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THE BRUNSWICK NEWS

The Voice of the Coast

EST. 1902

Volume 112, Number 226

www.TheBrunswickNews.com

JUNE 4, 2014

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Homeowner's dream comes true with help

Woman purchases first home with USDA loan

By **LINDSEY ADKISON**
The Brunswick News

Telisha Mack beamed with pride as she opened the door to welcome her guests.

The group was made up of U.S. Department of Agriculture officials, including Rural Housing Service Administrator Tony Hernandez. All greeted Mack warmly.

"This is a beautiful home. Congratulations," Hernandez gushed, handing Mack an oversized key in celebration of her new house.

The home, her first, was a dream come true for Mack. But like so many others, she needed help to realize it.

She found that help with the USDA. The organization offers a Rural Development Housing Program, which aids individuals who are unable

to purchase a home the traditional route.

For Mack, a single mother of three with a master's degree, it was the only solution.

"I started pursuing home ownership in 2011. I applied for mortgages with a lot of different banks and was denied. A lot of them wanted a big

Please see HOME, 5A



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United States Department of Agriculture Rural Housing Service Administrator Tony Hernandez, from left, USDA Single Family Housing Programs Director Ed Peace, and USDA State Director Quinton Robinson talk with new homeowner Telisha Mack in the kitchen of her home in the Satilla Sands subdivision Tuesday. Mack was able to purchase her new home through a loan by the USDA.

Home: USDA offers variety of help

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down payment or a co-signer," she said.

That's when Mack was told about the USDA home loan program.

"I have a friend who knew someone who did it. So I applied and was accepted," she said with a smile.

From there, she was guided by local members of the USDA who helped her complete all the documentation and find a home within her price range.

Mack was lucky. She found a home currently under construction in Glynn County. She was able to complete the deal quickly and was even able to help choose the interior color palette.

It was clear that Mack and her family have since made it their own, something Hernandez was thrilled to see.

"This house is more than a building. It's the foundation for the future of this family," he said. "Owning your own house changes your life. And (Mack is) a great example of this.

"You need help? You need to find partners that can help make your dreams come true."

Hernandez was visiting Brunswick from Washington, D.C., to spread that message. His goal was to generate a conversation about the USDA loan and grant programs during June, which is Homeownership Month.

There are a lot of options for individuals in Glynn and surrounding counties who meet specific guidelines.

Ed Peace, director of USDA Single Family Housing programs, says each one is designed to target a specific kind of homeowner.

The first is a direct loan, where the USDA makes a loan directly to the borrower, who the organiza-



Bobby Haven/The Brunswick News

United States Department of Agriculture Rural Housing Service Administrator Tony Hernandez, center, hands new homeowner Telisha Mack an oversized key for a photo opportunity while USDA State Director Quinton Robinson looks on Tuesday at Mack's new house in the Satilla Sands subdivision.

tion classifies as "very-low-income applicants." For these plans, payment assistance is provided that can lower the mortgage interest rate to as low as 1 percent.

"We make the loan directly to the borrower. They come to the office and fill out an application. Then we handle it until the end of the loan," Peace said. "These borrowers get into the house for very little money out of pocket. And they get subsidized payments where taxpayers help them out. For instance, a \$600 payment may be reduced to \$400 per month."

The amount of income to qualify varies depending on location and the size of the family, Peace said.

"But it's 80 percent of the median income for an area. For a family of four, just as an example, it would be about \$25,000 to \$35,000. For Glynn County, the highest loan amount is \$135,800," he said.

To determine eligibility, an applicant must submit documents

verifying income and have an adequate credit rating.

"These are all modest homes that are around 1,200 square feet unless the family is very large. But they are nothing elaborate," Peace said.

The other type of loan is called a guaranteed home loan, which are geared toward moderate-income families. The agency works in partnership with private-sector lenders to back the loans.

"We make sure it meets the proper guidelines. And we guarantee the lender that we will pay the majority of that loan if the borrower defaults. That's a very attractive to lenders," he said.

Peace estimates the income for a family of four with this loan would be approximately \$75,000.

"The guaranteed loan has a higher income limit," he said.

In addition to these loan programs, the USDA also offers home repair loans and grants to help rural homeowners make

Do you qualify?

Call or visit Totally Free, 2517 Norwich St., Brunswick, 265-1515. or call USDA Rural Development in Athens, 706-546-2162.

safety improvements or repairs such as adding wheelchair ramps or correcting faulty wiring. Senior citizens 62 or older can apply for a grant of up to \$7,500 for home repair assistance.

Unlike the USDA loans, grant assistance does not need to be repaid.

Of course, navigating these programs may be a bit overwhelming for those unfamiliar with the process. That's why Peace is excited that a local organization has recently been certified to help applicants.

"Millicent Harwell-Cross of Totally Free Inc. in Brunswick has been certified as a 'packager.' What they do is help the applicant go through the process and get verification on income, get the credit report together and anything else they need to do. It helps the speed of the loan," Peace said. "They can help with anything applicants will need. She can also do credit counseling and show them how to repay the loan."

The task may seem daunting, but Peace knows it's invaluable to many families who may never own a home otherwise.

"It gives them a good start. Once they start repaying the loans, they can refinance and move out of the program so someone else can come in," he said.

• Reporter Lindsey Adkison writes about business and other local topics. Contact her at ladkison@thebrunswicknews.com, on Facebook or at 265-8320, ext. 346.