

MORTGAGE DEBT FORGIVENESS – KEY FACTS

In late December 2007, Congress passed legislation changing the tax code relating to mortgage debt forgiveness. Ordinarily, debt forgiveness – including short sales, short refinances, deed-in-lieu of foreclosure or other ways lenders forgive debt owed - counts as taxable income. This legislation changes the tax code, offering an exception specifically targeted for home mortgage debt forgiveness.

Minnesota homeowners need to know that there are a number of stipulations in the legislation:

1. The burden is on the taxpayer to assert the exception.

In other words, debt forgiveness (short sale, deed-in-lieu, permanent loan modification, etc) still counts as income and lenders are required to issue Form 1099-C to the homeowner whose debt was forgiven. It is then the taxpayer’s burden to tell the IRS that they qualify for an exception to paying tax on this income. To do so, they need to fill out a special form (Form 982), which can only be used with the long-form 1040 as opposed to the 1040A or 1040EZ.

CAUTION

Exceptions are not automatic. Taxpayers must file Form 982 with the long-form 1040 when filing their taxes.

2. The exception is only for “qualified” debt, which is defined to exclude any cash-out in a refinancing.

The exception for debt forgiveness only qualifies if the original debt was incurred for home acquisition or to pay for home improvement costs – not cash out to pay other bills. Any cash-out amount is subtracted off the top of any debt forgiveness amount before the exception kicks in. For example, if a homeowner refinanced their home with a \$120,000 loan, of which \$15,000 was cashed out to pay debts unrelated to home improvement, and then sells short for \$100,000 - with the lender agreeing to forgive the remaining \$20,000 - only \$5,000 of this amount will qualify for the exception. *The taxpayer will need to pay income tax on the remaining \$15,000 of forgiven debt.*

3. Lower-income taxpayers claiming this exception may still be able to use VITA clinics for help filing their returns.

Note that Form 982 is likely to be too complicated for many people to fill out themselves. Most VITA or IRS tax clinics can generally assist taxpayers who need to fill out the long-form 1040 and Form 982. However, the issues may be complex and beyond the scope of VITA. Such taxpayers should be prepared to use a professional tax preparer.

UPDATE

In late 2014, this tax relief was extended, covering debts discharged through 12/31/2014.

This information is provided as a service of the Minnesota Homeownership Center and is not legal or tax advice. Consult a professional regarding your specific tax and legal obligations.

For information on how to contact a Housing Counselor that specializes in foreclosure issues, call the Minnesota Homeownership Center today at (651) 659-9336 or (866) 462 – 6466 or visit www.hocmn.org