

Wisconsin program helps residents at risk of foreclosure

By KIRSTEN KLAHN
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MILWAUKEE — When Cassandra Roberson learned she was losing her home to foreclosure, she began to sift through endless paperwork in order to find a way to keep her house.

Roberson said she quickly began to realize that keeping her home was more complicated than she ever could have imagined. It was something she couldn't do alone.

"I was trying to read all these things and not understanding," Roberson said. "Between the tears, between trying to explain to my mother, who right after I lost my job was diagnosed with cancer, it's going to be OK."

Thanks to the Metro Milwaukee Foreclosure Mediation Program, it ended up being more than OK for Roberson and her family, who were able to save their home with the help of a mediator. The program, which began in 2009, has recently expanded and is now offered statewide.

The foreclosure program provides mediation between the homeowner and lender that often can end with the lender reinstating and modifying the loan based on the needs of the homeowners, said Debra Tuttle, executive director of the Metro Milwaukee Foreclosure Mediation Program. Since 2009, the program has helped more than 3,000 families, and on average, just under 50 percent of all mediated cases result in a loan modification.

It also helps eliminate confusion for the homeowners by connecting all Wisconsin foreclosure mediation programs through a single website, Tuttle said.

And, she said, mediators are able to provide hope to families who are on the brink of losing their homes. It's a rewarding job, Tuttle said, and Roberson is a perfect example of that.

"Through mediation, we were able to assist this homeowner in getting a loan modification that offered an affordable payment and lower interest rate," Tuttle said. "Prior to that, she was running into obstacles, delays and ultimately, facing foreclosure. I hope others who hear her story, who may think they're facing insurmountable hurdles, understand that mediation may be an option for them, too."

The Department of Justice provides funding for the program, which is administered through the Milwaukee County Clerk of Courts. In early 2012, Wisconsin Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen allocated \$458,000 for the continuation and expansion of the foreclosure program.

Not only does the program help homeowners, but it also helps neighborhoods and communities that are suffering as a result of foreclosures, Van Hollen said.

The Metro Milwaukee Foreclosure program has estimated that as of July, there were more than 50,000 open residential foreclosure actions in Wisconsin. For every foreclosure that's avoided, the program estimates that it saves communities and stakeholders around \$40,000.

"I'm pleased to support this program and thankful to the many volunteer mediators, housing counselors, attorneys, lenders and others who have helped make it successful in assisting thousands of homeowners," Van Hollen said.

In February, a new process began with the program, which requires notice of mediation in a foreclosure action, Van Hollen said, and will help keep more families in their homes.

"This newly revised model of the mediation process does more to ensure homeowners get the assistance and answers they need more quickly and efficiently, and ensures that the parties stay at the table until the matter is resolved," Van Hollen said.

Homeowners facing foreclosure problems are encouraged to visit www.mediatemilwaukee.com to learn more about their eligibility and fill out a mediation request form. It should be done within 30 days after receiving the foreclosure summons and complaint, but interested parties that have missed that time frame should still call and speak with a mediator, Tuttle said.

"There's always a chance a mediator can still step in and help," Van Hollen said. "The more people the program can reach, the more communities throughout Wisconsin will continue to improve."

"Foreclosure mediation serves the interests of homeowners and lenders," Van Hollen said, "but also entire communities by preventing the devastating loss and neighborhood impact that can come with a foreclosed property."