



2015

annual report



our mission

To create safe and stable homes and families by inspiring attorneys to fight for equal justice.

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from the executive director

Dear Friends,

In 2015, the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation changed.

Our recent 35th birthday marked a perfect time to reconsider the state and direction of AVLF. We conducted a strategic planning process that helped us assess how, and how well, AVLF impacts the numerous communities that we serve. That assessment provided the basis for cohesive planning for our immediate and longer-term future.

The review of AVLF's work and impact on the local community revealed both favorable circumstances and compelling concerns. We are an organization that is providing a striking amount of high-quality, free civil legal services to local residents who would otherwise not be able to access a lawyer. Yet it is beyond question that a large majority of those in Atlanta who cannot afford legal services continue not to be able to secure them when their need is most pressing. Because AVLF recruits well and provides excellent training and support and malpractice coverage, hundreds of attorneys in Atlanta who might otherwise not have a pro bono connection do perform meaningful volunteer legal work each year. Yet only a small percentage of the Atlanta legal community is truly engaged in our (or, we believe, any) pro bono programs.

In the planning process, we acknowledged that we are members of a community that is fracturing, especially economically. With the other circumstances of disparity come, unsurprisingly for those of lower income, an increasing inability to afford even the most basic of civil legal services. And in recognition of our particular structure and attributes, we determined that AVLF appears uniquely capable of responding to the need to enhance access to the local civil justice systems.

Thus, we determined to take each of our existing pro bono programs deeper. For our Safe & Stable Families Project, this meant the creation of the Standing with Survivors Program that adds many layers of support to victims as they seek protective orders, and a Family Law Program through which experienced family practitioners will represent domestic violence victims who need legal services such as custody, child support, or divorce. Our Safe & Stable Homes Project created the Mobile Justice and Standing with Our Neighbors Initiatives. Through each, we endeavor to take our volunteer legal services into the community and expand our capacity for holistic support of the clients to whom we already offer legal assistance.

In 2015, there was tremendous positive energy around these enhancements to our programs, passion that has carried over into 2016. We are enthusiastic about AVLF's future, and through our monthly newsletter, our website (www.avlf.org), our Facebook page (AVLF235), and our Twitter account (@supportAVLF), we invite you to stay connected as we evolve. But before doing so, enjoy the following look-back at what we and our partners accomplished in 2015. We are proud that AVLF works so effectively to leverage the full power and resources of the legal community so when low-income Atlantans stand up to demand safe and stable housing, to insist on pay for an honest day's work, or to break free from domestic violence, a lawyer always stands with them. We thank you for your interest in the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation, and we especially thank the lawyers of Atlanta who through the gifts of their emotional, intellectual, and financial resources make our efforts possible and of real value to our clients.

Warm regards from the AVLF staff.

Sincerely,



Martin L. Ellin

"The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little." FDR





by the numbers: program accomplishments

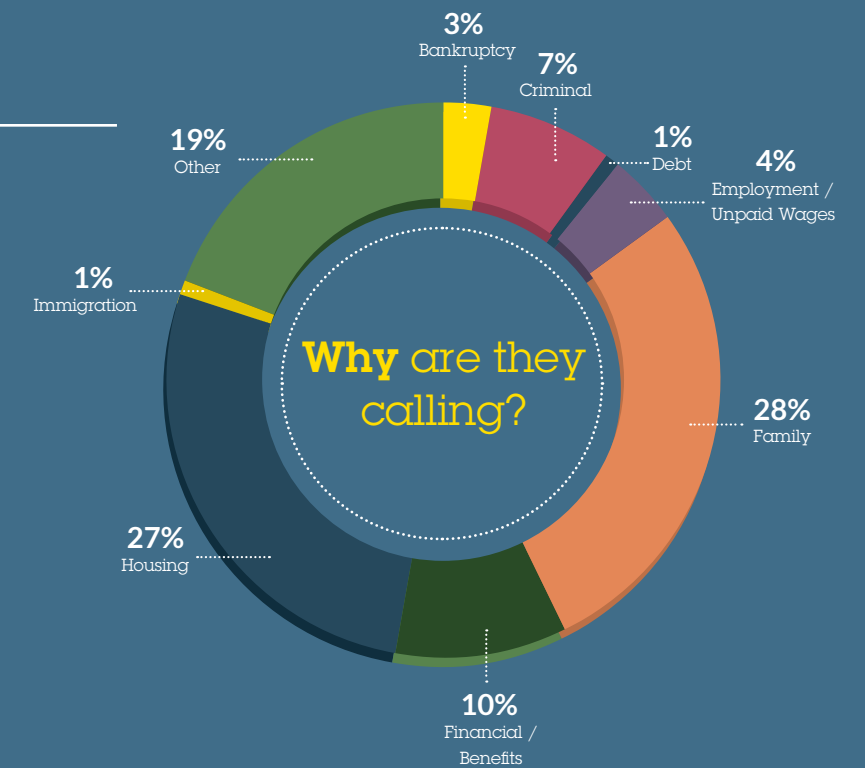
The best legal representation money can't buy. AVLF is the largest provider of pro bono legal services in Greater Atlanta. We directly serve almost 5,000 people each year and reach hundreds more through community outreach and workshops. Since 1979, we have promoted access to justice by inspiring attorneys to provide high-quality education, advocacy, and representation at no charge to low-income families with basic civil legal needs. AVLF's staff trains, mentors, and supports pro bono attorneys to assist low-income people at critical times in their lives. Our staff and our programs make it as easy as possible for lawyers to engage in meaningful pro bono work.

