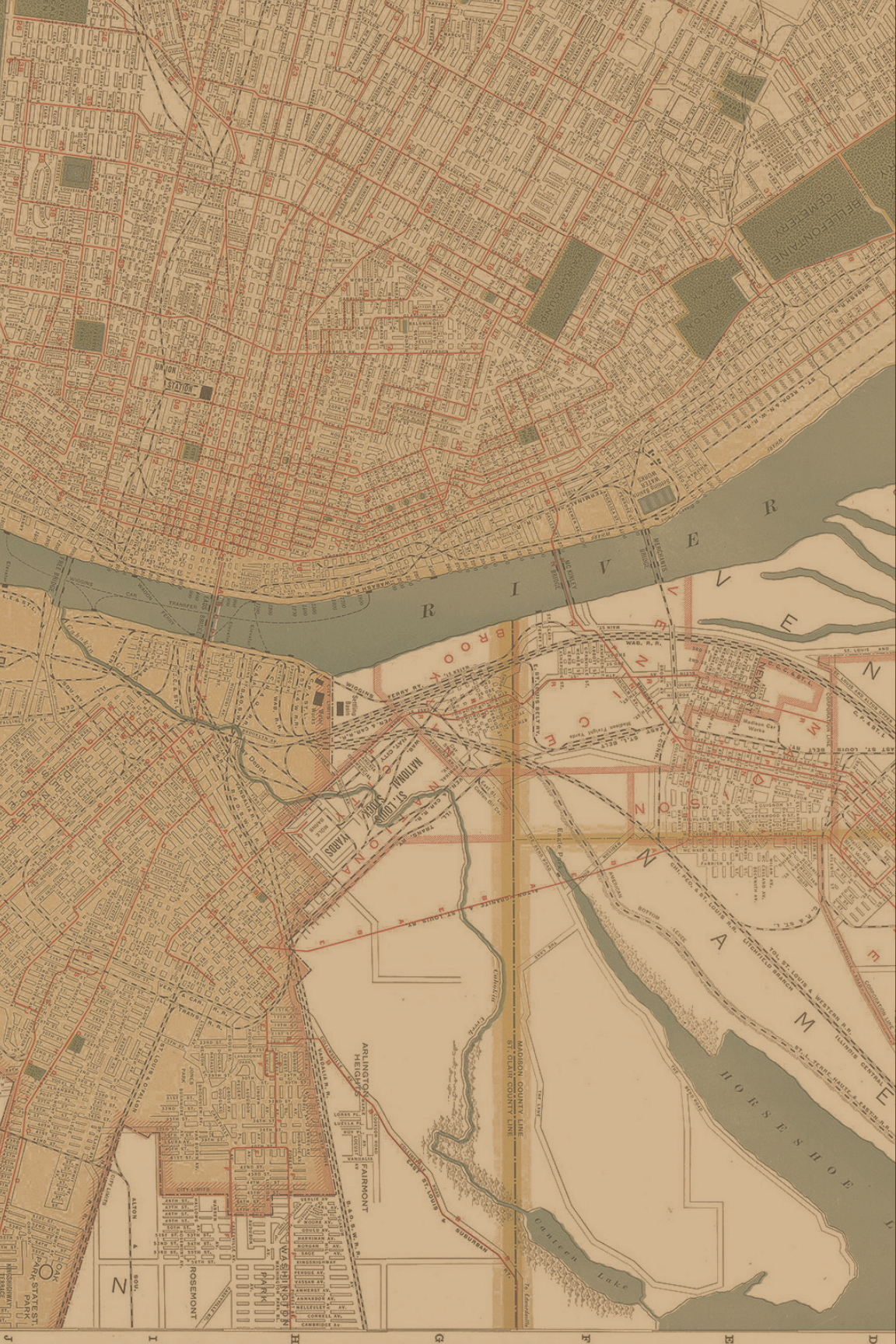


# Neighborhood Advocacy



**The First  
Five Years  
2018–2022**





# Neighborhood Advocacy

The First Five Years  
2018–2022

How Collaboration Between Legal Services  
of Eastern Missouri, Community  
Organizations, and the City of St. Louis  
is Revitalizing City Neighborhoods.



