

Toxic drywall puts end to Catholic Katrina program

by [Bruce Nolan](#)

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NEW ORLEANS (RNS) Operation Helping Hands, the Catholic ministry that employed thousands of volunteers to rebuild nearly 200 homes after Hurricane Katrina, said Wednesday (Sept. 7) it will shut down next summer, sooner than expected, because of its disastrous encounter with toxic Chinese drywall.

"Simply, we didn't have the funding to stretch it any further," said Kevin Fitzpatrick, director of Helping Hands. "And the biggest issue was, we got hit with Chinese drywall."

Fitzpatrick said officials with the Archdiocese of New Orleans have decided to spend their remaining money, about \$2 million, gutting and rebuilding 41 homes tainted with toxic drywall.

The agency also will fulfill commitments to other families already accepted in its rebuilding program, Fitzpatrick said. "But we're not taking on new commitments."

Officials said closing the rebuilding agency will not affect Catholic Charities' 42 other ministries in areas like counseling, literacy, food support and help for battered women.

Fitzpatrick and Catholic Charities President Gordon Wadge said Helping Hands might have continued for two or three years, but for the massive repairs mandated by the tainted drywall.

High-sulfur Chinese drywall entered the U.S. market during the building boom of 2006 and later.

But after living with it a few months, homeowners found the material emitted vapors that corroded electronics, ruined appliances and air conditioning, tarnished jewelry, aggravated respiratory conditions and often drove families from their homes.

Nonprofit agencies that helped rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina soon found they had installed the drywall in more than 200 homes before realizing it was toxic.

Nonprofit groups like Habitat for Humanity and Rebuilding Together New Orleans, like Operation Helping Hands, elected to shoulder the full costs of repairing homes where the drywall was installed.

In many cases, that ran to \$40,000 a home, Fitzpatrick and others said.