phone calls

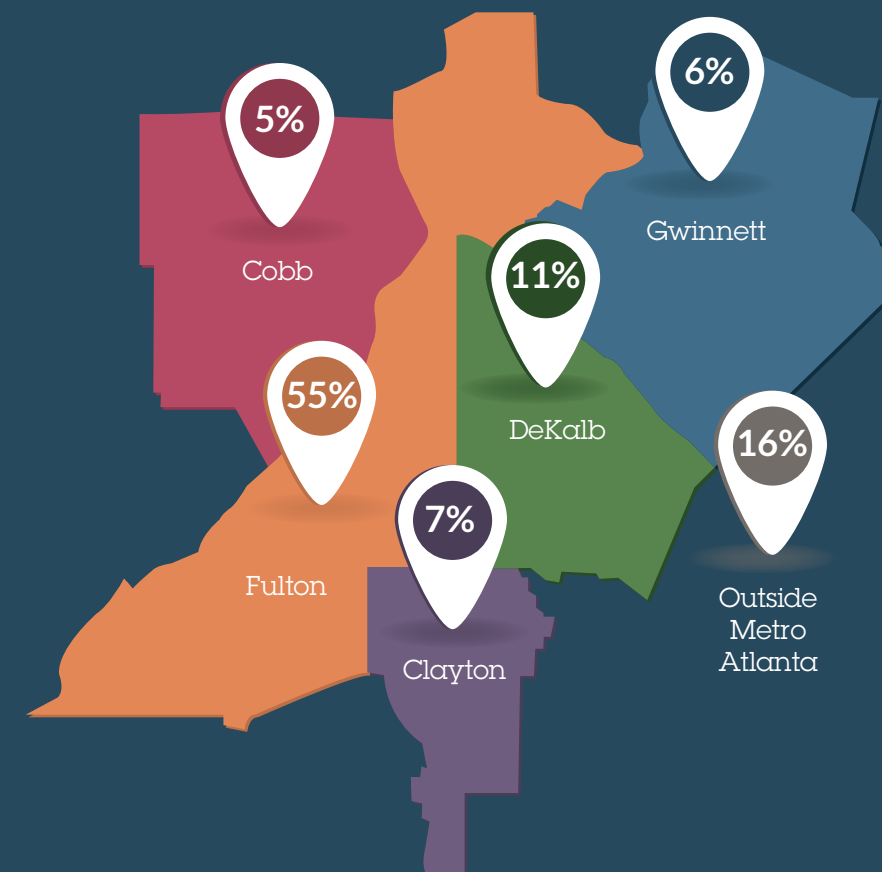


Number of calls to the AVLF main line in 2015:

3,900+

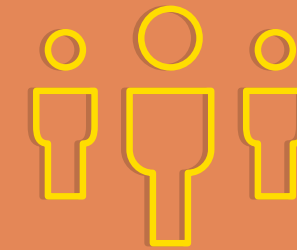


From where are people calling?



By whom are callers referred?

- Atlanta Bar Association
- Atlanta Legal Aid Society / Georgia Legal Services Program
- United Way
- DeKalb Volunteer Lawyers Foundation
- State Bar of Georgia
- Fulton County Courts and Law Library
- Georgia Law Center for the Homeless
- Word of mouth and avlf.org



our programs

safe and stable homes

- Saturday Lawyer Program (SLP)
- Eviction Defense Program
- Bankruptcy Program
- Dollars for Judgments Program (DFJ)
- Low-Income Creditor Assistance Project (LICAP)

safe and stable families

- Safe Families Office (SFO)
- Guardian ad Litem Program (GAL)
- Probate Information Center (PIC)

“ I was treated like I was part of the family, and I will not forget it. ”
– Saturday Lawyer Program Client

“ My attorney was always courteous, considerate, and knowledgeable. I couldn't ask for better representation. ”
– Saturday Lawyer Program Client

safe & stable homes

saturday lawyer program (SLP)

The Saturday Lawyer Program provides Fulton and Clayton Counties' working poor with access to high-quality legal assistance from trained volunteer attorneys in areas vital to economic security, including landlord/tenant disputes and unpaid wage claims.

Total number of Saturday Lawyer clinic interviews conducted:



Number of interviewed clients placed with an attorney for extended representation:



Number of interviewed clients who got valuable advice and counsel:



Value of attorney hours donated during Saturday clinics:



Number of volunteer attorney hours:



Value of donated attorney hours on the 299 cases accepted for full representation:



Number of family members helped:



Number of callers who are either screened for services or given issue-specific referrals to other service providers:



safe & stable homes

eviction defense program

The Eviction Defense Program provides low-income and unrepresented tenants facing eviction with attorneys to represent them in court in their time of critical need.



Number of tenants given
valuable advice
and counsel:

57

Number of tenants
provided full
representation to defend
eviction on short notice:

40



Amount awarded
to tenants facing
eviction:

\$33,741



safe & stable homes

dollars for judgments program

The Dollars for Judgments Program places creditors' rights attorneys to work on behalf of low-income clients who have obtained a judgment as a result of an injustice done to them.

Number of clients assigned expert attorneys to collect on \$285,997 worth of judgments:

18



Amount collected in 2015:

\$6,479



Adobe stock

safe & stable homes

low-income creditor assistance project

Launched in 2014 as an extension of our work to collect on behalf of our clients, the LICAP program provides expert representation to low-income client-creditors when their employer or landlord files for bankruptcy instead of compensating our clients as ordered.

