

Tenacious advocate fights for families

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Joyce Butler was shocked to see her monthly mortgage payment jump \$200 to \$1,593 a month – an amount that was near impossible for her to pay.

She said her bank wouldn't give her a clear explanation why in the 2008 bank statement.

"I was managing it, but just barely," said Butler, 68, who then worked as a lab technician at Jewish Hospital. Her husband was retired.

Butler, of Withamsville, feared she'd have to sell the house she bought in 1995, a bi-level on an acre of land on a quiet street. She pictured having to live out her life in a crowded, assisted-living apartment complex.

Then she met Bill Hanks, a foreclosure prevention expert at Housing Opportunities Made Equal, a private nonprofit housing advocate agency.

He helped prove to the bank that the loan was more than 31 percent of Butler's family income and she was going to have trouble keeping up. It helped that she had kept up with her other bills.

With his help and a lot a patience – it took two years – she whittled her payment to a more manageable \$1,120.

"They gave me a hard time, but he stuck with me," Butler said. "I call him a steady driver."

Hanks' boss, Elizabeth Brown, said hundreds of homeowners have similar stories about Hanks.

863 families helped

Between 2007 and 2010, Hanks helped 863 families in Hamilton County. He saved homes for 542 of those families. When families do have to leave their home, it's often because they reached out to Hanks too late, Brown said.

Despite that success rate, Hanks' job almost disappeared in December.

Funding from the United Way, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation and PNC Bank covered Hanks' \$60,000 salary but only until the foreclosure crisis subsided.

Still, a little more than 6,556 foreclosures were filed last year in Ohio.

When Hamilton County Board of Commissioners President Greg Hartmann, who as former county Clerk of Courts watched foreclosures skyrocket, heard Hanks' work was about to end, he knew he had to help.

He reconfigured how the county would spend federal grant dollars from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and came up with \$50,000.

Of that, \$30,000 is money that wasn't spent in 2010 and \$20,000 came out of the county's 2011 Planning Department budget, which is funded through the grants.

He's still working to find the last \$10,000 needed to pay Hanks through the end of the year.

"Bill Hanks is a real community asset and resource who has helped people who can afford to stay in their homes, do so," Hartmann said.

"It's in the county's best interest to keep people in their homes."

The Hamilton County Board of Commissioners unanimously signed off on the plan.

Hanks, 71, who spent 30 years in the mortgage lending and loan underwriting business, works with lenders to modify adjustable loans with high interest rates into fair loans that a family can afford.

And he links families having trouble paying their mortgage because of a lost job to resources and programs that can help.

A few years ago, home loans became a very different business.

He spotted a want ad for his current job and said it was a natural transition.

“You have that sense of satisfaction,” Hanks said. “There is no more fulfilling work than to be able to help families keep their home.”

Hanks said it’s not possible to save every home. Sometimes a home becomes a liability, worth so much less than what is owed.

People call him when they are frustrated by failed attempts to work with lenders on their own, contradictory information and tales of lost paperwork.

“They are often ready to give up,” Brown said. “He helps them understand the process and stands with them as a trusted friend, offering encouragement and way forward.”

Helps lower payments

Typically, Hanks helps owners lower their monthly payments \$200 to \$400 a month.

In one case, Brown recounted, she watched Hanks work for months helping a homeowner submit the same documents over and over. He thought things were all settled, only to get a call from the woman saying the bank had sent her a foreclosure letter.

“He immediately called the lender, stayed on the phone through numerous transfers and long waits and finally spoke with a supervisor who reviewed the file, agreed a mistake had been made and approved the modification,” she said. “It’s that tenacity that makes him so successful.”

About HOME



Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME) is a private, non-profit agency that serves as the traditional fair housing agency in Greater Cincinnati. It works to eliminate illegal discrimination and build stable integrated communities. Helping people prevent foreclosure is part of the agency’s work. For assistance, call 513-721-4663.