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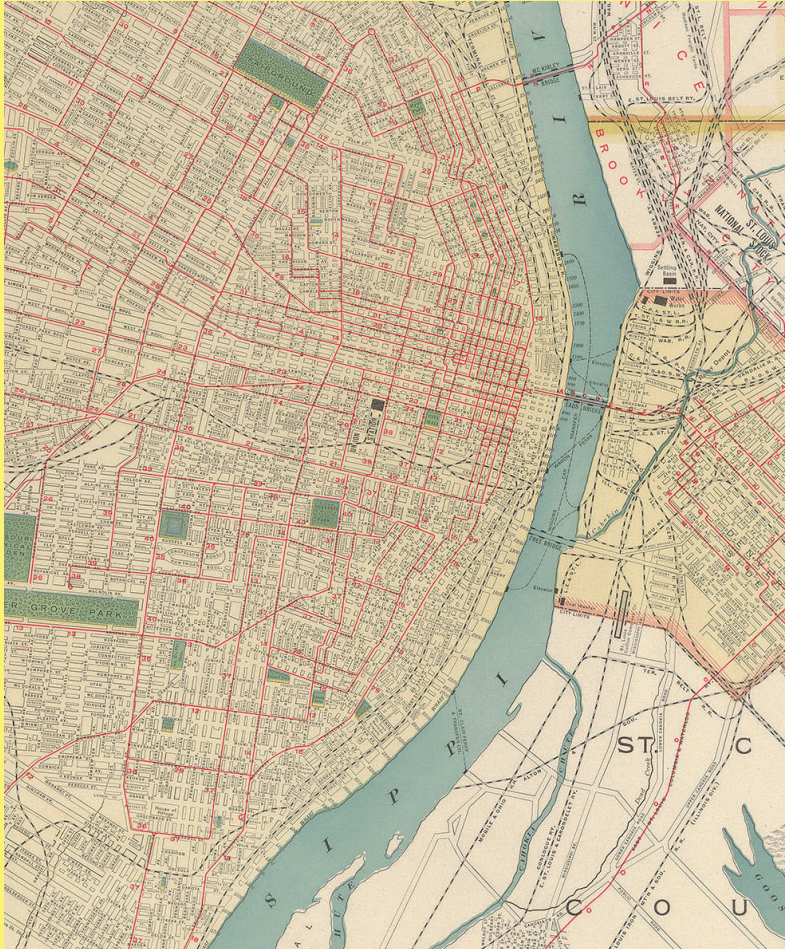
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# Background



Introduction



*The City of St. Louis* is awash in vacant property, third most nationally. Almost 6% of the City's housing stock — 7,663 buildings and over 12,000 lots — is vacant. Roughly 75% of these vacancies are situated in the region's poorest neighborhoods.

In 2018, Legal Services of Eastern Missouri launched its *Neighborhood Advocacy* program to serve City neighborhoods, reverse decades-old disinvestment trends, and create neighborhoods of safety, security, vibrancy, and economic opportunity.

Staff and volunteer attorneys represent neighborhoods to acquire vacant, abandoned, and blighted properties for redevelopment as safe and affordable housing. The team also works to keep vulnerable homeowners in their homes through title clearance and simple estate planning. In these ways, Legal Services helps families build wealth through homeownership and protects residents against displacement when neighborhoods revitalize.

Legal Services collaborates with City departments, law firms, volunteer attorneys, and nonprofit community organizations to propel community-driven redevelopment throughout the City of St. Louis. This collaboration reduces blight and crime, increases tax revenues, and drives investment. Most importantly, it improves the quality of life for St. Louisans.

This book spotlights a few of the success stories that would not have been possible but for the work of Legal Services.



Support for *Neighborhood Advocacy* comes from St. Louis Development Corporation, Affordable Housing Commission – St. Louis City, the Legal Services Corporation – Pro Bono Innovation Fund, the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis, Missouri Foundation for Health, FLOURISH, Skadden, Justice Catalyst, Americorps – Vista, Wells Fargo, PNC Bank, and our generous donors.

