

Faith community in East Bay rallies to help distressed homeowners

By [Hilary Costa](#)
[Contra Costa Times](#)

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The Rev. Robert Rien, left, from St. Ignatius of Antioch Catholic Church chats with Pastor Dr...

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As political pressure builds in Washington for the banking industry to do more to help struggling homeowners avoid foreclosure, the call in eastern Contra Costa County is coming from church-based advocacy groups — and it's getting louder.

Two grass-roots groups — the Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization, or CCISCO, with its following in Antioch's predominantly Spanish-speaking Catholic churches, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow PUSH Coalition, organizing African-American Protestant churches in Antioch and Pittsburg — have the faith of those in need, and are gaining traction with lawmakers and banking officials.

Miguel Sanchez is among those who have turned to CCISCO. The 52-year-old father of three has been out of work since the construction industry fell into a steep decline, just as the mortgage on his Antioch home skyrocketed by \$2,400 a month.

His initial elation at a temporary mortgage-modification offer faded when he realized he couldn't even afford that figure, and that his payments could balloon in a few years — the same situation that had already pushed him to the brink of bankruptcy.

"They told me that's the only choice I got, the one they sent me," Sanchez said.

Now he is preparing to walk away from the house he worked all his life to buy — but holding out hope CCISCO will have more luck negotiating with his lender.

"The only people making money right now are the banks, Wall Street," Sanchez said. "They've got all the power over there, but they forgot about the people, the people working hard just for a living. I don't ask for money; I ask for a little help."

The foreclosure crisis has ravaged eastern Contra Costa's housing market, claiming thousands of homes and slashing in half some property values. According to data provided by ForeclosureRadar.com, 4,039 homes have been foreclosed this year in the region (Bay Point, Pittsburg, Antioch, Brentwood, Oakley and Discovery Bay) — nearly half of the 8,112 foreclosures countywide.

With actions that include church rallies that draw hundreds (Jackson attended two of them), bullhorn protests at local banks and a charter bus trip last spring to lobby in Washington, D.C., Contra Costa's activists are seeing results.

Barbara Desoer, Bank of America's president for mortgage, home equity and insurance services, has promised to meet with CCISCO officials in Antioch on Jan. 12. That month, the area's city councils will consider divesting from banks that don't negotiate "in good faith" on foreclosure issues.

"We know that banks, many have been working with folks to try to assist them, but most of the evidence we have shows that there hasn't been enough effort," said Bryan Montgomery, Oakley's city manager.

Recently elected Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, said he has been working with CCISCO since the summer and backed its approach to igniting change.

"It's seen not in moving the entire world immediately, but rather it's seen in encouraging members of Congress to encourage the administration to get on the ball and to pass legislation," Garamendi said, pointing out that on Dec. 11 the House passed the Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which in part will ban teaser rates on loans and make mortgage contracts easier to understand.

Jackson underscored the need for unity at an October rally in Antioch, and leaders from CCISCO and the Rainbow PUSH Coalition say they want to erase divisions of race and faith to join together to keep families in their homes and get their demands met.

Those demands include banks reducing the principals on home loans, ceasing foreclosure proceedings on homeowners eligible for loan modifications, and, most important, working compassionately with homeowners.

They say banks mistreat homeowners and give them the runaround as they contend with red tape and heaps of paperwork to renegotiate their mortgages.

"I really feel angry that our people have been treated like this," said the Rev. Robert Rien, parochial administrator at St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Antioch, and a leading activist in CCISCO. "(The banks) are supposed to be there to serve the people whose money they've taken in good faith."

Representatives from the nation's major banks and a mortgage trade association disagree with the activists' assessment.

"Lenders are making an unprecedented effort to deal with an unprecedented challenge," said Dustin Hobbs, a spokesman for the California Mortgage Bankers Association.

Hobbs said modifying a loan isn't as simple as signing off on a lower mortgage rate. Because most home loans are securitized — many investors own different parts of each loan — banks must get each one to sign off on any change to the terms. And that takes time.

"There's no simple solution," Hobbs added.

Wells Fargo and Bank of America — two of the nation's largest mortgage lenders — say they have approved 422,001 and 385,000 trial and permanent modifications, respectively, in 2009.

At Wells Fargo, nearly 100,000 of those were under the Obama administration's new Home Affordable Modification Plan; at Bank of America, 160,000 were HAMP modifications.

Joe Ohayon, a senior vice president at Wells Fargo, said the bank has hired 7,600 people this year focused on "home retention resources."

"Some customers have been challenged with getting clear, timely communication, and we hold ourselves accountable, and we want to improve that process and are taking actions to do that," Ohayon said.

In an e-mail statement, Bank of America spokeswoman Ginny Zoraster said bank officials are in discussions with CCISCO and have taken "appropriate steps" as they learn of individual situations.

But the power to approve or deny modifications should rest with the government and not banks, because the foreclosure crisis originated with their poor business decisions, said Cal State East Bay finance professor Tammie Simmons Mosley.

"A lot of homebuyers or people that refinanced, they would not have had the opportunity to do that if these mortgage products were not available," Mosley said.

R. Mario Howell, pastor at Antioch Church Family, Antioch's oldest African-American congregation, said the Rainbow PUSH Coalition is just getting off the ground but has big goals for its advocacy work in eastern Contra Costa.

"We want to get to the point of millions of ants — they don't hurt you too much, but if they irritate you enough you are going to make some changes," Howell said.

He said churches can no longer help their congregants with rent payments or grocery money as they once commonly did, but they can provide a voice.

"We have to continue to pray and trust God, but the people who are coming to us, how long do you trust the Lord at times like this?"