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Distressed homeowners get help

Due to record-high home foreclosures around the state, nearly 700 struggling homeowners told their troubles to volunteer attorneys on Jan. 10 during a free helpline staffed by Attorneys' Title Guaranty Fund.

The volume that Saturday was so heavy that several hundred callers who couldn't get through received return calls from attorneys on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday.

The volunteers included three members of the ISBA Real Estate Law Section Council: Steven B. Bashaw, Samuel H. Levine and Ralph J. Schumann. Bashaw and Levine also serve on the ISBA Assembly and Committee on Legislation.

Among others were Natalie H. Weidemier of the Chicago Volunteer Legal Services Foundation, Michael van Zalingen of Neighborhood Housing Services, and Bruny Martinez Rupp of the Regional Fair Housing Center (see photo).

Home foreclosure filings in Cook County were up 22 percent from January through November 2008, compared to the same timeframe in 2007. Statewide, foreclosures soared 27 percent during the same period.

The most common concerns and questions callers voiced to the ATG helpline volunteers were.

- I lost my job/income due to illness/cutbacks at work/divorce and can't afford my mortgage payment.
- I want to sell my home, but do not know how I'll do it if I can't sell it for the amount owed to the lender.
- How do I work with the lender to lower my payments or renegotiate the terms of my loan? If unsuccessful, what should I expect from the foreclosure process? Will I be forcibly removed from my home? What rights do I have?

"We had anticipated a high volume of calls," said Henry Shulruff, senior vice president of ATG. "It's a huge problem, and many people simply don't know where to go for reliable advice."

He added that the title company plans to repeat the helpline initiative, and is exploring ways to expand the concept to reach a greater number of troubled borrowers. "There are many free services available to help people who are falling behind in their mortgage payments," Shulruff said. "Having good counsel before the foreclosure is filed, and competent legal representation after the foreclosure is filed, greatly helps people stay in their homes."