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*Special thank you to Neighborhood Advocacy’s in-house volunteers:*

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*Additional thanks to our many law school interns.*

*Credit to Chuck Ramsay, who took the majority of the book’s photographs.*

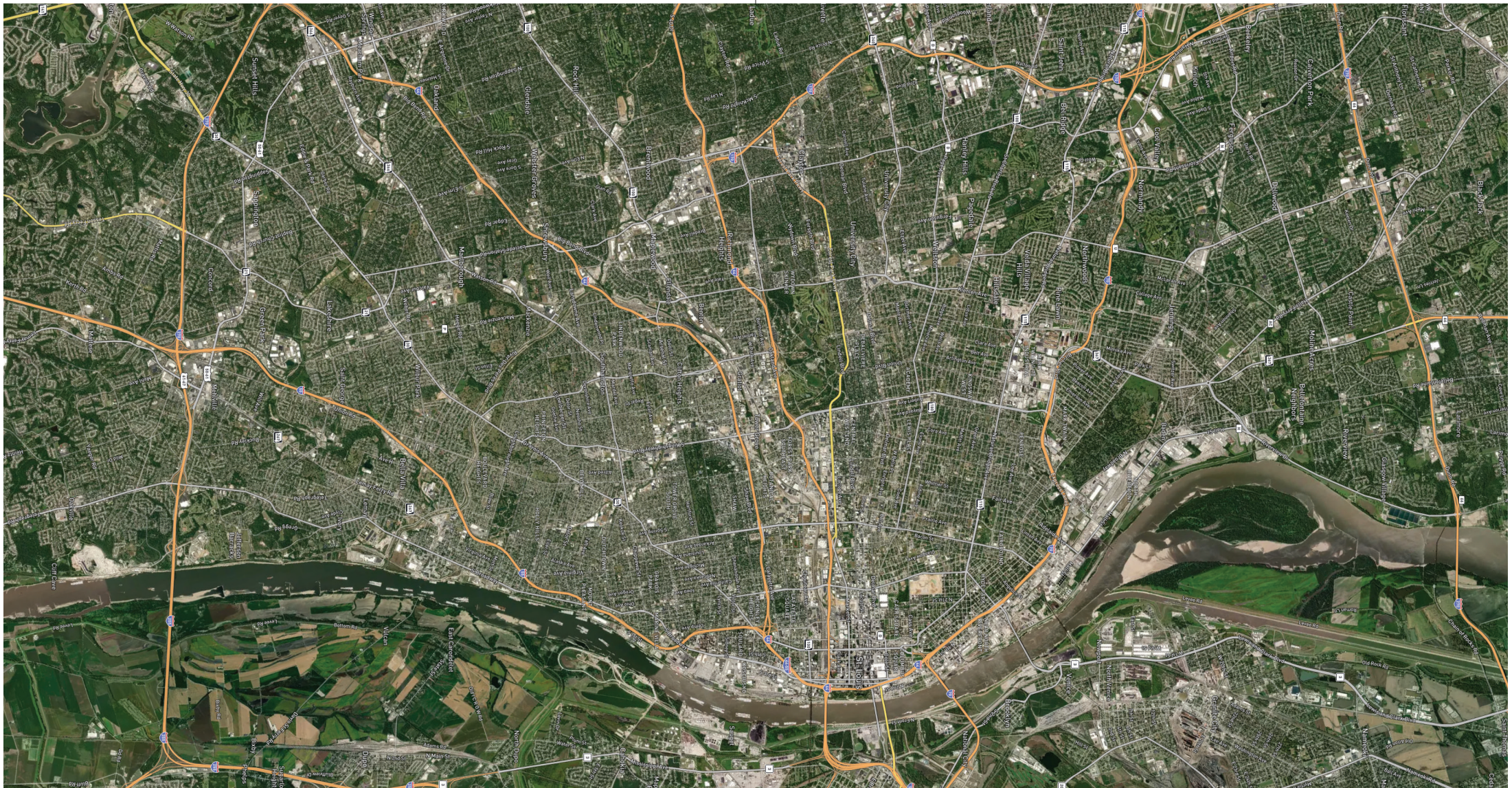
*This work would not be possible without dedicated pro bono partnerships from the following:*

Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner, Husch Blackwell, Lewis Rice, Stinson, and Thompson Coburn.