Number of cases referred through the LICAP program in its second year, with great successes so far:

6



While the need for the LICAP is infrequent, its impact is remarkably powerful when deployed; the provision of a LICAP attorney turns what was previously a complete dead end for a low-income creditor into – in our experience thus far – a unmitigated victory.



safe & stable homes

bankruptcy program

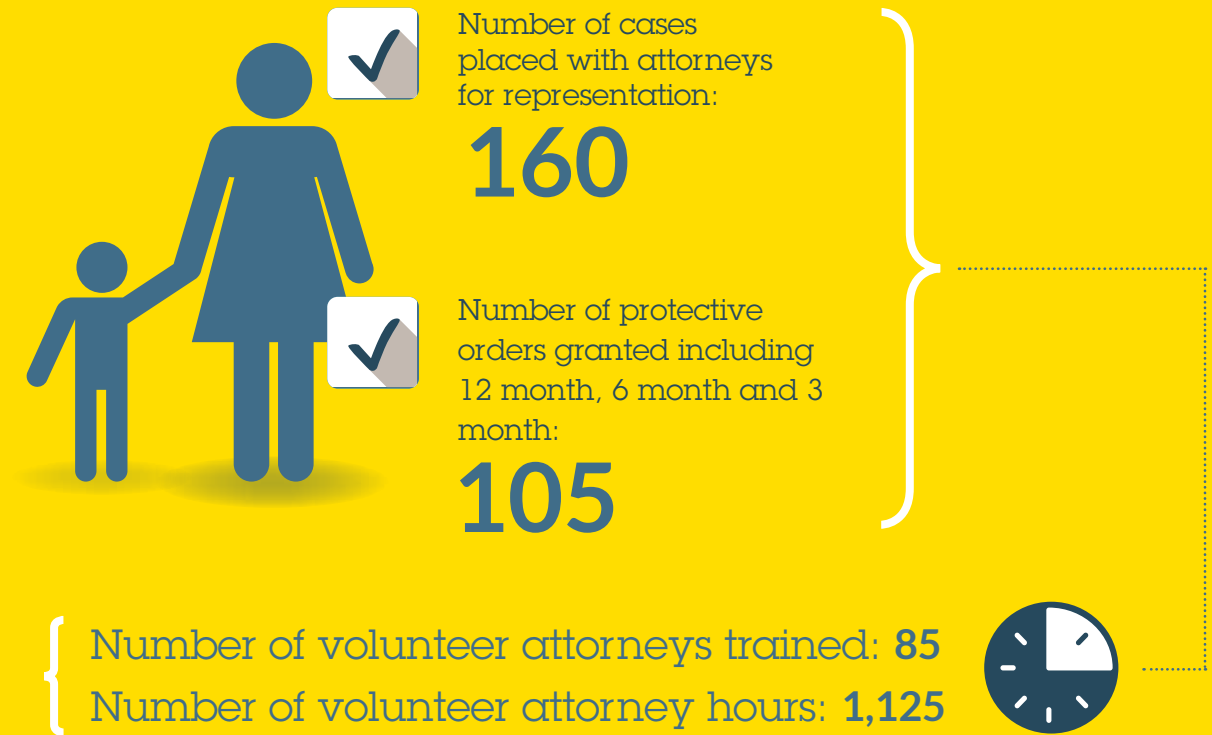
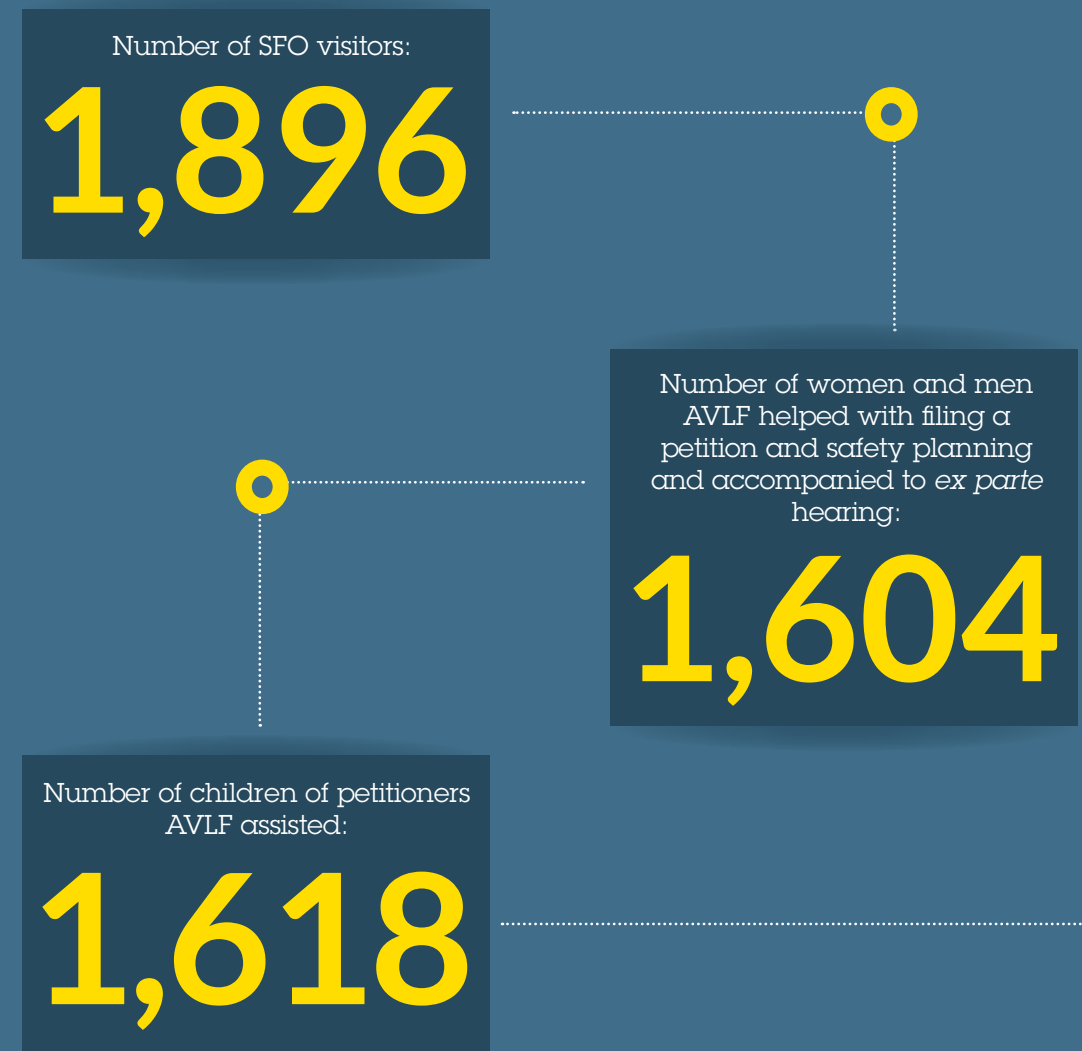
The Bankruptcy Program was developed in 2004 as a cooperative effort between the law firm of Clark & Washington and AVLJ to respond to the significant need among low-income individuals for counseling about and, when appropriate, assistance in filing Chapter 7 bankruptcy petitions. In 2015, the Bankruptcy Program partnership expanded to include the King & King law firm.



