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Summit sheriff declines to halt foreclosure evictions

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POSTED: 01:44 p.m. EST, Feb 23, 2009

A Cleveland-Akron social justice group is calling on Summit County Sheriff Drew Alexander to follow the lead of other sheriffs who have taken a stand against foreclosures.

But Alexander said Friday he's required by law to follow court foreclosure orders.

"The concept of not doing it is great — nobody wants to put anyone out on the street," he said. "The only way I can get relieved of my responsibility is for the courts to assure us they're not going to hold us in contempt."

Greg Coleridge, of the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker group, made the request in a letter to Alexander.

"Other sheriffs have seemingly taken unilateral action to not evict homeowners and renters," Coleridge said in an interview.

If Alexander won't issue a moratorium, Coleridge asked the sheriff "to do as much as he can within the constraints he has."

Amid the nation's foreclosure crisis, sheriffs are making headlines with their stands.

Sheriff Richard K. Jones of Butler County, Ohio, directed his deputies late last year not to evict anyone who has no place to go.

Jones said Friday that he is following court orders, but his office has worked with judges and landlords to ensure that housing was found for all evicted residents.

"We're starting to see working-class people who a year ago could make their payments and live in their homes," he said.

Last fall, Cook County (Ill.) Sheriff Thomas J. Dart put a moratorium on foreclosure evictions. He resumed the evictions after meeting with judges to ensure that renters are properly notified if their building is in foreclosure.

The evictions have dramatically slowed in his county, which includes Chicago.

In Detroit's Wayne County, Sheriff Warren C. Evans suspended all foreclosure sales this month. He later said he would hold them if lenders can assure him that the homes are either exempt from the federal Troubled Asset Relief Program or that homeowners have been given the chance to renegotiate their mortgages.

Evans' spokesman John Roach said Friday that no sales have been held since early this month. In a typical week, the sheriff's office would have overseen 400 to 600 sales.

In Genesee County, Mich., Sheriff Robert J. Pickell is working with judges and landlords to give renters more time to vacate a foreclosed property.

"There were unsavory landlords that were collecting the rent and letting [mortgages] go," he said.

Alexander said most homes are vacated before the eviction date and before that time deputies try to share information about social service agencies with occupants.

Stories of renters receiving little notice of foreclosure have caught the attention of state Reps. Ted Celeste, D-Grandview Heights, and Mike Foley, D-Cleveland.

This month, the legislators reintroduced the Ohio Renter's Protection Act, which would require landlords to tell tenants about

foreclosures.

The bill would force rental agreements to convert to a month-to-month lease when the court approves the sale of the property.

Ohio ranks as one of the worst states for foreclosures and delinquent mortgages.

In Summit County, the number of foreclosed properties sold at sheriff's sales has jumped 225 percent since 2001.

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