*Our Volunteers:*

Addison Fairchild	Dedra Brock Moore	Julie Scheipeter	Marisa L. Byram	Reggie Harris
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*Neighborhood clients lead their own vacancy efforts*  
 – identifying problem properties, setting expectations for developers, and prioritizing cases. The strategies employed by neighborhoods include: establishing model blocks, stabilizing homes located near community assets, addressing bad actors, and targeting high-visibility vacancies.



# Case Studies



North City





## Completing Clemens

Residents long held out hope for the development of these two historic Clemens Avenue properties; but as is often the case, the LLC owner went defunct before the project began. The properties sat vacant, mired in title problems and debt held by out-of-state lenders. In response to a lawsuit filed by volunteer lawyers, the owner sat down with the community to find a suitable buyer and sell the properties for a reasonable price.

These Clemens properties represent the most striking before and after transformation to date. Outcomes like these are rarely possible through municipal code enforcement alone.





## Cates Six-Family

This six-plex on the 5800 block of Cates sat vacant for years as the speculative investment of suburban owners. Shortly after volunteer attorneys filed a lawsuit over nuisance conditions, the property was sold to a developer from the neighborhood and rehabilitated under a community benefit agreement.









## The Veteran's House

One piece of paper stood in the way of the West End's worst property becoming one of its gems. Years of complaints to elected officials, municipal court dates, and calls to City agencies did nothing to solve the horrific conditions at this house on Clemens.

Neighborhood leaders intervened and referred the property's owner to Legal Services attorneys who examined the title. The owner, a Veteran, had a willing and qualified buyer waiting to purchase the property, but several sales had fallen through. Why? Because there was a mistaken legal description in the chain of title. Legal Services assisted the owner in clearing title so the property could be sold. It has since been redeveloped by a rehabber who lives on the same block.





## Blair Beauty

Property can become abandoned for different reasons. One common cause - as was the case here - the title was fractured after the owners died without an estate plan. After months of attempting to contact legal heirs, attorneys petitioned the Court to declare the property abandoned, transferring control to the local neighborhood association, which redeveloped the property through a community benefit agreement with a woman- and minority-owned developer.





photo courtesy of Zillow.

## Menace on Maple

This long-standing vacant single-family house is directly across the street from an elementary school. The community brought it to Legal Services' attention as a high priority because of its proximity to the school and the children and families that had to pass by it every day. In partnership with a volunteer attorney from one of St. Louis' top law firms, the legal team filed a lawsuit on behalf of the community. Shortly after the owners were served, they agreed to sell the property. Over the next several months, a development review committee of local residents met with potential buyers. The community would only agree to dismiss the lawsuit upon a sale to a qualified buyer. The leverage given by the lawsuit paid off and the buyer agreed to the terms of the sale and a timeline for repairs under a community benefit agreement with the community.





photo courtesy of Zillow.





## Baden Brings it Back Home

What can be done when the vacant house next door is owned by an LLC on the other side of the globe? Missouri law allows neighborhoods to appoint a receiver when property becomes a problem. Here, the Baden community reclaimed and rehabilitated this abandoned property once owned by an LLC more than 6,000 miles away. A long-time Baden resident rehabbed the property and her brother now lives in the immaculately restored home.









## Mallinckrodt Model Block

A good strategy can go a long way. Beginning in 2018, the Hyde Park Neighborhood adopted a model block approach to several vacant nuisance properties adjoining its business district. Since then, with pro bono assistance, the neighborhood has secured title to the properties, contracted with a local nonprofit developer, and demolished the one building that was beyond saving. The remaining buildings are all undergoing high-quality renovation by the nonprofit rehab partner, who specializes in training young people in the building trades.



