



Mississippi REALTORS® Show Business & Community Leaders How to Win With Employer-Assisted Housing

In this economy, it's sure not easy getting anyone to part with money. But down in Mississippi, thanks to a statewide program of education and outreach, REALTORS® are finding some success, despite the hard times, in convincing employers that helping their employees on the road to home ownership is a win-win situation. Make that win-win-win, actually.

It all started back in 2008, in the Mississippi State House. Thanks largely to the longtime urging of the Mississippi Association of REALTORS® [MAR,] the legislators made it possible for employers to write-off as a business expense gifts to an employee of up to \$10,000 towards a down payment and/or closing costs; for the employee, the gift is tax-free. Having won this tremendous boon, it was then up to the REALTORS® to make sure that the possibility was known and understood – so that it could become a reality.

In a case of truly fortuitous timing, just as MAR took up this challenge, the National Association of REALTORS® launched The Ira Gribin Workforce Housing Grants program. Mississippi applied for and received a grant of \$60,000 to increase statewide awareness of the new legislation. At the same time, the grant was to help train REALTORS® on how to engage employers and community leaders about the benefits of Employer-Assisted Housing.

John Phillips, MAR Vice President, has been hard at work spending these timely funds. Over the past two years, together with educators from NAR, he and Dee Denton, Past State President, have trained a total of 203 REALTORS® all over the state. The four-hour Employer-Assisted Housing (EAH) Class (www.realtor.org/eahclass), which counts toward continuing education credit, “generates serious enthusiasm,” he says. “Our members love learning how they can create real social and economic good in their communities – with a chance of improving their own bottom line in doing so.”

The key, he has found, is in harnessing that enthusiasm by helping the REALTORS® to form community teams right away, to approach employers together. Like exercise, involving partners helps keep up the good intentions. And by involving a number of partners, from lending agents to appraisers to attorneys to pest-control specialists, a REALTOR®'s proposal will seem less self-serving to an employer who is likely already feeling the strain of budget demands. Non-profit organizations are particularly valuable partners. Chances are these teams of professionals already have contacts among local employers; relationships formed through schools, church, sports, clubs and business that will provide a trusting basis for introducing the idea of Employer-Assisted Housing.

Mark Tucker with Magnolia Real Estate in Laurel, Mississippi is one REALTOR® Phillips points to whose enthusiasm is really making this work. Mark took the training, assembled a team, created a PowerPoint presentation and a Facebook page, and got to work approaching employers – starting with his local school district, which has nearly 1,500 employees. He and his team (two fellow REALTORS®, an attorney, a lender, and

a home inspector) have given their home-buyer education presentation over half a dozen times and are looking to expand beyond Jones County. “This is not about my selling these people homes,” he points out. “We don’t even hand out business cards. And it’s not even about getting the employers to make a financial contribution to their employees’ home ownership. They tell me ‘I can’t afford to give my employees another benefit!’ and I tell them that giving the education *is* the benefit. It’s a free service to their employees, provided by our team and the State Association.” Tucker’s motivation is a simple sense of responsibility to his community. “At the end of the day, I make my living from this community, and this is how I can give back,” he explains. “I love this place, and these people, and I care about what happens to them. I can help them understand the home-buying process, easing their worries and equipping them with knowledge – which is power.”

Tucker equates the mystery surrounding home buying with the obesity crisis: “I have seen first-hand that once people have the knowledge they need, they will begin to make smart choices.” Many of them don’t understand the concept of a credit rating. “We tell them that there has to be discipline and sacrifice – not to go buying a living room set if you’re still renting.” Nor does the team shy away from discussing foreclosure. “A number of people come to our presentations because they already own a home, but need to know how to hold on to it.”

John Phillips is now preparing to launch the next phase of the program: two webinars that will serve as a refresher course for all those who have been through the training. The final – and by far the most expensive – component of the program funded by the Ira Gribin grant is coming up in August, when MAR sponsors regional events throughout the state to connect the trained REALTORS[®] with community leaders, politicians, and especially the employers who can help make home ownership a reality for their employees. Formal invitations are going out for the breakfasts and luncheons in Oxford, Tupelo, McComb, Jackson, and Gulfport, covering the state from Tennessee all the way to the Gulf.

“They couldn’t be happier in the State House,” says Phillips, “after all, we’re taking their legislation and making it worthwhile by applying it here on the ground. MAR has manned an Employer Assisted Housing booth at the big annual Mississippi Economic Council “Hobnob Mississippi,” a networking convention where they got the word out to as many community leaders as possible. “And when REALTORS[®] like Mark Tucker actually succeed in their outreach through local employers,” Phillips concludes, “well, then whole communities win.”