




Program helps owners remain in their homes; Those facing foreclosures can get assistance through unique local partnership.

CAREN BURMEISTER
Florida Times-Union (Jacksonville)
January 31, 2009

Powered by
 LexisNexis®

In the past three months, 189 Beaches homeowners have defaulted on their mortgages and are facing foreclosure, according to a national online company that tracks such information.

But few of them are taking advantage of Jacksonville's Foreclosure Intervention Program, where counselors work with local banks, mortgage companies, lawyers and some local funding to help homeowners find alternatives to foreclosure.

Jacksonville began the program in May through a partnership with Jacksonville Area Legal Aid and Family Foundations, which provides trained professional staff for marriage and family counseling and consumer credit counseling.

Jacksonville has provided another \$250,000 for 2009, which is available as a last resort to help families catch up on missed payments. That funding provides a no-interest mortgage of up to \$5,000 per household. The "mortgage" will be forgiven if the homeowner stays in the home five years. If the homeowner sells or leaves the home, the mortgage must be paid back.

Since May, 15 homeowners in Jacksonville Beach, 20 in Atlantic Beach and one in Neptune Beach have sought free counseling or assistance through the Foreclosure Intervention Program, said Jacksonville spokeswoman Ginney Walthour.

But that falls far short of the number of people who are eligible. Between Nov. 5 and Jan. 28, there were 89 defaults on single-family home mortgages in Jacksonville Beach, 68 in Atlantic Beach and 32 in Neptune Beach, according to RealtyTrac, a national foreclosure database.

Homeowners who want to participate in the intervention program must undergo counseling at Family Foundations, and the sooner the better. Counselors work with lenders on payment arrangements or to modify the mortgage, so it's important to seek assistance as early as possible, Walthour said.

Jacksonville Mayor John Peyton and other Jacksonville officials held a press conference Wednesday highlighting the case of Biji April, a Jacksonville resident who fell behind in her mortgage payments because of an illness and missed work. After completing the program, April made up some of her missed mortgage payments and the city provided financial assistance for the balance.

"The value of home ownership is incalculable," Peyton said about the intervention program. "Keeping families in their homes is a key way to help give people hope for a brighter future and ensure that our children grow up in a stable environment. I applaud Ms. April for her bravery in reaching out for assistance, and I am pleased that the city, Family Foundations and others were able and willing to provide support to her family."

Of the 470 homeowners who applied for the program, 360 have reached successful solutions, Walthour said. Those who didn't may have left their homes or filed for bankruptcy.

Martha Cox, vice president of resource development with Family Foundations, said Jacksonville has

developed a unique solution for the foreclosure problem and it's important that residents know it's available.

"Our city has come out with an incredibly novel approach to this," Cox said.

With the help of Jacksonville Area Legal Aid, Carolyn Pittman of Atlantic Beach is still living in her house despite years of foreclosure proceedings. Her lawyer, Lynn Drysdale, has been staving off the foreclosure by forcing the mortgage company, Ameriquest, to prove who owns the loan.

Ameriquest has refinanced the 71-year-old widow's mortgage three times since 2001, promising to help Pittman lower her interest rate and monthly payments. But then her original payment more than doubled.

Like many such mortgages, her loan was bundled with other loans and resold. Now, companies such as Ameriquest are stuck with properties they can't do anything with, Drysdale said.

They are still trying to reach a fair resolution in Pittman's case, she said.

"We're absolutely thrilled with the intervention program and that we're doing something about this," Drysdale said.

Cox said the intervention program can only help in situations where it's clear who owns the mortgage. Otherwise, they refer the homeowner to Jacksonville Area Legal Aid.

Funding is still available for families in jeopardy of foreclosures. To sign up for a counseling class, call 630-2489 or contact Family Foundations at 396-4846 or www.familyfoundations.org.

Caren Burmeister can also be reached at (904) 249-4947, ext. 6321.

Copyright 2009 The Florida Times-Union

Copyright © 2008 LexisNexis, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Terms and Conditions Privacy Policy

ksgx Version: Host: w2 C3_DB=c3@kplexdb:3306; GEO_DB=dp-prod@db7; KPLEX_DB=ksg@kplexdb:3306; SESSION_DB=session@kplexdb:3306;