# Case Studies



South City





## Good Homes in Dutchtown

The abandoned single-family home on the 5000 block of Alabama was owned by a Texas real estate investor. The property had gone through two failed tax foreclosures when Legal Services filed a lawsuit under Missouri's Abandoned Housing Act in November of 2018. Through the lawsuit, the local community development corporation was granted legal control and contracted with a nonprofit developer to fully rehabilitate the property for sale to a first time, minority homebuyer. The new owner moved into the renovated home Summer of 2022.





photo courtesy of *St. Joseph Housing Initiative*

For 4600 S. Grand, the same partners came together again, gaining title to another abandoned property through Missouri's Abandoned Housing Act. Prior to gaining control, the northwest corner of the building was struck by a car, causing a partial collapse of the foundation. St. Joseph Housing Initiative renovated the property under a community benefit agreement with Dutchtown South Community Corporation and it was sold to a low-income first-time homebuyer, saving the property from the wrecking ball.



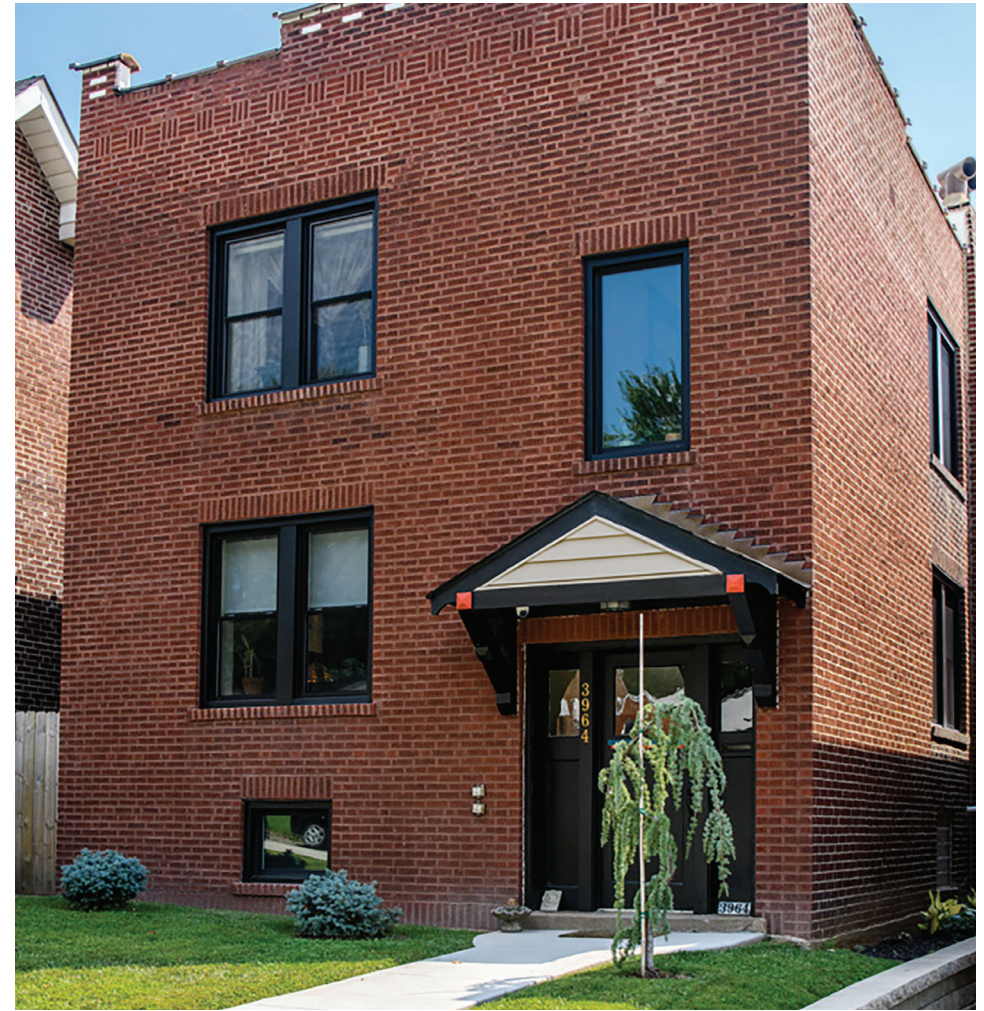


photo by J.B. Forbes, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*.

