

How local labor unions are helping members buy homes

2023 was a big year for Philly labor activity, including the formation of new unions. As home prices rise and wages don't keep pace, local labor unions are offering members home buying help.



Latisha Thompson and her partner, Paul Prescod, near their Philadelphia home. The couple got help purchasing their first home through her union, AFGE. Jose F. Moreno / Staff Photographer

by [Michaëlle Bond](#)

Latisha Thompson and Paul Prescod are big fans of [labor unions](#) and the benefits and protections they've won for workers. So much so that they got engaged Labor Day Weekend a couple years ago and plan to get married this Labor Day weekend.

So when they decided to buy their first home, they looked to Thompson's union for help.

Last year was a [big one in the Philadelphia region for labor activity](#), including the formation of new unions. To sell members on the value of a union card, the organizations not only advocate for higher wages and defend workers on the chopping block, they also offer benefits that touch on other aspects of workers' lives.

That includes helping members with the biggest purchase of their lives. And as home ownership has gotten less affordable in recent years, home-buying help through unions has gained momentum.

Staring down [elevated mortgage interest rates](#) and high home prices this fall, "I was honestly looking for just any route of relief," said Thompson, 32, who works at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in West Philadelphia.

Through Thompson's membership in the [American Federation of Government Employees](#) (AFGE), she and Prescod got paired with a real estate agent and a lender, who gave them "incredible" service and got them down-payment assistance and an exclusive loan with no private mortgage insurance.

They closed on their four-bedroom, 2½-bathroom home in [Fern Rock](#) on Dec. 15. The couple got the home after a potential buyer had to pull out because of problems financing the purchase.

"I really couldn't have gotten this far without the benefits of my union," Thompson said.

Home buying help is taking off

Daniel P. Bauder, president of the [AFL-CIO's Philadelphia Council](#), which comprises more than 100 local labor unions, said local unions have been offering home-buying help for a while. But "I think it's becoming more popular, and I think it's also becoming better-known," he said.

“It’s a wonderful thing that the unions are doing, and it’s making a real impact in the lives of their members,” Bauder said. “Unions are so much more than grievances and wages and benefits.”

Purchase rebates, discounted [homeowners insurance](#), and discounts on moving vans and supplies are among the assistance local unions are offering.

Chester Bullard, national benefits coordinator at AFGE, said that when it comes to unions offering home buying help, “the last decade I’d say is really where it’s taken off.”

He noted that interest rates and qualifying standards for mortgages have made now a “challenging time” to buy a home.

“It’s the biggest purchase people make financially,” he said. “So anything we could do to relieve some of those challenges we thought was really important.”



Latisha Thompson and her partner, Paul Prescod, looked to Latisha's union, AFGE, for help after they decided to buy their first home and were staring down high home prices and elevated mortgage rates. Jose F. Moreno / Staff Photographer

The city's largest municipal union — the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees' [District Council 33](#) — has recently held home-buying seminars for members on how to improve their credit and fund their purchase.

“A lot of people didn't know where to begin and didn't think it was possible,” said Evon Sutton, District Council 33's political director. She said [president Ernest Garrett](#) believes “this is something else we ought to be doing. Making life better all the way around for the people we represent.”



Latisha Thompson and her partner, Paul Prescod, closed on their home in the Fern Rock neighborhood in December, thanks to help from Latisha's union. Jose F. Moreno / Staff Photographer

The home-buying seminars are part of the union's effort to help members take advantage of [Philadelphia's Turn the Key program](#). The city initiative gives developers publicly owned land so they can build price-restricted homes for first-time buyer participants, the [first of whom moved in this summer](#). The program prioritizes city employees.

Once union members buy their homes, some unions also help them keep them. Unions affiliated with AFL-CIO can opt in to a program called [Union Plus](#). Union members who use the program to get or refinance a mortgage can get no-interest loans to help pay their mortgage if they are laid off or go on strike.

Last year, the program loaned more than \$600,000 in mortgage assistance to homeowners. Union members also can talk to housing counselors through [Union Plus's Save My Home Hotline](#).

Other places to look for home-buying help

Besides unions, companies sometimes also offer [help to employees to buy a home](#). A lot of people don't realize they may be able to get a few thousand dollars from their employer, said Al Perry, immediate past president of the Pennsylvania Association of Realtors.

Aspiring home buyers should ask any organization they belong to whether they offer assistance as part of their rewards programs and ask for suggestions from their real estate agents, many of whom partner with affinity groups, said Perry, broker and owner of Century 21 Advantage Gold, a real estate firm with offices in and around Philadelphia.

Local governments can help, too. Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania and New Jersey counties surrounding it [offer down-payment assistance for first-time home buyers](#), which isn't unusual for counties. But towns and

cities might offer assistance, too. That's less common, but "it's worth looking into," Perry said, pointing to Upper Darby as an example.

For the last two decades, the township of more than 85,000 people has offered a [first-time home-buyer program](#). Upper Darby residents who have not owned a home in the last three years and make below certain incomes are eligible for up to \$10,000 for down payments or closing costs.

This story has been updated to correct the size of Thompson's and Prescod's new home.

###