

FLORIDA HARDEST-HIT FUND:

Progress and Best Practices for Foreclosure Prevention

There has been steady progress this year for the Florida Hardest-Hit Fund (HHF) programs. Recent changes have broadened eligibility criteria and increased assistance available from this federally funded foreclosure prevention and housing market stabilization program. Homeowners with eligible hardships who are facing the possibility of foreclosure, or have homes that are “underwater,” can apply to receive help from Florida HHF programs. HHF Advisor Agencies are located throughout the state to assist homeowners in submitting an application for the specific program that may be able to assist them.



BY MICHAEL CHANEY

The first of Florida’s HHF programs was launched statewide in 2011. Funded through the US Department of Treasury (Treasury) and administered by Florida Housing Finance Corporation (Florida Housing), the programs are designed to assist homeowners in states hit hardest by the downturn in the housing market. Florida received the second largest allocation among the 18 funded states and the District of Columbia.

Eligible applicants can benefit from a collection of HHF programs that can help to pay the monthly mortgage and/or pay arrears on the mortgage; reduce the principal balance; and help elders with a reverse mortgage to catch up on property taxes and other housing expenses. In July, a pilot for the newest program began. Florida HHF now offers up to \$15,000 for down payment assistance in Duval, Orange, Hillsborough, Volusia and Brevard counties; these counties were selected for the pilot based on data from several metrics, including amount of distressed home sales and percentage of foreclosed homes.

Since its inception, the Florida HHF programs have assisted more than 24,000, with over 5,000

assisted during the past year. Overall, Florida Hardest Hit has paid \$552 million on behalf of eligible recipients.

Changes to the eligibility criteria and increased program benefits means that additional homeowners may now be qualified for HHF program assistance. For the HHF Principal Reduction program, the loan-to-value is now 115%, reduced from 125%. Additionally, a general change to all HHF assistance allows a person assisted by more than one HHF program to receive up to \$92,000 of total assistance, an increase from the previous maximum of \$50,000; and, the maximum assistance for homeowners with a reverse mortgage has increased from \$25,000 to \$50,000.

Regular program updates and trainings are provided to staff at the HHF Advisor Agencies; there are more than 60 agencies that provide eligibility determinations for homeowners who apply for assistance. Most recently, Advisors participated in a webinar that highlighted one Agency’s best practices. HELP, a nonprofit housing counseling agency based in Naples (formerly the Housing Development Corporation of Southwest Florida), has been active in HHF since its inception.

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> FORECLOSURE PREVENTION

The training featured details of how HELP staff efficiently process HHF applications in a nearly paperless office environment, where documents are scanned and stored securely. The nonprofit uses a secure email system and other approved processes to protect applicant information, which helps to make the eligibility determination process run smoothly. The webinar highlighted the agency's use of spreadsheets, software, scanners and other technology that assists staff in working as quickly as possible when reviewing each homeowner's application.

HELP's procedures include a second advisor's review before an application is determined to be eligible. During the webinar, participants focused on how this second advisor carefully reviews every income calculation, eligibility criterion, and qualifying hardship to ensure all qualifications have been met. HELP's accomplishments are based in part on a staff of four, all of whom have been working with HHF since the beginning. The ownership and pride they feel for this work contributes to their success with the Florida Hardest-Hit Fund program. [HNN](#)



HELP'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS ARE BASED IN PART ON A STAFF OF FOUR, ALL OF WHOM HAVE BEEN WORKING WITH HHF SINCE THE BEGINNING. THE OWNERSHIP AND PRIDE THEY FEEL FOR THIS WORK CONTRIBUTES TO THEIR SUCCESS WITH THE FLORIDA HARDEST-HIT FUND PROGRAM.



Left to right: Jane Wayne, Michael Puchalla, Marie Gonzper, Maria Gonzalez

A background image showing a diverse group of people in a meeting or training session. A woman in the foreground is smiling and looking towards the camera. Other people are visible in the background, some looking at a screen or document.

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