safe & stable families

safe families office

The Safe Families Office is Georgia's only lawyer-staffed, courthouse-based resource for victims of intimate partner abuse. Lawyers, paralegals and law students trained by AVLF in the law and psychology of domestic violence offer legal consultation, advice, direction, and when necessary direct representation in their effort to secure protective orders, the highest protection offered by the law for the victim and her family.



“What you do is so important. Don't ever think that you aren't making a difference. Saving one family is a success.”
- Safe Families Office Client

safe & stable families



guardian ad litem program

Divorcing parents often fight over custody of their children. Judges are responsible for deciding with whom and on what terms the children of a divorce will live and visit. To determine the children's best interests, especially in high conflict cases, judges frequently ask to have the help of a Guardian ad Litem.



Number of volunteer attorneys trained:

51

Number of volunteer attorney hours:

1,120



Value of donated attorney hours:

\$252,000



Number of new cases opened in 2015



Number of GALs appointed to cases opened in 2015

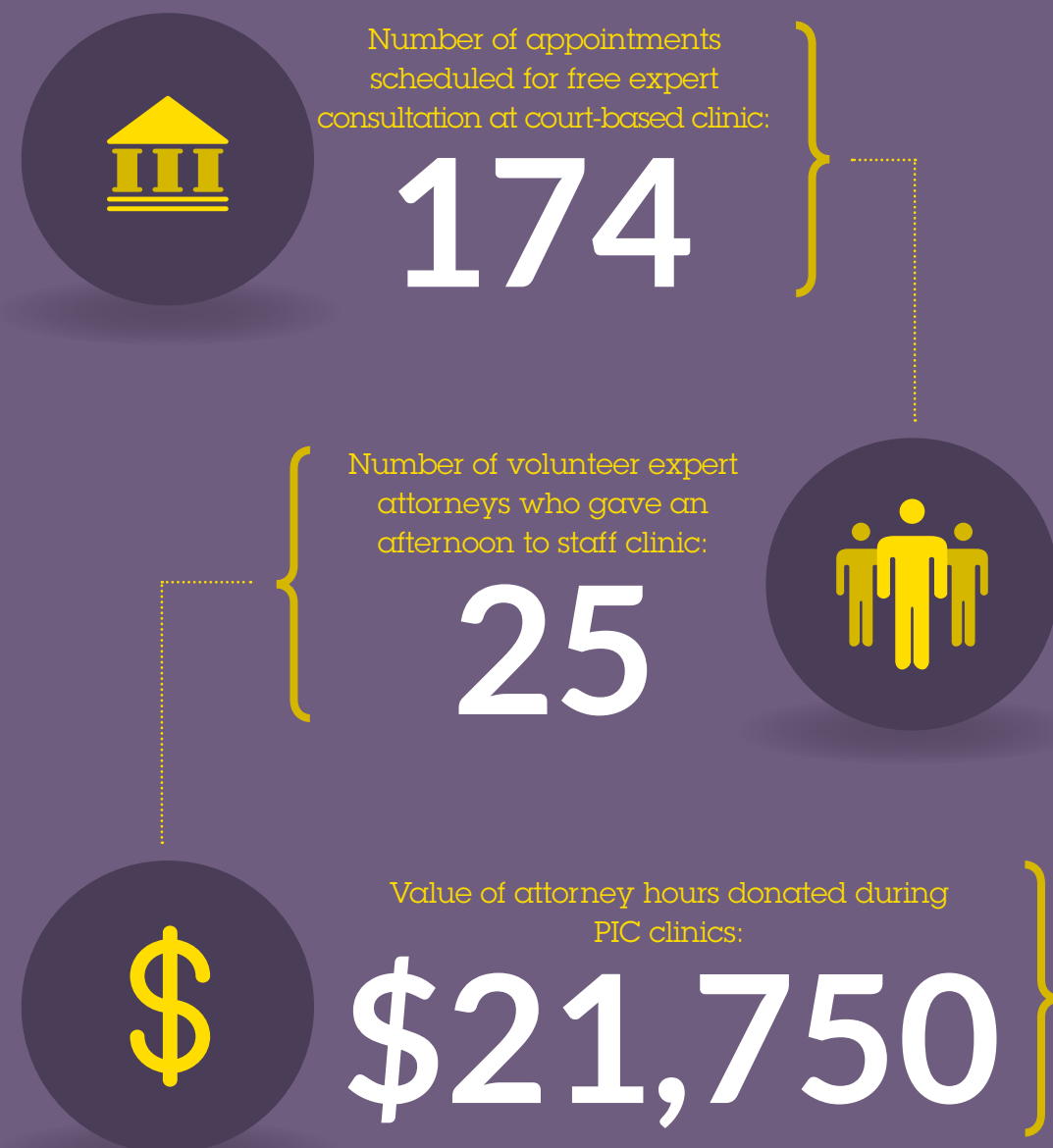


Number of children helped

safe & stable families

probate information center

At the Fulton County Courthouse, volunteer attorneys working with AVL F provide free 30-minute appointments to individuals with questions about active probate issues surrounding a deceased loved one. Common areas of consultation include the probate of simple wills, the administration of estates, and poverty affidavits.



