

- ▶ Property taxes
- ▶ Save money, pack your lunch
- ▶ Energy efficient appliances

Consider housing counseling

Are you struggling to make your mortgage payment each month? Does your payment take up a huge chunk of your income? Do you have an ARM that is about to reset? Are you facing a reduction in income that may soon make it difficult to pay your mortgage?

If you answered “yes” to any of those questions, you should consider making an appointment with a housing counselor.

Housing counselors have a great deal of knowledge when it comes to mortgage modifications, foreclosure prevention and programs that are available to help homeowners. Just because you are not in foreclosure, it doesn't mean you won't benefit from seeing a housing counselor.

Many homeowners attempt to contact their lender directly and quickly become frustrated because they don't know who to ask for and what questions to ask. These homeowners may give up and think there is no help available for them.

Housing counselors not only know of the available programs, but they can work directly with your lender.

If you are worried that you may have trouble keeping up with your mortgage, the time to ask for help is now, not after you've received a foreclosure notice.

Advantage CCS has a staff of housing counselors who are certified through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. There is no cost for a foreclosure prevention session.

If you, or someone you know, needs assistance, call (888) 511-2227 to schedule an appointment.

Did you know ...

That you can split your property tax payments?

Many people choose to have their property taxes paid out of escrow, which means that a portion of the homeowner's monthly mortgage payment is set aside for their property taxes. The lender then pays the property taxes when they're due. However, some people choose to pay their taxes on their own.

Depending on the value of your home and the tax rate in your area, these taxes can be very expensive. Some people may find it difficult to come up with the full amount. But, there's another option. You can make split payments on your property taxes.

You may find it easier to make quarterly or bi-annual payments instead of having to come up with the entire amount at once. Regardless of how you choose to pay your taxes, be sure to put aside some money each month to save for your payment.

Contact your local tax department and ask about this option.



Q: Will buying energy efficient appliances really help reduce my utility costs?

A: In most cases, the answer is yes. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy developed the Energy Star label to make it easier for consumers to purchase energy efficient appliances that will save money on utility bills. Products with this label are tested and proven to be energy efficient.

Energy Star refrigerators use 40 percent less energy than conventional models and the clothes washers use between 40 and 50 percent less energy and 55 percent less water.

Some products with the Energy Star label can be more expensive. If that is the case, it must be proven that the buyer will recover their investment through utility bill savings. Outfitting your home with mostly Energy Star appliances will likely save you \$80 a year in utility bills.

If your budget doesn't allow for new appliances, there are ways to run your current appliances more efficiently. See the Advantage Challenge for ideas of how to get the maximum energy efficiency from your current appliances.

For more information on Energy Star Qualified appliances you can go to www.energystar.gov.

Save money and pack your lunch

If you're working, and especially if you're not a morning person, you know how difficult it can be to get out of the door on time in the mornings. Sometimes something just doesn't get done. Maybe that something happens to be packing a lunch.

It's easy to skip making a lunch and just grab a quick meal from the nearest fast-food place or convenience store, but that is a good way to go over-budget in the food department. You can save yourself a lot of money by packing your lunch on a regular basis. Save the lunches out for a special treat.

The average price of a combo meal at a fast food restaurant is \$6. You can make your own lunch consisting of a sandwich, yogurt, fresh fruit and a sweet treat for around \$3. That's a savings of \$15 a week, or \$750 a year. If you eat lunch at a sit-down restaurant at an average cost of \$12 a meal, you can save over \$2,000 a year, just on lunch!

If you always seem to be pressed for time in the morning, take a few minutes the night before to put your lunch together. If you have something that could get soggy, like a sandwich with mayo, make that before you head out the door. But, you can get everything else ready. If you're planning to take leftovers from last night's dinner, put them in a to-go container as you're cleaning up from dinner.

While you're at it, prepare your coffee pot for the next morning too. Even if you spend \$1 on a coffee from the local gas station each work morning, you will spend \$250 a year. If you like fancy coffee drinks, you can spend up to \$1,000 a year if you buy a drink every day!

Even if you like high quality coffee that costs \$12 a pound, you will spend less than \$80 a year if you make your coffee at home every day.

Alternative vacations for your budget

With summer just around the corner, one simple word comes to mind... VACATION!!! A vacation can lift your spirits for months at a time. The only question is how to pay for it.

A trip to a beach, a resort or another country can be pricey. In these days of tight budgeting, it might not always be affordable. However, there are options. Sometimes a day trip or a weekend getaway is better for your pocket book and for your peace of mind.

Taking a day trip is a quick, easy, and inexpensive vacation alternative. Depending on where you live there are many options to choose from. Every city has museums, zoos, amusement parks, and historical sites. Some of these places have a small entrance fee and some are completely free. You can usually stay all day, and most places let you bring your own food. A trip to a park is also a great idea for a Saturday. Most places have large parks with walking trails, playgrounds, and wildlife reserves. Keep in mind that you don't have to stick to the area around where you live. A few hours drive can sometimes reveal great treasures you never even knew about. Check the paper and the internet to find enjoyable places to spend a day, or just simply ask around.

A night or a weekend away can be relaxing, enjoyable, and cheaper than a full week's vacation. Camping, while not for everyone, can be a great way to introduce the kids to nature. All you need is a tent and a cooler full of food. Some sites are as cheap as \$7 to \$10 a night. Most places do have bathrooms and some even have showers. Another great idea is to drive to a city you have never been to before. Whether it's a small town or a major city, spending a day or two and just looking around can be exciting and relaxing. Some hotels, motels, and bed and breakfasts can be expensive, but if you catch them on an off weekend or a weeknight some are as cheap as \$50 a night.

Regardless of your choice always remember to call ahead. All your plans can be quickly ruined by a special event at the park you chose or a convention at the hotel you wanted. Things like that can also stretch your budget.

Resources

Online coupons
www.coupons.com

USDA Food Plans
www.cnpp.usda.gov

Federal Trade Commission
(877) FTC- HELP

The Advantage Challenge

Advantage challenges you to ...

Reduce your electric bill by changing how you use your appliances.

Here are some simple ways to lower your electric bill:

Vacuum the coils in the back of your refrigerator twice a year.

Wash your clothes on either the warm or cold setting. You can even find detergent specifically made for cold water. Ninety percent of the energy used by a washer is to heat the water.

Dry your clothes outside or use an indoor drying rack.

Run your dishwasher only when it's full and use short wash cycles for everything except the dirtiest dishes. Also, skip the "heated dry" cycle and let your dishes air dry or dry them with a towel.

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