

Family spends Christmas in own home thanks to county program

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Christopher and Janel Smith will spend Christmas in their own home for the first time today thanks to a home ownership program run by Lackawanna County.

The program, administered by the Neighborhood Housing Services of Lackawanna County, helps county residents clear those initial financial hurdles difficult for so many to buy a house - closing costs and down payments.

There are many people that can responsibly own a home, but cannot clear the hurdles and miss out on home ownership, said Jesse Ergott, NHS executive director.

"They can afford to make a regular mortgage payment, but saving for closing costs and down payment can be difficult," Mr. Ergott said. "This program helps families achieve home ownership."

Families at or below median income can receive a deferred loan of up to 15 percent of a mortgage loan, with a maximum purchase price of \$150,000 and grants for closing costs of about \$1,200. So a family looking to buy a home for \$100,000 could receive a \$15,000 deferred loan to help make a down payment.

The family would likely be expected to chip in 5 percent for a down payment so as a mortgagee they can avoid paying mortgage insurance. Mr. Ergott said the deferred, interest-free loan would remain as a lien on the family's home for 10 years and if the family remains in the home for that time period, the loan is forgiven.

Funding, provided by an Act 137 fee on the county real estate transfer tax, helps a handful of families a year.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith, now proudly of Peckville, were selected to be one of seven families for the home ownership program. They purchased a home last month and are looking forward to their Christmas dinner in their own home with their 3-year-old boy and 11-month-old girl, Mr. Smith said.

"I look at it now as the place I'm going to be 20 to 30 years from now, having watched my kids grow up," Mr. Smith said. "There are many things we want to do to make it our house and we have many plans for the future."

It is partly that pride of home ownership that can make the program worthwhile, Mr. Ergott said.

"It's absolutely a neighborhood development tool. The more people on a block that own homes the safer, the cleaner that block will be. It's because of that pride of ownership from people who own those properties," Mr. Ergott said.

For information on or to apply for the program, contact Neighborhood Housing Services of Lackawanna County at 558-2490.

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