## A Little Push

One of our earliest successes is proof that attorney intervention can make a difference for neighborhoods working to tackle vacancy. Marine Villa Neighborhood Association (MVNA) sought Legal Services help to deal with the badly blighted property at 2220 Chippewa. A demand letter was sent to the property owner indicating that a receivership petition would be filed if the conditions at the property were not abated. Upon receiving the letter, the owner offered to donate the property to MVNA so that it could be rehabilitated. Legal Services worked with the neighborhood to find a qualified developer — who just so happened to be the small business owner next door. The property is now fully renovated and incorporated into the neighboring business.





## When all else fails ...

For years, Tower Grove Community Development had tried to find a solution to the problems presented by the property on Parker. Numerous complaints to the City, to elected officials, and direct outreach to the owner did nothing to alleviate the nuisance conditions at the long-vacant property. In March of 2019, Legal Services filed a lawsuit on behalf of Tower Grove under Missouri's Abandoned Housing Act. Less than six months later, the property was fully renovated and title transferred to a new, local, reputable owner.





photo courtesy of Sean Spencer, *Tower Grove Neighborhoods Community Development*.





photos by Sean Spencer, *Tower Grove Neighborhoods Community Development*.

## Appearances Matter

Although the property on Arsenal, directly across from Tower Grove Park, had been vacant and boarded for more than a decade, it wasn't in violation of any local ordinances, limiting the City's ability to intervene. The property had, however, regularly been the site of repeat criminal activity. These conditions allowed Legal Services to file suit against the owner. As a result of that lawsuit, a settlement was reached where functional windows and doors were installed on the property, eliminating the appearance of vacancy, and reducing the property's visibility as a beacon for crime.



# Behind the Work



Vacancy Prevention  
Community Engagement  
Technical Assistance  
for Lawmakers





BEHIND THE WORK · VACANCY PREVENTION

## Vacancy Prevention

The most effective strategy for reducing the number of vacant and abandoned properties is to prevent them from becoming vacant in the first place. Each year, staff and volunteers handle dozens of cases to keep families in their homes, to preserve homeownership as a generational asset, and to resolve the title problems that prevent families from accessing the assistance they need to make repairs. These are just a few examples of how the Neighborhood Vacancy Initiative is serving homeowners and their families.

### *Real Estate Tax Assistance Fund*

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, dozens of struggling St. Louis homeowners under threat of losing their homes called us for help. Our attorneys led a coalition of partners – including Park Central Development, Prosperity Connection, the St. Louis Community Credit Union and the City of St. Louis Collector of Revenue – to create a program that would provide families the financial assistance they needed to redeem their properties before losing them to tax foreclosure sale. Legal Services gathered the data needed to understand



the scope of the problem, structured the program, and recruited donors. In its first year alone, the Real Estate Tax Assistance Fund (RETAF) saved 68 family homes from the tax sale. Legal Services continues to participate as a partner and a referral source to fix title problems that would otherwise prevent families from accessing the fund.

*Estate Planning & Heirs' Property*

Upon the death of a family member who has not taken steps to legally pass title, family property can become mired in title problems that interfere with the family's ability to access much needed resources, such as home repair, that make it possible to keep the property safe and habitable. These title problems are a legal blight which often lead to property abandonment and physical blight. Through Neighborhood Advocacy's Family Property Project, attorneys prevent title issues by providing free beneficiary deeds to City residents and seniors. They also take on complex heirs' property cases to help families to secure resources and avoid abandonment.