avlf's strategic plan

In 2015, AVL F undertook its most comprehensive strategic planning process to date. Drawing from a consultant's rigorous work with AVL F staff, significant stakeholder feedback, input from both board and staff members at a professionally-facilitated offsite session, and AVL F's own program review, AVL F determined that "growth" should mean deepening and strengthening current programs for greater relevance and impact in the community, as opposed to expanding geographically or adding divergent programs. Motivating this decision was a shared desire to serve more people more holistically in the areas where AVL F could most impact lives.

As a direct result of these strategic choices, AVL F will launch the Mobile Justice and the Standing with Our Neighbors Initiatives as a part of the Safe & Stable Homes Project and the Standing with Survivors Initiative within the Safe & Stables Families Project.

The full AVL F Strategic Plan can be found at www.avlf.org/strategicplan.



client successes



Saturday Lawyer Program Success Story

Ms. W rented an apartment in one of Atlanta's most notoriously run-down apartment complexes. When she first called AVLF in mid-2015, she described black mold spreading up the walls, ongoing water leaks, a broken HVAC system, and gas and carbon monoxide leaks. Her repeated complaints to management fell on deaf ears.

Ms. W worked on Saturdays and couldn't make it to AVLF's Saturday Lawyer Program, so star volunteer Jane Warring of Clyde&Co, along with Attorney Seema Reddy, visited Ms. W at her home.

After seeing the apartment with their own eyes, Jane and Seema reported to AVLF that the situation was even worse than Ms. W described. Drywall was missing from the ceiling and a bucket sat under the hole, catching leaking water. The HVAC unit was precariously perched on a small piece of wood. Numerous holes in the unit's exterior walls were letting rodents inside. The Fire Department had turned off the gas after detecting a leak, but the landlord had simply turned the gas back on without making repairs. The list of dangerous problems went on and on.

Using money from our Healthy Homes emergency fund, AVLF purchased a carbon monoxide detector for Ms. W to protect her health and safety, and sent a mold inspector to the premises. Results of the mold inspection showed that the concentration of mold spores in the unit was more than eighty times the recommended maximum.

Jane and Seema's attempts to negotiate for relief with the landlord were unsuccessful, so they filed a lawsuit in Fulton County Magistrate Court, raising claims of failure to repair and breach of contract.

In court, the attorney for the complex attempted to deny that the problems were severe, but eventually admitted that she had never visited the unit herself. Jane and Seema arranged a time to conduct walk-throughs of the unit with the attorney and a representative for the management company.

At the walk-through, the management company admitted that Ms. W's apartment needed significant repairs. They agreed to fix all of the problems in her apartment within 15 days - or the case would go back to court. Also, the landlord agreed to pay Ms. W a confidential sum for the damages to her personal property and for the diminished value of her apartment.

With lawyers holding them accountable - and with the threat of a court date looming - the landlord and maintenance workers finally lived up to their word and undertook the necessary repairs. Soon thereafter, with Jane and Seema's help, Ms. W was able to move into a new apartment complex. Ms. W and her two children are now settled in a new apartment that is cleaner and safer.

client successes



Safe Families Office Success Story

In 2010 and again in the summer of 2015, Mr. P visited the Safe Families Office in an attempt to obtain a protective order against his son's mother, who was living with him at the time. Mother had been neglecting and verbally abusing their child, but unfortunately, her behavior did not meet the requirements of the Family Violence Act. SFO staff advised Mr. P that he did not have sufficient grounds for a protective order.

In the fall of 2015, Mr. P returned to the SFO. Mother's behavior had escalated to meet the requirements of the Family Violence Act, so Mr. P proceeded through the ex parte protective order process. Because he had recently filed a legitimation action against Mother, his protective order hearing was before the family division judge who was responsible for handling his legitimation action.

While the judge determined Mr. P had met his burden for a protective order to be granted, she noted that because his legitimation was not finalized, he had no legal rights to his child. The judge therefore granted the Order for Mr. P, but not on behalf of his son. She warned Mr. P that if he filed the Ex Parte Family Violence Protective Order, Mother may take their son with her when she was served with the Order and evicted from Mr. P's home. Mr. P was torn. He sat quietly and thought it over. Ultimately, he abstained from filing the Order – it was the only way he could ensure his son's safety.

Nearly a month later, Mr. P came back to the Safe Families Office. He'd decided that while he risked his son being removed from the home by Mother, the risk was worth it. He hoped that his legitimation would soon be granted and that he would be awarded custody of his son.

AVLF arranged for a pro bono private process server to serve Mother as soon as possible. Nearly 30 days had passed since Mr. P filed for the TPO, so the the Ex Parte Order would expire soon. After staking out Mr. P's house two nights in a row, the private process server caught Mother coming into the home just before midnight and served her with the protective order. Mother behaved in such an aggressive and erratic manner that the process server called the police, who told her to leave the property. Luckily for Mr. P, she did not take their son with her.

