

Strength in numbers to fight foreclosure bind

Regional coalition draws on activists, agencies for help

By Karen Sackowitz

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Methuen resident Danny Nunez spent months trying to negotiate a mortgage modification with his lender before receiving word that foreclosure proceedings had begun on his home. With his latest appeal denied just weeks ago, Nunez knew that he, his wife, and their three daughters could lose their home before the holidays.

“I was trying to work with them but just got the runaround,” he said. “When I called and found out my last application was denied, I thought, ‘Now what?’ ”

Nunez’s story is like many others in this area. According to the Merrimack Valley Housing Report, the average number of “orders of notice,” the official start of foreclosure proceedings, issued in Methuen, Lawrence, Lowell, and Haverhill in September had doubled since September 2008.

For many of the families behind these statistics, help can be found through community resources such as the [Merrimack Valley Project](#). An advocacy group comprising 30 area congregations, labor union locals, and other community organizations, the Merrimack Valley Project works to highlight economic and social issues that are hitting individuals and the region as a whole.

“The process starts with house meetings,” said the Rev. Victor Jarvis, pastor of Ebenezer Christian Church in Lawrence and president of the [Merrimack Valley Project](#). “We hold gatherings at different people’s homes where members of the community can voice their concerns. From there we decide which issues to organize behind.”

Nunez, a volunteer and chapter representative for the project, brought his story to one such gathering.

“The issues are personal, but these meetings are so intimate, it makes it easier for people to share their stories,” Nunez said. “We knew we weren’t the first family to go through this, but thought it might help.”

Recognizing Nunez’s story as an example of the region’s overall foreclosure crisis, the [Merrimack Valley Project](#) worked with him to research options and connect him with people who could help. He ended up putting his case in the hands of Michael Raabe, supervising attorney with Neighborhood Legal Services, one of the project’s partner agencies.

Through Raabe, Nunez learned the details of the federal Making Home Affordable program, which is designed to help families avoid foreclosure through mortgage restructuring or refinancing. The plan offers homeowners several options for keeping their monthly payments capped at 31 percent of their gross monthly income, including reduced interest rates, an extended mortgage term up to 40 years, or shifting some of the loan’s balance to a balloon payment due at the end of its term.

“That information gave me the first feeling of hope I had had in months,” Nunez said. “Another woman at the meeting began to cry, she was so thankful to know there was hope for her too.”

At Lawrence Community Works, another Merrimack Valley Project partner, the number of residents seeking advice has grown steadily over the past year. Twice-monthly informational workshops have been upped to once a week, with an average of 10 new people attending each meeting.

According to Lissette Caraballo, a home ownership and foreclosure prevention counselor with Lawrence Community Works, the ongoing economic crisis has refueled a foreclosure problem sparked for many by “predatory” lending practices in 2007.

“At that time, homeowners fell victim to deceptive practices in which people who qualified for fixed loans were intentionally steered toward unfavorable variable-rate mortgages,” she said, adding that many of the lenders were shut down after investigations. “Now, there are homeowners with good loans, but job losses and income reductions are having an impact.”

Jarvis, the Merrimack Valley Project’s president, said these factors can be especially hard on the immigrant community, where language barriers and unfamiliarity with the intricacies of the law can leave homeowners vulnerable. Through its partnerships with local organizations, he said, his group is able to offer education and guidance to those who need it most.

Lisa Vinikoor, the project’s lead organizer, said that supporting the immigrant community is vital to the region’s future.

“These people represent what I would argue is the next generation of the middle class,” she said. “They have been working their way up, but this issue shoves them right back down, forcing them to start over again, this time with a negative credit rating.”

At the Merrimack Valley Project’s annual meeting on Monday, the group was slated to decide where it will be focusing its resources next year. While chances are good the group’s primary campaign will involve foreclosures, Jarvis said, nothing was finalized before the meeting.

“We are not an institution; our decisions are based on the needs voiced by those in the community,” he said. “The people will tell us how to work.”

For Danny Nunez and his family, things may be looking up, although hope is a tentative emotion in his household.

Following a rally last month on his family’s behalf, organized by the Merrimack Valley Project and held on the steps of their church, Nunez and Raabe have been in contact with officials at his bank, Wells Fargo.

He has been accepted into a three-month trial period for the Making Home Affordable program. If he is able to make his first three reduced payments on time, he will be eligible for reassessment and a final modification plan. It represents a positive step after a grueling process.

“When you keep getting doors closed in your face, it can really break your spirit,” Nunez said. “But as a father, you want your family to be secure. You don’t want to lose your home.”