Case Study

Lake Michigan Credit Union Cuts Title Report Turn Times by Up to 50% with FirstClose

Lake Michigan Credit Union (LMCU) needed a home equity services partner that could integrate with a new loan origination system (LOS) and provide hands-on training for its home equity team. By partnering with FirstClose, LMCU cut title property report turnaround to two to three days, resulting in an estimated 40–50% improvement in delivery. FirstClose's valuation cascade also resolves more than 98% of completed valuation orders with an AVM, enabling LMCU to avoid a full appraisal on more than 99% of orders, supporting faster decisions while limiting member costs.

Client Overview

Headquartered in Grand Rapids, Mich., LMCU is the largest credit union in the state and one of the largest in the nation, serving more than 600,000 members. The credit union lends across Michigan and, increasingly, in Florida, an expansion that began in Bonita Springs under a previous CEO and has continued to grow further inland.

LMCU builds its products around long-term member value, a philosophy reflected in offerings such as its 4% max checking account, which is uncommon among financial institutions of its size. That same approach shapes its home equity program, which centers on a 10-year draw period and 15-year payback period, giving members flexibility to borrow against their homes over time. LMCU's line-of-credit product is its most popular home equity offering, followed by its fixed-rate home equity loan.

Several years ago, LMCU shifted home equity from its consumer lending division to its mortgage department because the credit union holds the home as collateral. That alignment also enables the team to fall back on agency guidelines when unusual scenarios arise, mitigating risk by drawing on the experience its first-lien underwriting staff has in applying them.

Opportunity

Before working with FirstClose, LMCU relied on a vendor that was built directly into the credit union's core system, allowing staff to place orders via a quick link without leaving their workflow. That changed after an update to LMCU's core system eliminated the vendor's direct integration, forcing staff to use a separate website and adding steps to every request.

The switch brought delays. LMCU saw lag time in ordering title property reports and valuations, including internal inspections, and those delays compounded in the spring and summer, when the credit union's home equity volume is at its peak.

LMCU also felt it didn't get the training support it needed from that vendor, which, rather than working directly with staff, handed over materials on how to use the new website. That left LMCU's home equity leadership team to train their own team on the new ordering platform.

Solution

As LMCU prepared to move its home equity operations to Temenos, the credit union sought a partner with an existing settlement workflow integration to that LOS. Because FirstClose had an established Temenos integration, LMCU did not have to choose between the timeline for its system migration and the settlement workflow that depended on it.

Order Management Services (OMS) from FirstClose consolidates title, valuation and flood ordering into a single platform and applies the lender's own rules for which provider handles each file. Lenders can access it in two ways: through FirstClose's web platform or embedded directly in their LOS, where orders are placed and completed reports are returned without anyone leaving the system of record.

LMCU opted for the direct integration but began on the web platform, so its team could order through FirstClose while the LOS migration was still underway. FirstClose also met with LMCU's entire home equity team to train staff on the platform directly.

"FirstClose did the legwork on training, which was huge. As a manager, I can learn a new system, but having to teach it to my whole team on top of everything else isn't easy," said Julie Oziemkiewicz, home equity director at Lake Michigan Credit Union. "They came in and trained our team directly, so people could ask any question and actually get a real answer."

Results

Shorter Turn Times and More Complete Files

Using OMS, LMCU orders full title property reports through a single platform rather than a separate site per provider. Reports now come back in two to three days, and based on LMCU's estimate of its previous turnaround, that represents a roughly 40–50% reduction in report cycle time. The improvement helps files reach underwriting sooner and with fewer outstanding documents.

Demand for LMCU's home equity products varies by season and market, making turnaround matter beyond convenience. Its growing Florida membership borrows more evenly year-round, and some keep a home equity line of credit on standby heading into hurricane season. In Michigan, business picks up in April, stays busy through the summer and tapers off in October before settling into a steadier pace from November through March, with borrowers using funds for debt consolidation early in the year and shifting to home renovations as the weather turns.

"Even in our busy season, I can confidently say these files are much more complete going into underwriting, because we have those documents," Oziemkiewicz said.

Cost-Effective Services for Members

LMCU members pay for the third-party services their loans require, so FirstClose's pricing shows up directly in what they owe at closing. On home equity balances, those fixed costs carry more weight than they would on a first mortgage.

Valuations run through a cascade that begins with an AVM and escalates only when a file can't be satisfied at that tier. More than 98% of LMCU's completed valuation orders resolve at the AVM, and with FirstClose Desktop Valuations included, more than 99% never reach a full appraisal, the slowest and most expensive option for the member.

Cost was not what LMCU set out to solve. But for a credit union that builds its products around long-term member value, keeping closing costs down is consistent with how it approaches everything else, and Oziemkiewicz said the savings were a benefit she hadn't anticipated going in.

"Things are expensive these days, so if we can help reduce cost, it's huge," she noted.

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>
> **Julie Oziemkiewicz**
> *Home Equity Director at Lake Michigan Credit Union*

Fewer Errors and Reorders

As staff enter order information, FirstClose’s platform displays a property image alongside the details they’ve entered, providing visual confirmation before an order goes out. Catching an error there takes seconds, whereas catching it after a report comes back means reordering and restarting the clock.

“You’re starting to type in the information, and it pulls in an image of the house,” Oziemkiewicz said. “It makes everything so easy to read that there’s really no room for mistakes. Sometimes people make it a little more complex than it really needs to be. Not FirstClose.”

Ongoing Support and Monthly Reporting

LMCU meets monthly with its FirstClose account manager for a recap of the previous month’s activity. Between those check-ins, the account manager and FirstClose’s support center handle day-to-day questions.

“I get a full breakdown of what they’re seeing on their end each month, and it’s valuable data I can bring straight to my senior leaders,” Oziemkiewicz said. “That open communication, having a direct point of contact, has been huge. I love that customer service aspect of it because it makes that relationship even stronger, having someone to be able to rely on.”

For LMCU, the shift to FirstClose has meant receiving complete files sooner, delivering more cost-effective service for members and gaining a level of hands-on support the credit union hadn’t found with its previous vendor. As its home equity program continues to grow across Michigan and Florida, that partnership has become as valuable to the credit union as any single improvement in turnaround time.

About FirstClose

Headquartered in Austin, Texas, FirstClose, Inc. is a leading fintech provider of data and workflow solutions for mortgage and home equity lenders nationwide. The company’s mission is to increase profitability and reduce costs for mortgage lenders through systems and provider relationships that enable lenders to serve borrowers more effectively, reduce closing costs, and shorten closing times.

For more information, visit firstclose.com.