

AVLF's Standing with Our Neighbors Initiative

When our neighbors stand up to demand safe and stable housing for their families, a community of AVLF volunteers stands with them.



When our neighbors secure **safe and stable housing**, our whole community **thrives**.

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Imagine that you are a low-income single parent, working full-time for minimum wage and recently took a second job on the weekend to make ends meet. You are renting the only place you can afford that is near your five-year old son's school, the bus route to work, and your cousin's apartment, which is absolutely necessary for childcare.

After your second week in the rental home, you start to see black mold on the walls that appears to have been freshly painted over before you moved in. You call your landlord, but he never returns your calls. Your son's asthma is flaring up. The attacks have gotten so bad that he missed a few days of school last week. You think, "Is it the mold that is causing these problems? Why is he just getting sicker?"

You keep calling your landlord – between shifts – but there is no response. You think about moving, but you remember that the landlord said he would sue you if you left early. Plus, the elementary school is really starting to improve and you don't want to uproot your son. You know that this may require an attorney, but with two jobs and medical bills, you don't have the time or resources to explore that possibility. You feel trapped.

At your breaking point, you notice a flyer in your kindergartener's backpack, announcing that a Staff Attorney and a Community Advocate from the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation (AVLF) now have permanent office hours at the school, and they are focused on addressing families' landlord-tenant issues. Hoping for the best, you stop by.

The Community Advocate is in, listens to your story, tells you that this is exactly why AVLF is there, and completes a quick intake. After checking in with you, the Staff Attorney stops by to see the conditions that very next morning. She immediately makes two calls: the first to one of AVLF's team of volunteer attorneys dedicated to working on housing issues in your specific neighborhood, and next to an expert mold-testing company to take samples. Together, you, AVLF's staff and the volunteer attorney meet that weekend and formulate a plan. The volunteer attorney takes on your case, and a demand letter is sent within a week to the landlord – on the letterhead of a leading law firm.

In the meantime, AVLF's Community Advocate delivers better air-filters for your air conditioning unit and a large dehumidifier for your son's room – a quick response while your legal team is getting the landlord's attention.

Within two weeks, repairs are scheduled and an agreement is reached giving you a few months of discounted rent as compensation. Your son is back at home every night; you can help with homework, his health and attendance improves quickly, he doesn't have to change schools, and you get to keep the dehumidifier just in case. Two weeks later, AVLF's Community Advocate calls to see how things are going. The landlord, you report, has been treating her better ever since. Now you have the fresh start you were looking for when you rented the home.

This is the vision behind AVLF's Standing with Our Neighbors initiative. Families cannot thrive without affordable housing that is safe, stable, and allows for a healthy environment. Schools cannot thrive with a student body forced to live in unstable housing and deplorable conditions. AVLF and our volunteer attorneys – who donate over \$2 million in attorney time annually – are uniquely positioned to have a positive impact in these areas. Through this initiative, we partner with schools and community allies to focus AVLF's volunteer resources on improving housing stability – all to improve resident health, reduce enrollment turnover, and enhance student attendance and performance. AVLF's partner firms for this innovative initiative are **Alston and Bird, Arnall Golden Gregory, Jones Day, Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton, King & Spalding, Nelson Mullins, Sutherland Asbill & Brennan, and Troutman Sanders.**

Drawing on poverty, public health, and school-system data, AVLF identified initial zones of focus. Thanks to the generous support of the **Cousins Family Foundation, Kaiser Permanente, and the Home Depot Foundation**, the Thomasville Heights initiative is fully funded and launched for the 2016-2017 school year, with a new AVLF Staff Attorney and AVLF Community Advocate embedded in the community and working with AVLF's partner law firms to help stabilize housing around Thomasville Heights Elementary School. Basing our efforts out of Dunbar Elementary School, AVLF is laying the foundation for the expansion into the neighborhoods of Neighborhood Planning Unit V for the 2017-2018 school year.

