

Program helps families save homes

Contributed by CYNTHIA ROBY

The Urban League of Broward County is now in the business of helping families to keep their homes.

One of seven Urban League affiliates around the country selected by the National Urban League in 2009 to implement the initiative, the ULBC's Restore Our Homes program provides foreclosure prevention counseling for homeowners in jeopardy of losing their homes.

"We were not into foreclosure counseling, but we saw a rising need in the community," said Courtnee M. Biscardi, the Urban League of Broward County's wealth building department program manager said.

The program helped the Quant family, who in 2006 closed on their new home in Miramar. The two-bedroom, one-bath abode was intended as the couple's starter home. "This was at the height of the [real estate] bubble," Tina Quant, 35, said. "We had been paying almost \$1300 for a two-bedroom apartment and knew we wanted to own."

But one year later, Rigoberto Quant, 34, an ironworker, became unemployed. The Quants, with their two children Jovan, 11 and Jai-lani, 5, relocated to Chicago, where Rigoberto found work. Their home was then back on the market.

"We were then paying the mortgage on it as well as rent on our place in Chicago," Tina Quant said.

"Our realtor eventually found a renter, but still we paid about \$300 out of pocket to meet the full mortgage payment."

In September of 2009, when Rigoberto Quant's employment ended, the family returned to South Florida.

"Rigoberto was receiving a fraction of his salary while on unemployment," Tina Quant said. "We were devastated."

Tina Quant said she contacted her mortgage company, Litton Loan Servicing, to advise them of her husband's employment status.

Litton Loan, she said, suggested that the couple contact the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

"We were told by HUD that their funding [for mortgage modifications] had ceased, and that we would be better off contacting the Urban League of Broward County for assistance," she said.

"We gave them [Urban League] permission to work with our mortgage company in order to advance the modification process. Our application was then processed."

Two weeks later, Tina Quant said, the couple received their first response from Litton Loan.

“We were approved for a loan modification,” she said. “It was a burden lifted.”

Restore Our Home’s hotline, Biscardi said, receives about 100 calls per week from Broward County residents seeking foreclosure help.

“We started to see the statistics growing as far as the number of foreclosures in Broward County. And it makes no sense to do housing-related work and not be prepared to assist these families and individuals,” she said.

According to Tina Quant, her trial modification amount was \$969. The couple, she said, originally had a \$1,332-per-month mortgage payment on a 30-year home loan. The amount did not include taxes and insurance. The loan modification amount is \$1,047, including taxes and insurance, she said.

“We made our first payment on May 1,” said Tina, who now works part-time for the Urban League as a housing assistant.

The modification’s purpose is to reduce the client’s interest up to 2 percent, and then put whatever the arrears, or, amount they owe the bank, back on the principal so the mortgage payment will be affordable, said Garry Bellfleur, who served as the Quant’s

foreclosure counselor.

Most of the program’s clients, Bellfleur said, have an adjustable-rate mortgage (ARM).

“They never took a first-time homebuyer course where they learned about ARMs and its interest, and are unaware that the payments are reset.”

Many, Bellfleur said, are on trial payment plans.

“But after that finishes, they still cannot get the loan modified because the bank is overbooked. They [banks] say that the process takes 30-90 days, but it can take longer,” he said.

The client’s mortgage payment versus their expenses, Bellfleur said, cannot exceed 31 percent of gross monthly income.

“Most of them exceed that,” he said. “There are also clients who are unemployed or have income reduction.”

Foreclosure clients can no longer be profiled, Biscardi added.

“It’s not just a low-to- moderate-income person, which is typically the client we are working with,” she said.

“It’s the new low-to- moderate-income person; the ones who made five to six thousand dollars per month and are now at twelve hundred and are having difficulty coping.”

It is a new population, Biscardi said, “and that’s changed the game, but the necessity is still there.”

According to Biscardi, of the 269 clients that have been involved in the program, 240 have been fully engaged in counseling. Others were referred out to other programs. And of the 240, Biscardi said, only two clients have lost their homes.

“Our goal is to satisfy the client’s case by having them keep their homes,” she said.

For more information about the Restore Our Homes program, to speak with a counselor or make an appointment, call 954-625-2570, Mon. - Fri. 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., or visit <http://www.ulbroward.org>.

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