

The Morning News

Local News for Northwest Arkansas

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Language Barrier Hinders Foreclosure Help

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SPRINGDALE -- Some distressed area homeowners have found the quality of mortgage assistance they receive depends on what language they speak.

Juvinal Vega of Rogers called Chase's Spanish-speaking helpline earlier this month to try and negotiate settlement terms for a \$36,000 home-equity line of credit against a home he owns in Buena Vista, Calif.

Vega -- who allowed a reporter and Crye-Leike real estate agent Tayron Reynosa to eavesdrop on his call -- said he was surprised to hear helpline operators say "Just pay the money or leave the keys," and "Get a second job and pay the money you owe."

Three other calls made to the Spanish-speaking line got the same collection-effort responses. But it was a different story when Reynosa, acting as an interpreter for Vega, called the English-speaking helpline.

"On the English-speaking line I was quickly directed to the loss mitigation department for possible settlement options. Not a single time did anyone answering the Spanish-speaking line offer to transfer me to loss mitigation," Reynosa said.

Vega and Reynosa continue to work with Chase's loss mitigation department to negotiate a settlement.

Chase, a commercial banking division of JPMorgan Chase & Co., recently announced it extended its mortgage modification efforts -- \$1.1 trillion of loans -- to expand the reach and effectiveness of programs already under way.

"All Chase mortgage customers have the option of either speaking with a Spanish-speaking representative or (if none is unavailable) using the Language Line where a third party comes on to translate," Chase spokesman Thomas E. Kelly said in an e-mail. He said the calls are monitored.

A phone call and several e-mails were made to Kelly, who added that "I am glad that we were ultimately able to help the customer." He asked for Vega's loan information so that the problems reported could be researched. Kelly said the bank would look at ways to improve the process, if needed.

Reynosa and others say Chase and other large lenders are not equipped to handle the huge volume of calls they are getting. On several calls made by Vega, he was put on hold for an average of 20 minutes before getting to speak with a live person. ABC's Nightline reported Wednesday that many callers are finding the process cumbersome. California Congresswoman Maxine Waters endured waits of up to two hours when trying to intercede on behalf of three of her constituents seeking problem mortgage assistance.

"It's a mess and it's getting worse, not better," said Nancy Bolin, director for the Economic Opportunity Agency of Washington County. EOA provides housing assistance to low-income families and teaches first-time homebuyers classes in both English and Spanish.

Reynosa suspects Spanish-speaking call centers are not properly supervised by qualified loss mitigators, but instead are manned by low-paid hourly workers who basically read a script and can give no real advice or options for help.

Several years ago, Reynosa worked as a loss mitigator and collector for a California-based mortgage servicing company and said non-English-speaking call centers can operate more like third-party collection agencies than actual help centers.

Chase Bank declined to say if it used third-party call centers to help service Spanish-speaking customers.

Reynosa has recently been trying to help Veronica Perea of Springdale get her mortgage loan modified to avoid foreclosure. But he ran into similar problems when dialing a Spanish-speaking call center located in Florida for OCWEN, a mortgage loan servicing company.

OCWEN did not return two messages left Wednesday and Thursday.

"The workers on the Spanish-speaking line could not give me any information on the loan. Only after I spoke English to someone was I told to contact another number," Reynosa said.

He called an English-speaking help center run by OCWEN that is located in Mumbai, India. That call center was able to put Reynosa in contact with the proper loss mitigation department, also being handled in India.

"If I didn't speak English, I would still be running in circles," Reynosa said.

Reynosa said he mailed and faxed the complicated financial worksheets for Perea to OCWEN three different times, and each time was told the necessary paperwork had not been received.

"It's very frustrating and something needs to be done," Reynosa said.

"What a problem," said J.P. Sexton, president of the Northwest Arkansas Chapter of the Mortgage Bankers Association. "When these homeowners purchased their homes there was likely a Realtor or friend or family member present to help answer questions, but when these homeowners have to use the telephone, I can see where it could get messy."

He said loans made two or three years ago could have been sold several times and homeowners behind in their mortgage have to go to the proper serving agent to get their loan modified.

Maribel Tapia, a housing counselor with the EOA of Washington County, maintains that many Hispanics are not getting the help that is out there because they cannot speak English.

"I too, have found that the workers answering the Spanish-speaking helplines are often not qualified loss mitigators. Some of them barely speak Spanish and prefer to speak English," Tapia said.

Tapia claims many call centers are just third-party collection agencies with no authority to modify home

loans or grant forbearance.

She said having to resend documents three and four times is the norm, not the exception, and fears many homeowners will simply give up.

Tapia is also concerned that several local minority homeowners have been contacted by online mortgage counselors charging from \$500 to \$1,200 to intercede on behalf of the distressed homeowners.

"There is no need for anyone to pay for these services. Distressed homeowners, Latino and otherwise, should seek the free services of local nonprofit organizations like the EOA for help," Tapia said.