



Being able to live where you work

By Charisse Jones, USA TODAY

NEW YORK — The duplex is only a short sprint from the house where Aquila Haynes was raised. But because it is hers, with a mortgage that she pays and rooms she can call her own, this home in a pocket of Brooklyn represents a leap that is in some ways immeasurable.

It is also something that Haynes, a city worker paid \$55,000 a year, would have been hard pressed to buy without the help of her union, New York City's District Council 37.

"It would have been extremely difficult," says Haynes, 28, who got a \$17,000 grant through a union housing program that helped her buy the \$295,000 home in August. "I was able to move in and buy the furniture and necessities I needed. Without the grant, I would not have been able to do that."

Tens of thousands of teachers, firefighters and other public workers across the USA must make long commutes each day because they cannot afford to buy or rent close to where they work. In response, unions such as DC 37 are tapping pension funds, forfeiting pay increases and forming partnerships to create affordable housing for their members. Some developers are even picking up the baton, targeting housing specifically for such workers.

Last month, New York City's comptroller announced that \$28 million of the teachers' union pension fund was being invested in bonds to finance two apartment buildings specifically for teachers, aides and others involved in education. It is the first new housing in at least a generation to be financed by a municipal union for its members.

Union and city leaders hope the moderately priced rentals in the Bronx will help stem the tide of teachers leaving the city and its school system.

"We want a workforce that lives in the city in which it works," says Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers. She says that 4,600 teachers quit working in New York City's school system in 2006, and some educators commute from as far away as Pennsylvania.

'A drop in the bucket'

The 234 apartments will be part of a larger complex to open in the summer of 2009. Teachers and others working in education will apply for an apartment through a lottery, and families of four earning up to the area median income of \$70,900 will be eligible, says Aaron Eckerle, program information manager for the New York City Housing Development Corp., which issued the bonds.

There are 80,000 teachers in the city earning between \$45,000 and \$100,000 a year, so the units are "a drop in the bucket," Weingarten says. Still, she sees it as a significant model for what unions and city agencies can do. "What's important about this nationally, as well as locally, is it's a template."

Other programs for workers:

- Washington, D.C., last year negotiated an agreement with seven major unions to steer a portion of the members' payroll toward affordable housing programs. The set-aside amounts to roughly \$3 million over four years. The agreement was part of a broader contract with the unions representing 10,000 office workers, emergency workers and public works employees, says Sean Madigan, a city spokesman.

"The average price of a home, between 2001 and 2005, rose about 175%," says Madigan, noting that most people who work in the nation's capital don't live there. "We're paying people out of city revenues for city jobs and it would be great if the tax revenue would stay in the district."

- The developers of Green Cay Village in South Florida call their project "Palm Beach County's first affordable housing development marketed directly to teachers, police officers and other workers priced out of homeownership." The development opened in September. The builders visited city and county offices and took out ads in newsletters to spread the word. They targeted firefighters, health care workers and others with information about the 43-acre development, where condo prices start at \$198,900 and town houses at \$289,900, says Jerry Goray, project co-developer.

"We decided that was an underserved segment of the market and one we wanted to reach out to," Goray says. About 68% of the residents living in Green Cay's homes and apartments come from the fields they focused on. "It would be a prudent business thing to do as well as a matter of serving the community," he adds.

Living in homeless shelters

District Council 37, New York City's largest public employee union, launched its Municipal Employees Housing Program in 2006, helping its members obtain everything from grants for closing costs to a preference in the city lottery for a percentage of affordable units.

Unlike police officers or teachers, the clerical workers and other city employees represented by DC 37 must live within city limits, a difficult requirement when the average salary is \$30,000 a year, says Henry Garrido, the union's assistant associate director. "We discovered more than 300 families of municipal employees actually residing in homeless shelters," Garrido says.

Local unions have created housing for their members in the past, including a large development in Queens built in the 1940s by the electricians' union.

"It's ground that hasn't been broken in a while," Ingrid Gould Ellen, co-director of the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at New York University, says of the planned teachers' housing in the Bronx.

Though housing prices are generally ebbing nationally, affordable housing remains out of reach for the middle-class and poor in New York and many other cities, she says. In 2005, fewer than 5% of the housing units sold in New York City were affordable to a household earning the median income.

"So it's not surprising that you see these unions trying to respond because this housing market really strains, and these are the key workers that we need in the city," she says.

Haynes, a communications analyst for the city's Department of Education, lived at home with her mother to save for her new house. Now, her 7-year-old daughter has her own room, and a walk-in closet big enough to play in. "It's a nice feeling to give that to my child," she says. "I made the right decision."