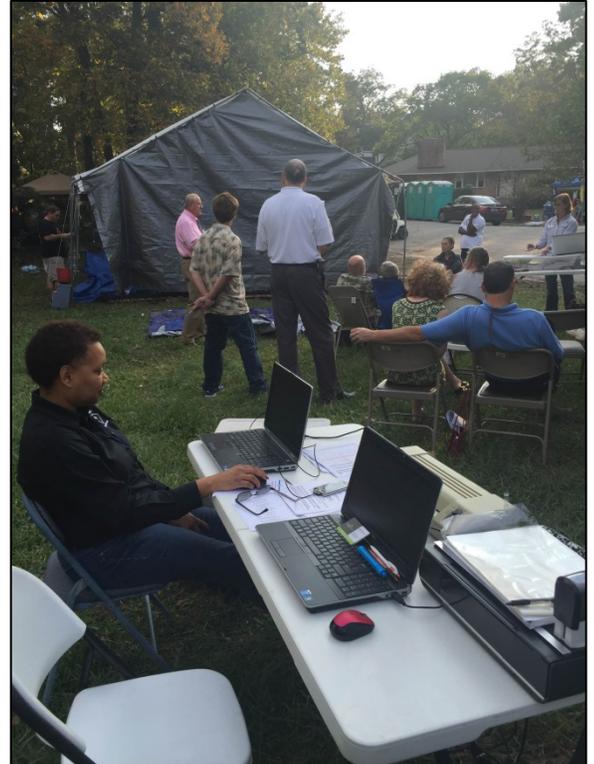


Internet was really slow,” she commented. “But the important thing is that permits were issued and one-on-one mitigation counseling on rebuilding safer and stronger was provided.”

The inaugural event was a small, but successful operation. More than 20 homeowners attended the Richland County event, and the county continues issuing permits while providing mitigation follow-up advice in the office.

“I scanned and attached all of the information in our online permitting system the next day,” said Hutcherson. “People were very grateful and thanking us for taking time out to help with this expedited service. We also provided business cards in case they needed information for other people or wanted to share with those who could not make it, so that they’ll know where to come for permits and advice as well.”

After returning to her office, Hutcherson sat at her desk pondering a few wishful takeaways for Richland County residents. “You can prepare a little bit, but you can’t control Mother Nature,” she said. “Hopefully, property owners benefited from this personalized service, and future disaster recovery will be faster with safer building practices and the purchase of a flood insurance policy.”



Director of Building Inspections, Donny Phipps talking to residents in flood -damaged neighborhood

For more information on rebuilding to safer standards visit <http://www.fema.gov/what-mitigation>.