

Bill to help Sandy victims avoid foreclosure goes to governor

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A bill to help Hurricane Sandy victims avoid foreclosure headed to the governor's desk Monday after passing the state Senate.

It had already passed the Assembly.

The bill, S2300, would give homeowners hurt by Sandy the ability to apply for a forbearance period on their mortgages, during which they could stop making mortgage payments but would have to continue to maintain and insure their properties and pay property taxes.

Co-sponsor Sen. Jennifer Beck, R-Monmouth, said providing a pathway to prevent foreclosure will protect families who are struggling to fund both a mortgage and rent.

"The process of securing state and federal recovery funds is long and complex," Beck said. "It has been four years, and yet we still have 3,200 Sandy victims eager to complete elevation and construction projects, including some that have just begun."

The other co-sponsor was Brian Stack, D-Hudson.

While advocates celebrated its legislative approval, they won't be able to relax until Gov. Chris Christie signs it. He conditionally vetoed a somewhat similar bill last year.

"We are only two-thirds of the way toward really helping people," said Amanda Devecka-Rinear, of Cedar Bonnet Island in Stafford Township, founder of the New Jersey Organizing Project, a grassroots group. "We really need the governor to do the right thing and sign the legislation."

The mortgage forbearance period would be until one year after the home is awarded a certificate of occupancy, or to July 1, 2019, whichever is earlier.

The bill provides for more transparency by the state Department of Community Affairs in its decision-making on applications under the Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, Elevation and Mitigation; Low-to-Moderate Income; and Tenant-Based Rental Assistance programs.

It also extends the one-year deadline for completing a project following a program grant award, if the delay was caused by a builder or the

The bill defines a Sandy-impacted homeowner as one who received rental assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency as a result of damage to his or her primary residence due to Sandy, or has been approved for assistance through RREM or LMI.

Devecka-Rinear's group has drawn attention to the thousands of families whose houses were badly damaged and who are still not back in their homes.

Last year's bill that Christie conditionally vetoed would have allowed for a three-year mortgage forbearance. Christie said he felt such questions should be left in the hands of the courts.

