

# Forest Cove Diaspora: Building Trust with Our Neighbors

Six years ago this summer, AVLFL made a transformational decision to shift the organization toward place-based work.

**We aspired to make long-term commitments to neighborhoods where we thought we could help bring more stability, and we hoped that the trust we built with – and the things we learned from – the residents of Atlanta’s neighborhoods would make us better advocates.**

We wanted to have a deeper impact and give our volunteers – who are so critical to our work – a more meaningful experience and stronger connection to both AVLFL and the city in which they work. We thought it would help us reach tenants who couldn’t make it to our downtown offices, and survivors of intimate partner abuse who couldn’t make it to the courthouse for protection.

**Our first leap of faith in this direction was to launch the Standing with Our Neighbors (SWON) program.** That meant hiring a full-time staff attorney and our first full-time community advocate whose every-day office would be inside Thomasville Heights Elementary School. At the time, the school was the state’s lowest performing elementary school – with annual enrollment turnover rates of over 40% – in one of the state’s most impoverished census tracts. Not coincidentally, nearly every student lived across the street in the notorious Forest Cove apartment complex. We believed that the eviction rates and deplorable living conditions at Forest Cove were a major force in that school’s struggle. We also believed that with the help of volunteer attorneys from several of Atlanta’s largest law firms, we could do something about it. We were right.

There was a 51% reduction in student exits in our first year at Thomasville Heights Elementary. As a report from the national Casey Family Programs recently noted, “SWON uses data to track the program’s ability to improve housing stability for families and, therefore, see improvements in student performance, retention, and attendance. Specifically, the data demonstrated a complete elimination of eviction filings over the course of two years in the school district where their program was initially launched, which resulted in increased school retention and stability.” Building on that success, we expanded the program, first to three other schools within the Carver Cluster of Atlanta Public Schools (APS), of which Thomasville Heights Elementary is a part, and later to several more APS schools across the city.

**Our team achieved that success by working directly with the residents of Forest Cove, building trust as they combatted illegal evictions and advocated for their right to live in homes free of mold and pests.** As our Community Assistance Program expanded, we were able to provide more holistic support. We assisted with utility payments, moving expenses, and transportation.

We learned a lot as well. Among many other lessons, we learned volumes about the importance of keeping our commitments as an organization – of not just building trust, but of living up to the trust placed in us. This is especially important because many of the clients served by AVLFL have a healthy sense of distrust of not just legal institutions, but institutions in general. They have come by this distrust honestly. Specifically, many are living with the long-lasting effects of pain and trauma. In far too many cases, institutions have failed to protect or help them or have been directly involved in inflicting the harm. Organizations or agencies charged with assisting them may not have kept their word or had enough resources to follow through. The judicial system may have played a role, real or perceived, in what they experienced as an injustice in their lives.

At Forest Cove, we saw this in the children who were living in trauma because the conditions of their rental housing were akin to a third-world slum, despite years of efforts by their parents to get any institution to intervene. As part of addressing that trauma, we work closely with Chris180, a non-profit that provides trauma-informed counseling and services for students at many of the schools that now host our staff, including Thomasville Heights Elementary. I still remember hearing one of their lead counselors years ago explain that a central component of the healing process for people who are living with trauma is rebuilding trust. Specifically, she spoke of the importance of routine and consistency and commitment from service providers, or anyone else for that matter. **She drew on AVLFL’s neighborhood-based tenant advocacy work as an example, explaining that for many of the elementary school children we serve, the living conditions are so unpredictable and unstable – another eviction notice or a falling ceiling or more rats could befall them at any time – that they don’t fully develop the psychological ability to trust.** She stressed that what our volunteer attorneys achieve – finally causing critical repairs to be expedited, stopping repeated abusive eviction filings once and for all – greatly compliments their therapeutic work.

She went further, stressing that our presence there and the way we went about our work – separate from the outcomes of our advocacy – were critical to the healing process as well. She explained that every time our staff or volunteer attorneys actually do what they say they will do, it helps that individual trust again. Every time that a volunteer attorney says they will come and see the conditions, and then actually shows up, that person begins to believe again. When they see us respect their dignity enough to come to their homes and be comfortable there – and when they see us come back every day, week, and year – that consistency and reliability starts to chip away at that distrust. And every school year that our staff and volunteer attorneys return to the neighborhood, the residents begin to have faith again in people and institutions that are trying to help.

