

From Sun Senior News, October 2011, reprinted by permission

Neighbors InDeed's Handy Helpers: What They Can—and Can't—Do for You

BY BARRY MACKINTOSH

An up-in-years Lincoln Hills resident recently visited our local Home Depot to buy a stepladder, telling the sales attendant he needed one to change his smoke alarm batteries. Concerned that the resident might fare poorly on a ladder and knowing about Neighbors InDeed, the attendant tactfully suggested he call for a Handy Helper instead.

Good advice! There's no reason for anyone here to risk injury on a ladder when a free Handy Helper is only a call to Neighbors InDeed away.

Not surprisingly, jobs requiring a ladder are among the most common Handy Helper tasks. Replacing smoke alarm batteries and HVAC filters, changing overhead bulbs, and lubricating garage doors accounted for more than a third of the 3552 Handy Helper visits in the last 12 months. If residents requesting these jobs don't have ladders (or adequate stepstools), Handy Helpers will bring their own.

Irrigation systems also prompt many calls. In the past 12 months Handy Helpers made more than 300 visits to program or adjust controllers, adjust or replace sprinkler heads, and replace station valve solenoids.

Other routine Handy Helper jobs include

- minor plumbing tasks like clearing garbage disposals and unclogging drains
- programming thermostats
- replacing refrigerator filters
- fixing doorbell problems
- checking deadbolt plate screws
- hanging pictures and mirrors
- turning mattresses
- moving light furniture and boxes
- checking water heaters
- picking up groceries, meals, and prescriptions for those temporarily incapacitated

Some Handy Helpers can also diagnose and fix simple computer and telephone problems, connect and adjust home entertainment components, and do minor electrical work.

Handy Helpers aren't assigned tasks involving undue personal risk or liability or requiring more than a half-hour to perform. So there are some specific things they DON'T do, like

- checking entire drip systems
- cleaning gutters
- climbing onto roofs or into attics

- working on 14-foot or higher ceilings
- installing grab bars
- replacing plumbing fixtures
- relieving caregivers or performing health care tasks
- installing holiday lights and decorations
- transporting residents or using their bank cards
- running errands outside Lincoln
- relighting pilot lights
- lifting or moving things weighing over 35 pounds

Sometimes a resident will call with an uncommon problem or need that may or may not be within a Handy Helper's capabilities. The Information & Referral volunteer taking the call can arrange for a Handy Helper to come and evaluate the situation. If the Handy Helper feels comfortable undertaking the job, he or she may do it—as when Arnie Sondergard installed a fake owl with a bobbing head to scare pigeons away from a resident's patio lattice. Evidently it worked for a time at least, because Arnie was recalled some months later to install a replacement after the first owl's head stopped bobbing!

If the Handy Helper considers the job beyond his or her scope, the resident may be told to call back for referral to a recommended professional. So whatever the need, Neighbors InDeed may at least have good advice.

Not being professionals themselves, Handy Helpers can sometimes be challenged by such seemingly simple tasks as changing light bulbs. Doug Brown, who previously wrote this column, took over an hour to extract a broken bulb from a microwave and replace it. While screwing in an overhead floodlight, the present writer wedged it against its tapered housing before it was fully seated so that it couldn't be lit or unscrewed. As with Doug's microwave episode, some disassembly was required before the job was completed an hour later. So much for the half-hour rule!

Although we normally know what we're doing, some residents are reluctant to call for a Handy Helper. Perhaps they've always been self-reliant or had spouses who handled everything around the house, and now their situations have changed. I've actually had people apologize for bothering me when I arrived to perform some task.

Don't feel this way! We Handy Helpers have all freely volunteered our time and home maintenance talents to help our fellow residents free of charge (although donations to Neighbors InDeed are always welcome). We get as much satisfaction from being useful and appreciated as you get from our work.

There are many reasons to feel good about living in Lincoln Hills. The availability of Handy Helpers is one. Being a Handy Helper is another. Don't hesitate to call Neighbors InDeed at 223-2763 for help—or to volunteer for our community's most rewarding program.