

Face to Face

NAACP program leader helps first-time homebuyers navigate the system

Nov 18, 2019, 7:16am CST

Buying a home can be a challenge for anyone. But it can be especially difficult in minority communities, where there is often limited access to information about how the process works and what resources are available to first-time homeowners.

Enter **Belinda Everette**, who oversees housing advocacy for the NAACP's Houston branch.

Two years ago, Everette launched the "Homes for Houston" program, which aims to educate professionals from diverse backgrounds about the ins and outs of purchasing a home for the first time.

Relying on her 30-year career in the financial services industry, Everette drafted a curriculum to teach young minorities about everything from how to apply for a loan, where to find down payment assistance and what to look for in a home inspection.

"We like to say, we're there for you from class to keys," Everette said. "It's so easy to become overwhelmed by the process. It's not designed to be easy to understand in any way."

In just two years, more than 500 people have gone through the class. Graduates have secured over \$12.8 million in new loans, with the average loan running about \$180,000, Everette said.

"The longest it's taken one of our graduates to close on a home was eight months," Everette said. "On average, the time from class to keys is about 90 days."

The program has been so successful that NAACP branches in Atlanta and Colorado Springs are working to launch similar programs in their cities.

Everette recently testified about the Homes for Houston program before a subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives. Lawmakers wanted to know why homeownership in African-American communities was so low and what steps could be taken to raise ownership rates.

Everette actually conceived of the Homes for Houston program while seeking to answer those questions.

While working for Countrywide Home Loans, Everette saw that the homeownership rate among African Americans in Houston was about half that among white residents.

"I started to realize that there is something pervasive and systemic at work," Everette said. "A lot of it is that the process is so daunting that a lot of people just give up on it."

Add in that many of the predatory loan programs at work leading up to the financial crisis of 2008 targeted minority communities and there are a lot of people who simply don't trust banks, Everette said.

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"It's not always as though a bank doesn't want to lend to minorities," Everette said. "Sometimes, they just don't know how to reach those communities."

Bridging that gap is another thing Everette hopes to achieve with the Homes for Houston program. Each class is taught by a real estate professional and a financial services professional. So far, teachers have included experts from BBVA, Wells Fargo and Merrill Lynch.

Everette has also received an in-kind donation from San Antonio-based iHeartMedia Inc., which agreed to advertise the program twice a day for free. "The support we've received has been so incredible. When people see that you're actually helping people, they want to be a part of it," Everette said.

Looking ahead, Everette said she hopes to continue expanding the program to get more people ready to become homeowners. The challenge, however, is that there just aren't that many starter homes available to buyers in Houston.

"We've really struggled with the lack of inventory," Everette said.

That said, Everette is working to put home developers in contact with the people going through her program. Starting next year, Everette plans to incorporate more tours of new homes into the program.

"Information is power. The more we can do to provide people on all sides of the home-buying process with information, the better," Everette said.



DANIEL KRAMER
Belinda Everette oversees housing advocacy for the NAACP's Houston branch.

Closer look

Belinda Everette

NAACP, chair of housing advocacy

Hometown: Chicago

Education: University of Central Oklahoma; DePaul University, Chicago; Rice University

Hobbies: Creative writing, traditional and contemporary jazz, travel

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