



**LEGAL AID**  
OF WESTERN MICHIGAN

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December 22, 2009

Jennifer J. Johnson  
Secretary  
Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System  
20th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20551

Re: Truth in Lending – Proposed Rule: Regulation Z Part 226;  
Docket No. R-1367

Dear Members of the Federal Reserve Board:

Legal Aid of Western Michigan is a legal services organization providing legal representation to low income families and senior citizens in 17 counties in west Michigan, including the cities of Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, Muskegon and St. Joseph/Benton Harbor.

The Home Ownership Preservation Project directs legal services to homeowners who are facing foreclosure. Michigan's high level of unemployment combined with predatory and "exotic" mortgage loans and the current economic crisis has led to one of the highest foreclosure rates in the nation. We counsel hundreds of homeowners a month regarding foreclosure. We have also litigated many cases involving the Truth in Lending Act as well as other consumer statutes. Simply put, we are trying to save homes.

**Proposed Changes in Rules and Timing for Open-End Credit are Deeply Flawed.** The Board's proposal would allow creditors to make HELOC loans with *no advance disclosures*. Allowing open end home secured credit to be made with such minimal disclosure requirements will push the predatory activity into that form of lending – which is just as dangerous for consumers and the economy as predatory closed-end credit has been.

Additionally, we strongly oppose the Board's proposal for a weak, nothing-in APR for open-end credit. Here the Board



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Area Agency on Aging, Regions IIIA, IV, VIII, XIV • Kent County Senior Millage

proposes to put *no up front fees or charges in the APR*. This is directly opposite to the approach of the "all-in" finance charge in the closed end proposals. Creating this tremendous gap in meaningful regulation between closed and open end home secured credit will make it impossible for consumers to compare the products.

**Changes for Open-End Credit is Based on Wrong Assumptions.** Unlike the changes proposed by the Board for closed-end credit disclosures, the changes for open-end credit are deeply flawed. If adopted, this proposal will do a great deal of harm. It will not only enable HELOC lending to become much more abusive, but will also undermine the Board's innovative proposals for closed-end credit – because the abuses will simply migrate to the less regulated open-end credit market. The Board's HELOC proposal requires major revision.

The Board bases its flawed approach for HELOC changes on the mistaken idea that HELOC borrowers seek out HELOCs. Borrowers in the subprime market are most often provided HELOCs as part of 80-20 financing deals. The lender finances 80% of the obligation with a closed-end mortgage, and the remaining 20% with a HELOC. This may be a home purchase or a refinance, but the bottom line is that the borrower is highly leveraged, with no equity cushion. The borrower rarely understands the terms of the deal before closing, or even that there are two loans, and is never made aware that one of the loans is a HELOC. *The HELOC is a line of credit in name only, as nearly the entire amount available is drawn down at closing.* The Board has completely failed to deal with this subprime HELOC market—the market where abuses are most likely to occur.

Additionally, the Board treats HELOCs as an alternate form of a credit card, not an alternate form of a mortgage. Again, this view ignores the subprime market, where HELOCs are primarily sold as part of a mortgage transaction. They are sold along with closed-end mortgages in 80-20 transactions. By allowing HELOC lenders to state an APR that does not include fees, the Board is blessing a disclosure regime that will make HELOC APRs appear lower than the APRs for comparable closed-end mortgages, giving consumers the *false impression that the HELOC rate is lower.*

The Board's proposal is a recipe for abuse. Brokers will be able to steer borrowers into HELOCs and provide the terms of the

HELOC only at closing. HELOCs that are used to purchase a home will not be rescindable, so home purchasers who sign a fully-drawn HELOC at closing will have no ability to get out of it. Brokers will be able to mislead borrowers by selling HELOCs as cheaper than closed-end loans by showing borrowers the HELOC APR, which will look lower only because the two APRs are defined differently. Bad lending will migrate to HELOCs, undermining the true reforms that the Board has proposed for closed-end lending.

Based on this blindness toward the part of the market where the greatest abuses occur, the Board has decided to *dispense with all early disclosures about HELOCs*. Instead, the Board is giving its blessing to the practice of giving the borrower the first and only disclosures about the terms of the HELOC *at closing*.

**The Board's Mandate to Protect Consumers from Unfair Mortgage Practices Includes Home Secured Open-end credit.** It is disappointing that in the midst of the current disaster in the mortgage market, even with the obvious problems caused by essentially unsecured second mortgages, that the Board does not appear to recognize the dangers of home secured open-end credit. The Board's proposal on open-end credit reduces rather than increases protections for consumers from open-end credit lines. Instead, the Board should be mandating disclosures equivalent to closed-end credit, and substantive protections such as requiring creditors to evaluate the borrower's ability to pay all home secured credit.

There are many other issues which merit comment; for those, we refer the Board to the comprehensive comments provided by the National Consumer Law Center.

Sincerely,

LEGAL AID OF WESTERN MICHIGAN

  
Karen Merrill Tjapkes  
Attorney at Law and Director  
Home Ownership Preservation Project

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Cc: Michael Chielens, Executive Director  
Legal Aid of Western Michigan