

Community Action Agency offers help to homeowners facing foreclosure

By Neeta Delaney

Yes, the news claims the recession is officially over, but it's hard to convince anyone in Michigan that this is the case. Unemployment here remains high — more than 13 percent — and people continue to lose their homes to foreclosure at alarming rates.

Nearly 327,000 Michigan homeowners are expected to lose their homes to mortgage foreclosure between 2009 and 2012. While for the most part avoiding unemployment in the current economy is beyond the control of the individual, avoiding foreclosure is not. There are things individual homeowners can do to put the odds in their favor. There are options available to help people save their homes. However, if that's not possible or desirable, there are options to help people exit their homes with dignity.

Many of us don't know where to go to find out about our options. And many more believe they are alone in this and that the situation in which they find themselves is somehow their fault. Both of these assumptions lead to shame and embarrassment that can keep us from taking steps to improve our situation.

First of all, a word or two about these crippling assumptions. If you're at risk of losing your home, you are not alone. One in 10 Americans is currently at least one month late on their mortgage payment and 5 million Americans are



currently in some stage of the foreclosure process. Foreclosures are touching all of us — our family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers.

As far as thinking it's your fault you're in this situation, consider this. The majority of Michigan homeowners who are now at risk of losing their homes have prime mortgages, paid money down and could afford their homes when they purchased them. The challenge they now face is that they have either lost a job, had a health crisis and/or are making less than when they purchased the home. They just can't afford their home under this new economic reality.

The bottom line is that the foreclosure crisis is touching all of us and burying our heads in the sand or giving up won't help. We need to know what we can do and where to go to get help in the process. That's where the Community Action Agency (CAA) comes into the picture. The agency's highly trained HUD- and MSHDA-certified foreclosure counselors offer free help to anyone at risk of losing their primary residence. They can help at-risk homeowners in:

■ **Avoiding foreclosures.** They will evaluate your situation, help you with a budget, lay out your options, help you work with your lender including assembling

the required paperwork and advocating on your behalf — all with the utmost of respect and confidentiality. If they determine you are in need of legal advice, they will connect you with a free legal services attorney.

■ **Moving on after an unavoidable foreclosure.** If avoiding foreclosure is not possible, they will help you find affordable housing, access supportive services and lay out a roadmap to help you get back on your feet.

In addition to seeking the assistance of a free, local CAA foreclosure counselor, at-risk homeowners must also be on the alert to avoid falling prey to foreclosure rescue scams. Michigan is one of three states in the country targeted by scam operations seeking to prey on vulnerable homeowners. In fact, the FBI has a special task force here in the state to deal with the problem.

Remember, a billboard, a newspaper ad or professional-looking salesman does not translate into legitimacy. With foreclosure prevention assistance, the only legitimate, highly trained, certified help is free at your local Community Action Agency. But many people

don't realize this and are fooled by the ads they see.

We have found that the best protection against scams is an informed homeowner who follows this simple advice:

■ **Never pay anyone money up front to help you save your home from foreclosure.**

■ **Never trust anyone who promises they can save your home.**

■ **Never sign anything you truly don't understand.**

So, while the foreclosure crisis will be with us for a while, at-risk homeowners do have options and their best resource in finding out about these options is a HUD- and MSHDA-certified foreclosure counselor at Community Action Agency. To make an appointment, call 800-438-1845 or 263-7861.

To learn more about foreclosure prevention and how you can help, visit the Community Foreclosure Coalition (Jackson, Lenawee and Hillsdale) website at www.jlhcf.org.

Lenawee United Way is a partner in the Community Foreclosure Coalition.

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