BEHIND THE WORK · COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & OUTREACH

## Community Engagement & Outreach

Community lawyering is at the heart of *Neighborhood Advocacy*. Through clinics, outreach, community events, neighborhood cleanups, and steering committees, our program meets clients where they are, engaging and participating in all aspects of the communities we serve.











BEHIND THE WORK · TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FOR LAWMAKERS

## Technical Assistance For Lawmakers

The casework handled by the *Neighborhood Vacancy Initiative* gives staff a unique perspective as to the factors that contribute to vacancy and property abandonment, and the barriers faced by the community in returning these properties to productive use. This expertise has been called on by elected officials, and Neighborhood Advocacy staff have responded to requests for technical assistance on state-level legislation that helps communities better address vacancy and property abandonment.

### *Good Neighbor Law*

Community groups would train their volunteers to avoid privately owned nuisance properties during community clean-ups. As a result, some of the worst properties were ignored. In 2019, Legal Services responded to a legislative request to help create a trespass exemption for neighbors making modest improvements (grass cutting, trash pick-up, board-up, graffiti removal) to certain privately-owned abandoned property.



### *Another Arrow in the Quiver*

Community groups have worked with legal aid organizations for years to address vacant residential nuisance properties. However, they lacked a good legal vehicle to address one specific type of problem property – commercial and industrial nuisances. At the request of a State Senator, our team drafted legislation that made it easier for neighborhoods to bring legal claims over these types of nuisance properties, increasing the incentive for owners to make repairs by allowing the plaintiffs to recover attorneys' fees.







### *A Good Idea Gets Better*

St. Louis City's Land Bank (Land Reutilization Authority) is the oldest in the country. When it was created in the 1970s, it was ahead of its time. Unfortunately, the statutes had not kept up with the caselaw, meaning thousands of properties regularly foreclosed for delinquent taxes without all of the legal interest holders being given proper legal notice. This increased the likelihood that an owner might lose a property to foreclosure, but it also meant that the City's Land Bank couldn't reliably sell property once it entered its inventory. Legal Services attorneys responded to a State lawmaker's request to create legislation that enhanced the notice process in tax sales and expedited sales for vacant properties, making it easier and more likely that abandoned property would be bought and rehabilitated.

BEHIND THE WORK · TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FOR LAWMAKERS

### *New Spin on a Trusted Concept*

While the City of St. Louis has had decades to implement systems to address vacancy, suburban St. Louis County had yet to experience large-scale property abandonment until more recently. A coalition of partners, including a State Representative, has requested the assistance of Legal Services to draft legislation that would allow St. Louis County to create a Land Bank to better deal with its growing problem of vacant and abandoned property.



# Hope is Discipline



Building a Better St. Louis  
Where We Go from Here





HOPE IS DISCIPLINE · BUILDING A BETTER ST. LOUIS

## Building a Better St. Louis

The vacant and abandoned properties that move through the *Neighborhood Advocacy* program are often structurally condemned, sometimes barely standing, and close to demolition. These conditions coupled with a depressed housing market and difficulties accessing capital, make finding the right partner for rehabilitation just as challenging as fighting the legal battle in court.

Luckily, St. Louis is home to dozens of rehabbers, both large and small, who are willing to make significant investments into these long-standing eyesores, often with very little financial return. Without their contributions these properties likely would have been demolished, only to sit dormant as another vacant lot. Neighborhoods across the City need investment – not just in property, but in the communities where these properties sit. Rehabilitation partners open to long-term, community-centered development are encouraged to contact us for opportunities.





## Where we go from here

*Neighborhood Advocacy* started with one attorney and one neighborhood client. Five years and more than five-hundred cases later, a team of nine handles cases in nearly twenty neighborhoods, including our first intervention outside of the City of St. Louis.

We are extremely proud of what our team, our volunteers, and our clients have accomplished over these first five years, but there is still more to do. Volunteers and financial support are needed to sustain this work, ensuring that neighborhoods have continued access to the legal assistance needed to realize their visions for their communities – communities of *safety, security, and vibrancy*.



*Typefaces Used*

Actual, *Fabiola Mejía*

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