At the 12-month hearing, where the private process server appeared as a witness for Mr. P, the judge extended the protective order and granted Mr. P emergency custody of their son – but only until the legitimation hearing later that day, which was to be heard by a Judicial Officer.

Ultimately, Mr. P's legitimation against Mother was also granted. He was given full custody of their son, with Mother ordered to pay child support.

Throughout this process, the SFO staff got to know Mr. P. They learned that he is the father of six children, that he enjoys coaching his youngest son's football team, and that he and his children are avid Falcons fans. They learned that Mr. P rearranged his work schedule to be available to the children after school. They learned that Mr. P and all six children were rarely able to spend time together as a family, but when they did, they enjoyed dining out and going to the movies.

When SFO staff and the AVLF Junior Board learned that Mr. P would have a hard time providing Christmas for his family, they took action. Junior Board and AVLF staff members provided carefuls of presents, including clothing, shoes, toys, a mountain bike, gift cards to restaurants and movie theaters – even a washer and dryer!

This story reminds us that while domestic violence typically affects women, men aren't immune. Mr. P spent six years trying to ensure his family's safety. With the help of the SFO, he finally broke away from an abusive relationship to provide a better life for himself and his children.





“ *The attorneys I had a chance to work with were extremely helpful and considerate. I had full faith that my case would come to a satisfying resolve and have already recommended AVLF to several people.* ”

– Saturday Lawyer Program Client



financial report

Occasionally, we are asked, “Why do you need any money to run what is essentially a volunteer organization?”

The volunteer lawyers who represent our clients are recruited, trained, and then mentored by AVLF staff. Staff members also speak with, counsel, advocate for, and otherwise support thousands of Atlantans who call but cannot qualify for services from pro bono attorneys.

More than 75% of AVLF’s budget pays for personnel salaries and benefits. Eighty percent of AVLF staff directly interact with volunteer attorneys and clients.

Most of the remaining budget pays for rent for the AVLF office and for the costs associated with our five annual fund- and friend-raisers. Our policy is never to spend more than 10% of an event’s gross on expenses.

In 2015, revenue to AVLF came from three sources:

- 1. 20%:** We receive a legislatively mandated **add-on to filing fees** in the State and Magistrate courts of Fulton County.
- 2. 24%:** AVLF received **grants** from a variety of sources, including (but not limited to) the Atlanta Bar Foundation, the Atlanta Foundation, the Mary Allen Lindsey Brannan Foundation, the American College of Bankruptcy, and the Thalia and Michael C. Carlos Foundation.
- 3. 56%:** Generous individual lawyers, law firms, corporate legal departments, and Bar sections donated almost all the remainder of AVLF’s revenue as unrestricted gifts and/or in support of one of the Foundation’s fundraising events. Our primary and largest fundraiser, the Winetasting, raised more than 70% of the total contributions we received from the legal community.

our events ■ fundraisers

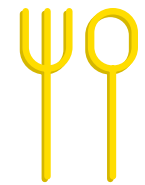


24th Annual Winetasting

On the first Thursday of each November, the Atlanta legal community kicks off the holiday season with the AVLF Winetasting. On November 5, over 1,000 guests joined AVLF at the beautiful new Georgia State University College of Law for the annual celebration of the outstanding pro bono legal work performed throughout the Atlanta legal community. United Distributors coordinated the donation of red and white wines, Seattle-distilled whiskies, and locally distilled vodka, while A Divine Event catered the party with an unusual flair. More than 540 different law firms, corporate legal departments, Atlanta and State of Georgia Bar Sections, and individuals donated over \$500,000 to AVLF in connection with the event.

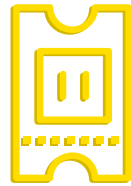


3rd Annual Beer Tasting and BBQ Battle



The Beer Tasting & Celebrity BBQ Battle is a collaborative effort of the Atlanta Legal Aid Society and Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation to raise funds – and awareness – to support critical programs administered by each organization in the Atlanta area. The 2015 event, presented by the Daily Report, was an unqualified success. More than 700 friends of AVLF and Atlanta Legal Aid attended the June 11 event at Opera, raising over \$75,000 to support equal access to justice in our community. The Pig and the Pearl, Smokebelly BBQ, Jim ‘n Nicks Bar-B-Q, Sweet Auburn Barbecue, and Twin Smokers BBQ duked it out in a competitive BBQ battle, with Sweet Auburn as the victor. Attendees enjoyed local and craft beers courtesy of United Distributors and delicious side dishes and desserts from Carole Parks Catering.

our events ■ fundraisers



4th Annual Warner, Bates, McGough, McGinnis & Portnoy Guardian ad Litem Benefit

Each August, the metropolitan area's largest family law firm hosts a party at its law office to raise funds for AVLF's Guardian ad Litem Program. On August 20, the beautiful penthouse offices of Warner, Bates, McGough, McGinnis & Portnoy were the perfect backdrop for delicious hors d'oeuvres and cocktails provided by Paces & Vine. Platinum and gold level sponsors included the Daily Report, IAG Forensics, and State Bank & Trust. The event is the primary pillar of support sustaining a program that has proven invaluable to the Fulton County Superior Court's Family Division, and as usual, judges, attorneys and other family law professionals gave generously (and celebrated convivially) at the event, which raised more than \$17,000 for the Guardian ad Litem Program.

