

Housing HOPE: Agencies lend a housing hand in Wytheville

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Graduate high school—check.

Graduate college—check.

Get a good job—check.



In the next couple weeks, Wytheville native Audra Horton will be able to check another thing off her list of things to do toward her own “American Dream”—buy her first house.

Since moving back to Wytheville almost two years ago, Horton has been crashing at her parents’ home—bearable, she said, but not exactly what she had pictured for herself at 28 years old.

She tried going through her bank to get a loan, but the only approval she was able to get was for a \$120,000 house badly in need of repair for well over \$700 month.

On the salary of an entry-level social worker, though, her chances of owning a comfortable home she could call her own seemed rather slim.

But she never lost “hope.”

As part of the homeownership program of Helping Overcome Poverty’s Existence, Horton, whose salary qualifies her as “low-income,” is receiving help to make her dream of having her own home come true.

In partnership with U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development, Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises, Southeast Rural Community Assistance Program, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, the Virginia Housing Development Authority and local donors, HOPE is providing Horton with an option for affordable housing.

Through a combination of loans from these different agencies, known as “leverage loans,” Horton will have a 1-percent interest rate on her house and no down payment.

She will be paying \$600 and some pocket change every month for a brand-new \$150,000 home in HOPE's low-income housing subdivision known as "Deerfield."

Horton and her two miniature pinschers are the 20th family to move into the Deerfield neighborhood, which closed on its first house five years ago. A dedication celebration for the completion of the first two houses in Phase II of the project was held on Thursday.

Several executives from various contributing agencies were present for the ceremony as well as Congressman Morgan Griffith and residents from Deerfield.

"We all know there's a stigma living in low-income housing," said Treva Adams, a board member for HOPE and a Deerfield resident.

After going through a divorce and losing everything she owned in a house fire a few years ago, Adams, now a single mom, found herself at one of the lowest points of her life. Her income and the fire insurance weren't enough to get a loan from the bank to get a house of her own, so she came to HOPE for help.

"We're not people looking for a handout," Adams said. "Every single penny of these loans is going to be paid back."

HOPE Executive Director Andy Kegley explained that if the homeowner wishes to sell the house before the mortgages are paid off, agencies such as Rural Development that have "recapture agreements" can take a cut of the profits from the sale of the house to help pay the rest of it off. In this way, the homeowner cannot take advantage of the program by making a profit off a home that was subsidized.

"It takes a first-time home buyer to recharge the real estate market," Kegley said, noting that in fiscal year 2010-2011, there were only three single-family building permits issued in the town, two of which were for Deerfield.

The average income of homeowners at the time of purchase of the house in Deerfield is \$26,736. Their average monthly payment, which is based on income, is \$519. The majority of homes were purchased by single females, many of whom have children.

If a homeowner's salary changes and he is no longer considered "very low" or "low income," they don't have to move out, Kegley explained. Their

monthly payments are adjusted accordingly, keeping them at 20 to 25-percent of their income.

But just because Deerfield is considered a very low and low income housing development doesn't mean the houses are cheaply built, noted HOPE homeownership coordinator Kathi Mineer.

Mike Allen, who built Horton's house, does just as quality of a job on these homes as he does on all his work, she said.

Within their allotted budget, residents get to choose their own décor—color scheme, appliances, flooring, lighting.

Horton laughed recalling how long she took to select the fixtures in her house.

She and her mom closed down Lowe's Home Improvement for several days straight trying to pick out lights.

"The day [the executive director] handed me the keys to my house was one of the happiest days of my life," Adams said as tears pooled in her eyes.

And Horton can't wait for her day to come.

"It's my place. It's my house," Horton said, explaining the pride and ownership she feels now that she's just a few weeks away from her own place.

Even though the house isn't officially hers just yet and she hasn't moved in all her stuff, Horton drives around the community just to look at her house. The neighbors have already invited her to block parties and July 4 celebrations.

"Now most everyone waves at me," she said. "They make me feel at home."

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