

## Creating High-End Homes for First-Time Homebuyers

BY CARYN SAGAL

Can developers and builders create a sense of relief in a real estate environment which appears weak? With the escalating costs of fuel and housing energy is there any relief for the first-time buyer with median income?

The answer is "yes" to both questions. Founded in 2005, Community Solutions develops neighborhoods through conventional methods to include, but not limited to, buying and rehabilitating vacant units, general contracting, construction management and partnership.

Its president and CEO is Luvon Dungee, who has developed or renovated more than 500 housing structures within the Baltimore metropolitan region.

Throughout his career, Dungee has earned a respected reputation in community development, tenant and housing counseling, construction and construction management.

Community Solutions is dedicated to creating communities for first-time buyers to give them higher-end, environmentally-friendly homes that stabilize neighborhoods in need.

Not only does it go into deficient neighborhoods and renovate dilapidated homes, it rebuilds the homes with character and provides the unexpected.

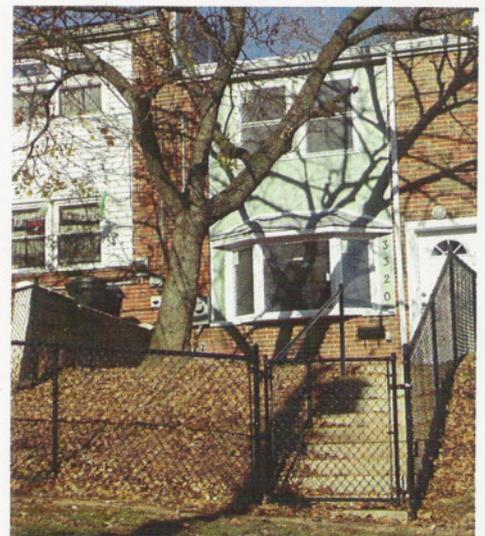
Community Solutions achieves this independently, as well as in partnership with community development organizations.

### NHS projects

Two years ago, Neighborhood Housing Services was developing a pilot project in the Riverview community in Halethorpe, Maryland.

Funded through the Baltimore County Office of Conservation, the project called for rehabbing homes into new and improved, environmentally-friendly and green homes which could be affordable to low- to moderate-income buyers.

NHS had learned that Community Solutions was creating green housing units and sent them a scope of work. Community Solutions reviewed it and ultimately opted to push the envelope further with the use of product, space and design.



Rebuilding the neighborhood.

The Community Solutions plan called for developing a 90 percent green home using environmentally friendly building products.

What's more, it increased the square footage, added a half bathroom, transformed the kitchen into the home's social center and added a dining/family room.

Construction on the first unit began in August 2007. By the end of October 2007, the 900-square-foot space was completely renovated.

The project was so successful that NHS initiated the start of a second and third unit. Community Solutions proudly accepted the charge of completely re-designing these spaces to include: bamboo flooring, tank-less hot-water tanks, 90-plus high efficient furnace, granite countertops, silver-coated roofing systems, solar tubes, low-e windows and fan fold exterior insulation.

Within one year, Community Solutions was well on its way to developing four environmentally-friendly units for sale. NHS and the office of Baltimore County Conservation invited Housing and Urban Development to review the project during all phases of development, ensuring the firm's development capability and understanding of green buildings.

Subsequently, Community Solutions has completed all four homes for NHS – all priced at \$150,000 -- and is taking requests from additional community organizations to create similar projects.

### Independent projects

Embarking on a new revolution of rehab, Community Solutions realized that the costs of creating a high-end home were just the same, regardless of the final purchase price of the home. Instead of the labor and finishes, it's the design that truly provides the edge.

As part of its commitment to enabling first-time buyers to afford the higher-end homes of their dreams, Community Solutions only creates homes to be sold under \$200,000.

In 2007, Community Solutions located a neighborhood in West Baltimore with a 40 percent vacancy rate, which fit the firm's model for community development.

Further research of the neighborhood showed that current and past sales of single family residences were \$75,000 to \$85,000. However, several of the units



A renovation with focus on design.

were not rehabilitated to a standard needed for the neighborhood to grow and prosper.

The average size of the neighborhood units varied from 1,600 to 2,100 square feet, creating a canvas on which to create an open space unit designed for the moderate income urban dweller.

Community Solutions knew it needed to provide a design that would create excitement from the moment you walk up to the porch fronts (curb appeal).

It also had to completely demolish the interior to create open floor plans and functional designs that would attract buyers from all cultures, including new urban pioneers.

During the first year, Community Solutions developed one unit using moderate green elements to reduce energy cost but increase efficiency.

Additionally, the firm purchased a corner unit and created a statement by erecting a 500-square-foot wrap around porch. The porch solidified Community Solutions' presence in the community, as well as provided the momentum to buy and rehab several other units within a one-to-two block radius.

All Community Solutions units have the following amenities:

- three bedrooms, two-and-a-half bathrooms,
- exposed brick,

- A-frame porch fronts with grand entrance,
- hardwood in-laid hardwood flooring,
- oversized master with super bath,
- first-floor powder room,
- custom kitchen with 42-inch cabinets and granite
- costume lighting,
- vaulted ceilings,
- 500-square-foot loft space overlooking the master bedroom,
- 10-foot ceilings,
- high efficient hot water tanks and 90-plus furnaces and
- pre-wiring for telephone, Internet and cable.

To date, the firm has developed five units in West Baltimore with 15 slated for construction within the first year, increasing the out sale by 100 percent. It also is researching additional neighborhoods to transform.

The designs are a win-win for Community Solutions; for its buyers, who gain an increased sense of self worth; for the neighborhoods, which now have a layer of design and stability and the communities overall.

Buyers and builders beware: luxury living does not require big ticket prices! ■

For more information about Community Solutions, LLC, call 410-902-5920 or visit [www.csolutionsdevelop.com](http://www.csolutionsdevelop.com).