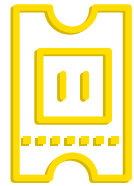


2nd Annual PurSHOEing Justice

One in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. PurSHOEing Justice is a fundraiser designed to recognize the legal issues facing domestic violence victims and the volunteers and programs who help them. Again in 2015, AVLF Board members Elizabeth Finn Johnson and Jennifer Jackson led an amazing team of women who made this second annual event a resounding success. King & Spalding was hopping as friends of AVLF sipped and shopped the night away, raising over \$25,000 for the Safe Families Office. Inspiring speaker Christy Sims stole the show with her moving survivor story, in which AVLF's Domestic Violence Project is proud to have played a small part. We offer a special thank you to our vendors Jeffrey Atlanta, Stella & Dot - Laurie Tagliatela, Massage in Motion, Inc., the Image Bureau, and Chanel at Saks - Robert Williams.



our events ■ friendraiser



AVLF Night at the Movies

Paycheck to Paycheck: The Life and Times of Katrina Gilbert

On Monday, September 21, AVLF hosted the second installment of AVLF at the Movies and featured the groundbreaking HBO Documentary Film *Paycheck to Paycheck: The Life and Times of Katrina Gilbert*. Over 200 friends of AVLF attended the powerful documentary chronicling the daily struggle of a working mother of three, Katrina Gilbert.

After the movie, Katrina headlined a panel of speakers and fielded questions about poverty and her struggle. Joining Katrina were Kelly Dolan, Executive Director of Atlanta Women's Foundation; Melissa Johnson, Policy Analyst, Georgia Budget & Policy Institute; and Cole Thaler, AVLF's Director of Safe & Stable Homes Project. The panel discussed issues related to poverty in Georgia and inspired the crowd to work in the Atlanta community to help those caught in the poverty trap.



our events ■ community outreach



Lawyer in the Library: Expungement of Criminal Records

West End Library
March 30



Workshop: "Landlords & Tenants – Whose Responsibility Is it?"

National Association of Housing Counselors & Agencies, Inc.
Annual Training Conference
March 31



Presentation: Tenants' Rights

Westview Neighborhood community activists meeting at a Westview hair salon
April 11



Presentation: Tenants' Rights

Tenants' Association of City Views at Rosa Burney Park Apartment Complex
July 16



special friends: donors

We are so grateful to the following donors who supported AVLF with gifts of \$10,000 and greater:

Alston & Bird LLP
Arnall Golden Gregory LLP
John Chandler & Elizabeth Tanis
The Coca-Cola Company Legal Division
Daily Report
Dentons US LLP
Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP
King & Spalding LLP
Gia M. Partain & Paul J. Murphy
PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP
Smith, Gambrell & Russell, LLP
SunTrust Legal Specialty Group
Sutherland Asbill & Brennan LLP
Taylor English Duma LLP
Troutman Sanders LLP
Warner, Bates, McGough, McGinnis & Portnoy



celebrating service: award winners

On Friday, October 16, AVLF honored our 2015 award winners at the Atlanta Bar Association's Celebrating Service Luncheon. Jamie Perez spoke for all of us at the awards ceremony as she said, "Words cannot express how humbled I am and how incredibly fortunate I am to be able to work with you all and present these well-deserved awards."

Congratulations to the 2015 award winners:

S. Phillip Heiner Award:

Taylor English Duma LLP

Safe Families Office Firm of the Year:

Jones Day

Guardian ad Litem of the Year:

Esther Vayman, Vayman & Teitelbaum, P.C.

Saturday Lawyer of the Year:

Adam Masarek

AVLF Hero Award:

Ricardo Corporán, Alston & Bird LLP

AVLF Difference Maker Award:

Craig Brazeman, Profiles Investigations



board of directors

"I firmly believe that we, as attorneys, are in a unique position to fix injustice in our world and that we have a responsibility to do so. Our legal system cannot work properly unless everyone is afforded equal protection and representation under the law. AVLF connects the best and brightest attorneys in our community with individuals who so desperately need their assistance and would not otherwise have meaningful access to the justice system. I am so proud to do this work and to be a part of this wonderful organization."

– Sarah Zampell, 2015 Junior Board of Directors Immediate Past President

Steve Allen, SunTrust Bank, AVLF Board President

Dena R. Hong, United Parcel Service, AVLF Board Vice President

James J. McGinnis, Warner, Bates, McGough, McGinnis & Portnoy, AVLF Board Treasurer

Walter Davis, Jones Day, AVLF Board Secretary

Paul J. Murphy, King & Spalding LLP

Chelton Tanger, The Tanger Consulting Group LLC, AVLF Board Executive Committee

Elizabeth Finn Johnson, The Coca-Cola Company (Retired), AVLF Board Immediate Past President

Harold E. Franklin, Jr., King & Spalding, Atlanta Bar President

Steven Gottlieb, Atlanta Legal Aid Society Executive Director

Hon. Wendy Shoob, Fulton County Superior Court Judge

Hon. Eric Richardson, Fulton County State Court Judge

Jane Warring, Clyde & Co US LLP, AVLF Junior Board President

Darrick McDuffie, King & Spalding, Gate City Bar Association President

Jonathan Smith, Miller & Martin PLLC, Atlanta Council of Younger Lawyers Chair

Nancy Baughan, Parker, Hudson, Rainer & Dobbs LLP

Tom Best, Home Depot

Maggie Hanrahan, Ogletree Deakins

Jeff Harper, Veritext Legal Solutions

Jennifer Jackson, Iris Data Services

Richard Mitchell, Mitchell & Shapiro LLP

Jeff Nix, Troutman Sanders LLP

Adria Perez, Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP

Margaret Ward Scott, Alston & Bird LLP

Rebecca Shanlever, Hall Arbery Gilligan Roberts & Shanlever

Will Shearer, United Distributors Inc.

