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Feds to fund housing help

Unemployment rate should make county eligible for aid

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— Ashtabula County's 15.1 percent unemployment rate should qualify it to participate in a new round of federal funding announced Monday to bolster housing finance agency loan programs.

Ohio and four other states will receive \$600 million in additional funding, according to the Ohio Department of Commerce. The state's share, \$172 million, is targeted for homeowners in counties with unemployment rates of 12 percent or higher.

The Obama Administration had previously awarded \$1.5 billion to Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan and Nevada, which drew protest from other hard-hit states. The new round of funding goes to Ohio, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island and South Carolina.

The Ohio Housing Finance Agency will administer the funding.

"We are looking forward to working with our partners to develop a plan for the state that ensures every dollar of this funding benefits troubled homeowners," said OHFA Executive Director Doug Garver. "These funds have been allocated at a critical time in the state's history, and it is fundamental that we keep unemployed and under-employed Ohioans in their homes."

Kimberly Zurz, director of the Ohio Department of Commerce, said the OHFA is already working with Gov. Ted Strickland and Save the

Dream Ohio to develop new initiatives.

Save the Dream Ohio is a multi-agency program that works with 37 HUD-certified housing counseling agencies, as well as legal aid societies and pro-bono associations to help Ohioans facing foreclosure receive the help they need. The program has received more than 52,000 calls to its hotline since beginning in two years ago.

Lynn Zalewski, executive director of Catholic Charities of Ashtabula County, said that agency has referred 15 families to Neighborhood Development Services in Ravenna, which administers OHFA assistance for Ashtabula County homeowners facing foreclosure. She said the troubled homeowners accessed close to \$22,000 in assistance.

Monday's announcement came as a boost for Ohio lawmakers and advocates who pushed the Obama Administration for federal aid. But it is only one piece of the solution.

"This is great news for Ohio, but it is not a windfall that's going to fix our foreclosure crisis on its own," cautioned Bill Faith, executive director of the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio.

Statewide in 2009, Ohio had 89,053 foreclosures, a 3.8 percent increase over 2008 and the 14th year of record-breaking numbers. 15.3 percent of all mortgages serviced in Ohio were either in foreclosure or at least 30 days past due in their payments; nearly one in six Ohio homeowners were delinquent or already in foreclosure.

There were 803 foreclosure actions filed in Ashtabula County last year, a slight increase from 2008.