

STATEMENT OF
BARRY R. WIDES
DEPUTY COMPTROLLER OF THE CURRENCY FOR COMMUNITY AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
April 15, 2008

Chairman Frank, Ranking Member Bachus, and members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today about the OCC's role in financial literacy and education efforts. My testimony discusses the many roles the OCC plays in promoting financial literacy.

Financial literacy is a key component of ensuring fair and equal access to credit and banking services. Comptroller of the Currency John Dugan has stressed the need to help national bank customers become more engaged in sound financial decision-making since taking office.

The OCC has done much in recent years to share financial knowledge and best practices; leverage resources; and build financial literacy partnerships. We concentrate our financial literacy activities in three main areas: building public awareness, encouraging the financial literacy efforts of national banks, and guiding federal regulations and policies.

Our public awareness efforts take several forms. Comptroller Dugan has taken the lead in highlighting this issue in speeches and keynote remarks during his visits around the country. The OCC has mounted an extensive Public Service message campaign to local news media in English and Spanish. And we produce a range of

Consumer Advisories that are easily accessible on the OCC's expanded consumer protection Web page.

Last summer, the OCC launched *HelpWithMyBank.gov*, a unique website that answers more than 250 questions drawn from actual experiences of the OCC's own customer specialists. *HelpWithMyBank.gov* links Web visitors to other resources and also customers to file complaints about national banks or request additional information on-line.

The OCC's Community Affairs Department, which I direct, focuses on helping national banks to become leaders in providing retail services to underserved communities and individuals. In addition to our headquarters staff, we have Community Affairs Officers around the country who work with our bank examiners in helping national banks to improve their financial literacy outreach and delivery programs.

As a resource for our banks, we maintain an extensive library of financial literacy information on the OCC's Web site. Recent OCC publications target the needs of Native Americans, small businesses, and the unbanked.

The OCC also serves on the Board of NeighborWorks America and participates on the Financial Literacy and Education Commission. We work regularly with these and other national and regional partners – many of whom are with us at today's hearing – to support financial literacy and education programs and to find the most effective methods for their delivery.

These experiences give us valuable insight into the importance of financial literacy to good financial decision-making. Moreover, this knowledge helps us, as federal

regulators, in implementation of the Community Reinvestment Act, which provides incentives for banks to undertake financial literacy activities.

The OCC is currently working with the other federal banking agencies to develop a narrowly-defined change to the CRA regulations that would provide CRA credit for communities that are “declining” because of unprecedented levels of foreclosures and related economic factors. This has raised a related thought for consideration by the regulatory agencies – whether positive CRA consideration should also attach to financial literacy and education activities that benefit these same middle-income impacted areas and facilitate their short-term recovery. Given the rising need for financial counselors to assist borrowers who are having difficulty meeting their mortgage payments, additional CRA incentives may be helpful to encourage additional bank partnerships with nonprofit housing counseling organizations.

Given the financial literacy challenges presented today, the time is right to bolster financial literacy for students, for working people, and for those facing retirement. We look forward to working with the other agencies on the Financial Literacy and Education Commission, the President’s Advisory Council on Financial Literacy, and your Committee to promote financial literacy and address the financial needs of all Americans.

I appreciate the Committee’s time and look forward to answering your questions.