Brian Smith, Arnall Golden Gregory LLP

Avital Stadler, Esquire Deposition Solutions, LLC

Jeong-Hwa (June) Lee Towery, Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP

Stacey Turner, Georgia Power

Bryan Ward, Sutherland Asbill & Brennan LLP

Meka Ward, Thomas, Kennedy, Sampson & Tompkins

Denelle Waynick, UCB, Inc.

Kinshasa Williams, UnitedHealthcare

junior board of directors

Jane Warring, Clyde & Co US LLP, President

Amelia Medina, King & Spalding LLP, Incoming President

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James Rusert, DLA Piper LLP (US)

Andi Warner, TrustPoint Court Reporting

Rachel Fox Weitz, Delta Airlines

Tyler Wright, IAG Forensics & Valuation

our people

avlf staff

Martin L. Ellin
Executive Director

Michael Lucas
Deputy Director

Cole Thaler
Director, Safe and Stable Homes Project

Elizabeth Ann Whipple
Director, Safe and Stable Families Project

Jamie Perez
Director, Safe and Stable Families Project

Julia Black
Program Coordinator, Safe and Stable Families Project

Nilufar Abdi-Tabari
Program Coordinator, Safe and Stable Families Project

Carey Kersten
Marketing Director

Dionne Hines Morse
Senior Paralegal/Program Coordinator

Matilde Davis
Program Coordinator

Kenisha Wade
Paralegal

Jon Reading
Office Manager

Lilli Crowe
Program Assistant

from the staff



Why I Do What I Do By: Lilli Crowe

In March 2015, *The Washington Post* published an article reporting that for the second year in a row, Atlanta has taken the title of the most unequal city in the United States. A report by the Brookings Institute shows that the household incomes of the wealthiest households are close to 20 times the incomes of the most impoverished. In Atlanta, the households in the 98th percentile have incomes of more than \$288,000 per year, while those in the 20th percentile earn less than \$15,000. Data collected by the Census shows that between 2009 and 2013, 25% of Atlanta residents lived below the poverty line. That's one quarter of us – one in four. The national percentage of people in poverty during this same time was between 12-15%.

This research represents why each of us at AVLF is here doing the work that we do. We see the real life examples of this data, the clients who work full time but still do not make enough money to have the sorts of freedoms that we take for granted.

Clients who were given an electric bill of hundreds of dollars due to a mechanical problem that their landlord refuses to fix, leading them to be short on rent, which results in their landlord filing an eviction against them.

Clients who are shown a model unit, but upon signing the lease they find an apartment full of mold and pests.

Clients who are trying to escape a domestic violence situation in their home, but do not have enough money to pay both first month's rent and a security deposit.

Clients who work all the hours they can to support their family, only to find out that their employer refuses to pay them at the end of the month.

Clients who represent themselves at a hearing for a protective order, only to find that their abuser hired an attorney.

Clients who get phone calls and letters from collectors saying that they owe thousands in student loans from a university, but they didn't even graduate from high school.

The common thread through all of these examples is vulnerability. Low income people are vulnerable in a way that those with means are not. If any of these situations happened to people with means, the solution would be a no-brainer. We would pay both the electric bill and the rent. We would address the landlord about the problems, and we would hire an attorney to write a demand letter and potentially take them to court. We might not struggle to break a lease and pay for moving expenses in order to escape an abusive situation. If our landlord refuses to release us from the lease, we could hire an attorney to advocate for us. We would confront our employers and demand our earnings, and if they refuse, we would hire an attorney to threaten legal action.

We would hire an attorney.

This privilege – access to equal justice – is unavailable to so many in our city and in our country. Poverty often means making tough decisions about where to apply the little money that people have, and paying thousands of dollars for an attorney is an expense that cannot fit into their life. Living on minimum wage is a constant balancing act, and with barely enough money to cover rent, the fees associated with a private attorney are out of the question.

This is why I do what I do. The clients that come through our doors are working as hard as they can in a system that works against them. They often work multiple jobs and find ways to make money in creative ways, but it seems like they are always in the hamster wheel. They are one illness away from not being able to pay rent, or childcare, or the electric bill. They are one blown transmission from being unable to get to work. They are one payroll error away from not being able to feed their kids. They are one busted pipe away from having no clothes or furniture. They are one non-law abiding landlord away from being locked out of their house. They are one step away from ruin, always trying to make sure they don't fall down.

I cannot solve or alleviate poverty myself. I cannot provide a living wage to so many people living under it. I cannot stop an abuser from hurting his partner. I cannot ensure safe, healthy, and secure housing. What I can do is provide a kind ear, a shoulder, and information. I can tell someone about the rights that he has. I can tell someone that she does not deserve to be treated the way that she has been. I can tell someone that the system has failed him. And through my job here, I can be part of the process that gives these people the power of an attorney.

With this power, previously disrespectful and volatile landlords start making repairs to an apartment. With this power, employers pay thousands of dollars in back wages. With this power, a victim of domestic abuse gets an order that finally protects her from her abuser. With this power, huge changes can be made to one vulnerable person's life.

That's why I do what I do.



how you can help

Through AVLF alone, lawyers in Atlanta give more than \$2,000,000 of high quality, free legal services to low-income residents of our city every year. By standing up for a victim of intimate partner violence, protecting a tenant whose landlord refuses to honor contracts and housing codes, representing an employee denied wages or advising a young woman in the wake of her mother's death, lawyers give 5,000 or more Atlantans each year an entry to an otherwise inaccessible legal system.

Atlanta is not just a series of streets we navigate to get to our work or our homes. This is our community, and the people who make up our community are our neighbors, our friends, and our responsibility. There is a direct link between your generosity and our ability to deliver worthy pro bono programs that save homes, save lives, and promote safe and stable families.

Stand up with us. Visit avlf.org today to sign up as a volunteer or to donate.





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