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Divorce And The Economy

PHILADELPHIA (CBS 3) — A national lawyers' group says divorce rates are dropping. Some couples just can't afford to break up. As CBS 3's Natasha Brown shows us, the problem is often the house.

It was love at first sight when MaryBeth Perrault found her dream home.

"I thought I would retire here and knew that this was a house that we could raise the family in," she said.

That was three years ago. Now she and her husband have split, and her dream home has become a nightmare.

"Now I can't stand it," she said.

Spouses used to fight to keep the house, often their biggest asset. Now, lawyers say, it can be the hot potato that nobody wants.

"Everybody wants the asset that's worth something," said attorney Gary Nickelson of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. "Nobody wants the asset that's not worth anything or has debt attached to it."

Haddonfield divorce lawyer Amy Goldstein says, not only is the housing market complicating divorces, so is the tightened credit market.

"It's not that easy to just go out and refinance your house and buy the other spouse out," said Goldstein.

Neither MaryBeth nor her husband could afford the house on their own. They put it on the market while she stayed there. So far, no takers. MaryBeth's personal housing crisis complicated her divorce.

"The divorce decree was written with the assumption that the house would have been sold by the time we got a divorce, so we had to alter that," she said.

Some divorce attorneys are getting creative. Divorce attorney Vikkie Ziegler said, "I'll allow one party to remain in the home, not pull the equity out, try to come up with a financial package, and then perhaps when a child turns 18 or graduates high school, they'll sell it."

There are even stories of couples living together after they're divorced.

Nickelson says those couples figure, "'Well, we can't get rid of the house, so I tell you what. We'll just live in the house until times are better. You can take the upstairs and I'll take the downstairs.'"

Selling is the only option for MaryBeth, who is eager to move on.

"I always call it the beast on my back," she said. "To be saddled with that on top of the emotional stress of a divorce is really, really difficult."

The bad economy is likely to affect couples for months to come. For now, MaryBeth has already dropped her asking price by \$30,000 and may go even lower just to get it to sell sooner.