SAFE EXIT

## Consistency and reliability matters.

That experience with our staff and volunteers, wholly aside from the housing benefit we might achieve, is actually part of their process of recovering from and breaking through the trauma. Our team, this counselor explained, was furthering their work and playing an important role in helping people heal – so that they could thrive.

That insight was powerful. It stayed with me. I think about it often. And it informs the way we approach our work. We gained a greater appreciation for the importance of consistency and long-term commitments to the neighborhoods we serve. That commitment, now one of AVL F's core values, was tested earlier this year when we faced a very difficult decision because of recent events at the Forest Cove apartment complex.

You may have read in the news or heard the NPR stories recounting that the Forest Cove apartment complex was condemned by the City of Atlanta at the end of 2021. **The condemnation and ordered razing of the complex resulted in an accelerated plan to relocate all of the residents of Forest Cove.** It also resulted in APS deciding to temporarily close Thomasville Heights Elementary, the school we have fought for over the last six years. That decision, in turn, led to the loss of nearly all of our funding for our neighborhood-based team in the Carver Cluster of schools. That loss jeopardized our ability to stand with the displaced residents being relocated in a process that, despite best efforts, carries a high risk of families falling through the cracks. The loss of funding also jeopardized our ability to stand with the residents of the many other neighborhoods that make up the Carver Cluster of schools, neighborhoods that also deal with evictions and substandard rental conditions.

This was a real crisis for AVL F. If we couldn't sustain the work in the Carver Cluster, did we have no choice but to close down our operations across the three other schools? Always committed to our amazing staff, did we have to consider whether there were other funded positions within the organization to which they could pivot? And what about the Forest Cove "diaspora," the hundreds of families with whom we worked for six years who would now be relocated across Atlanta and elsewhere?

It took a couple of weeks of soul searching, but the right decisions quickly became obvious. **We made two decisions and, leading with our values, committed to them regardless of whether we secured additional funding to support them.** First, we would put together a plan and a team to continue to support the Forest Cove "diaspora," standing with the residents as they advocate for an equitable outcome during this upheaval and displacement. Second, we would continue our commitment, now six years and counting, to the neighborhoods within the Carver Cluster of schools, maintaining the embedded Standing with Our Neighbors staff and bringing to bear the volunteer resources of our partner law firms.

## Once those decisions were made, with our moral compass intact, the path forward was clearer.

And as is often the case when you lead with your values, things started to fall into place.

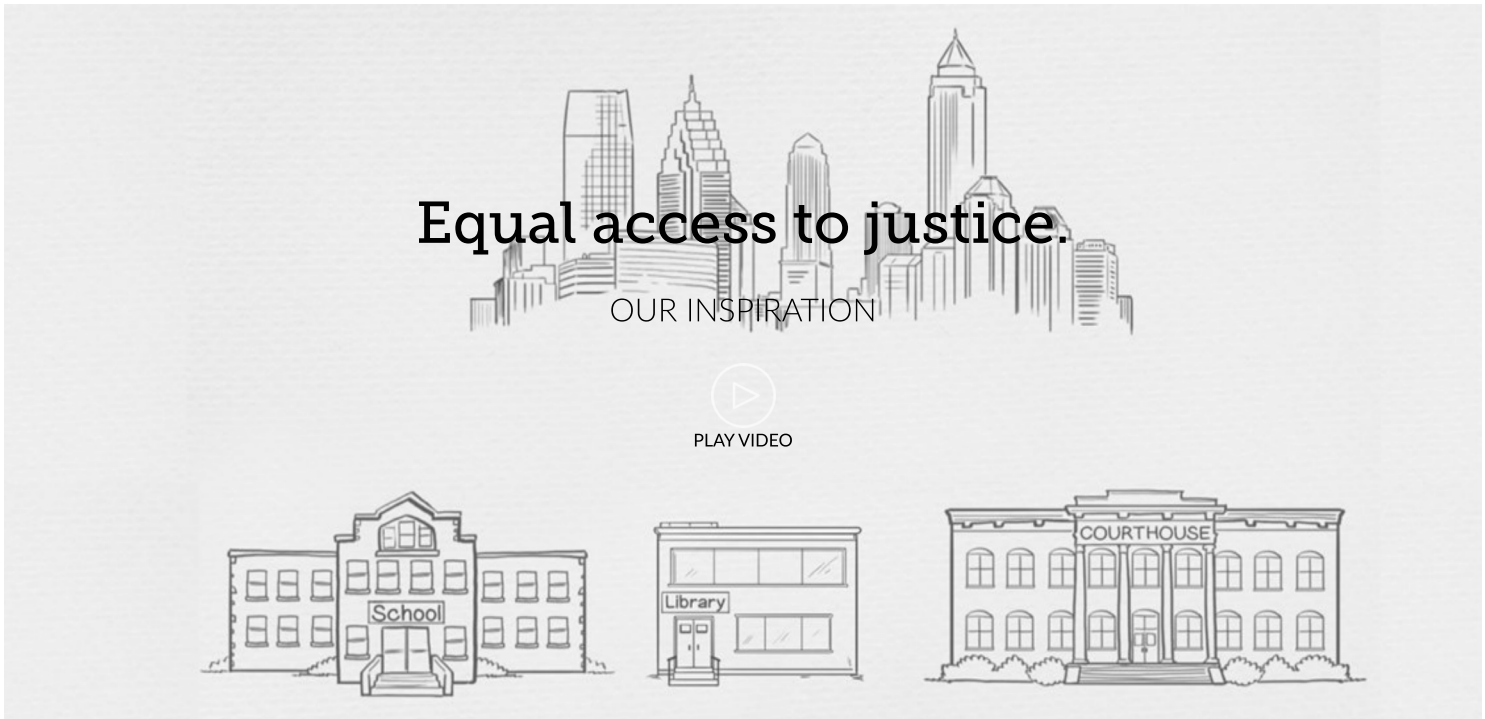
First, we secured additional funding to keep the Carver Cluster team in their neighborhoods through the end of the year while we pursue additional support. Our commitment to those neighborhoods was always to be measured in decades, if not generations, and that has not changed. We will find the necessary funding and we will keep that commitment.

Second, our plan to continue to stand with the Forest Cove "diaspora" recently became a reality when we were awarded the contract from the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta to be the lead agency for case-management and supportive services to the Forest Cove residents. The displacement, planned relocation, support, and possible return to the neighborhood of over 200 families from Forest Cove, represents one of the biggest challenges of its kind in Atlanta's recent history. **With over 40 years standing with Atlanta, six years with staff embedded in the Thomasville Heights community, and a diverse team of lawyers, social workers, and emergency assistance specialists, we believe AVL F is uniquely positioned to work directly with families to ensure Atlanta rises to this historic challenge.** Now with the support of the Community Foundation, we fully intend to do just that.

The decisions we made were pivotal ones for the organization and they will have, I think, larger implications as well. Honoring our multi-year commitments to the neighborhoods we serve is an incredibly important part of rebuilding the trust that our clients have lost. For our volunteers, doing meaningful pro bono work with AVL F is an important way for an individual lawyer to do her part to help restore faith in our system as well. It is an important way to help someone trust again, and, as we have learned, that trust may be exactly what is needed to help that person move forward, to heal, to thrive. Through all the turmoil and trauma of the last six years, we remain committed to helping the residents of Forest Cove – and the other neighborhoods of the Carver Cluster of schools – do just that: move forward, heal, and thrive.

Those hopes we had when we started this place-based journey have been realized. The trust we built with – and the things we learned from – the residents of Atlanta's neighborhoods has made us better advocates. It has helped us have a deeper impact and give our volunteers – who are so critical to our work – a more meaningful experience. It has helped us reach tenants and survivors we wouldn't otherwise reach. And, importantly, we learned just how much consistency and reliability matter. We are grateful to the residents of Forest Cove for teaching us that lesson. We are better for it, and we intend stand with them and their neighbors with that lesson as our North Star.

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## Upcoming Events

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Remote Volunteer Training: Eviction Defense  
 Thu. Apr 20, 2023

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Volunteer Training: Guardian ad Litem  
 Mon. May 8, 2023

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