



GEORGIA[™]
APPLESEED

Center for Law & Justice

HEALTHY HOUSING ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

STATE OF GEORGIA

Who created these guides?

The Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, GaAppleseed.org, created this toolkit with help from our partners.

Georgia Appleseed's mission is to increase justice for families and children in Georgia through law and policy reform and community engagement. We advocate for stable, healthy housing for families. Georgia Appleseed is the lead organization for the Georgia Healthy Housing Coalition (GHHHC), which includes advocacy groups/non-profits, educators, centers, schools, and others championing statewide improvements to housing conditions.

This toolkit would not have been possible without the help of our pro bono partners, including:

- Nelson Mullins LLP
- Ali El-Haj
- Shannen Levin

We are also grateful for the Georgia Appleseed interns who worked on the project, including Ari Colston, Jacqueline Estes Adams, Victoria Miller, Elizabeth Phillips, Megan Toomer, and Sarah Bueter.

This information applies only in the State of Georgia and does not constitute legal advice. Anyone seeking specific legal advice should contact an attorney.

INTRODUCTION

Who can use the Healthy Housing Advocacy Toolkit?

This toolkit is for individuals and families who want healthier, more stable rental housing. The toolkit is also for other community members who want to improve the lives of the children in their neighborhoods, towns, and counties across Georgia.

How do I use this toolkit?

This toolkit contains individual guides that can work together or as separate information sheets. You can read and use the toolkit together as a single document, or you can use the table of contents to find the topics that interest you.

We want you to share the information in this toolkit! If you use the information in this toolkit to create your own document to share with others, please give us credit in your document. We want people to know that they can come to Georgia Appleseed for more information, resources, and help.

The toolkit contains information and guidance about:

- Why stable, healthy housing is necessary for children and youth;
- How to work with neighbors, schools, local governments, churches, and others to make rental housing more stable and healthy for families and children;
- How to advocate for changes to law and policy to improve housing conditions; and
- Tenants' rights to healthy housing, how to require a landlord to make repairs, and how to respond to an eviction.

Can I help improve this toolkit?

Yes! We hope that you will help us improve this toolkit. This toolkit was made to be an introduction to advocacy. We wrote it to be easy to read and understand.

Let us know if you think that we should add information. Also, tell us about other ways that we can improve the toolkit. Please send any suggestions that you have to the Legal and Policy Director at Georgia Appleseed via info@gaappleseed.org.

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WHAT IS HEALTHY HOUSING?

What is healthy housing? Why does it matter?

A healthy home is where you and your family feel safe and secure.

Healthy homes are:

- Free of pests and mold infestations.
- Equipped with working air conditioning, heat, plumbing, electrical, and other home systems.
- Not overcrowded. Family members have appropriate privacy.
- Equipped with locking doors and windows. Family members can arrive and leave their home safely.
- Not too loud. Family members can sleep well, students can do their homework, and family members can relax.
- Stable. Family members can count on living in the home for a year or more without fear of eviction.

Healthy homes help families and children live better lives. Unhealthy homes can be dangerous, particularly for children.

Housing quality is one of the most important influences on a child's emotional and behavioral well-being.

Children who live in unhealthy homes:

- May have more mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, or outwardly aggressive behaviors such as breaking rules.
- May have lower reading and math scores on standardized tests.
- Have parents with a higher risk of depression and anxiety, which can affect the child's well-being.
- Move homes more often. Children that move homes often have problems with school and managing their emotions.

In other words, children who live in safe and stable homes are happier, healthier, and do better in school. And when children succeed, the whole community benefits.

Stable, healthy homes make stronger, healthier communities.

HOW DO I ADVOCATE FOR A HEALTHY HOME?

What is advocacy? When do I do it?

Advocacy is asking for something you want or need. Advocacy is also giving a good reason for why you should get what you ask for.

Most people engage in advocacy every day. At a store, we may ask for a discount on a piece of clothing. We may try to convince a friend or family member to do us a favor. Children may try to persuade their teacher not to assign homework. These actions are all forms of advocacy.

Asking your landlord to fix a broken air conditioner is also advocacy. Telling your family's story to a state legislator and asking them to vote for better protections for tenants is advocacy too.

This toolkit provides some information about how to advocate for healthy housing for your family in the following situations:

- Discussions with your landlord.
- Fighting an eviction in court.
- Working with other community members and leaders to improve housing conditions for tenants and their families.
- Lobbying government, legislators, and other state leaders to improve tenants' rights to healthy housing.

How do I get started?

Ask yourself and write down your answers to these questions:

- What do I want? In other words, what needs to be changed, or what is my goal?
- Who can help me reach my goal?
- How will I convince them to help me? What am I going to do to advocate for my goal?
- When will I get started?



The Healthy Housing Advocacy Worksheet on page 14 of this guide may be helpful in achieving your advocacy goals.

Use your answers to create a plan. The next step is to advocate. Let's consider a couple of examples.

Example 1: Creating a plan to get rid of pests in your home.

You want your landlord to do something about mice in your home. Your goal might be to have a home with no mice or bugs. You decide that your landlord should help you. You plan to write and deliver a letter to the landlord. The letter asks for an exterminator, explains why you need the exterminator, and reminds the landlord that you have a right under Georgia law to a safe home free of dangerous pests. You send the letter immediately.

Example 2: Creating a plan to make your home safer.

You want your city or town to make sure that housing in your community is safe for children. Your goal is for the city's housing code enforcement office to hire more rental housing inspectors. You plan to organize other tenants to write and deliver letters to the local city council asking them to hire more inspectors and explaining how inspectors will make homes safer. You gather a group of tenants, write the letters together, and send the letters to the council members. After you send the letters, you and other tenants show up at a council meeting and testify in person.

Use the facts in the "What is healthy housing? Why does it matter?" section on page 5 of this toolkit to make your story more powerful.



Remember: You are not alone.

Your family's experience may be similar to other families' experiences. Also, there is important research that supports your advocacy for healthy housing.

In many cases, your advocacy is more powerful when you:

- Connect your story to other stories in the community; and
- Share facts about the impact of healthy housing on families and children

HEALTHY HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

Feelings of shame and housing discrimination can make advocacy seem hard and intimidating.

Many families in rental housing do not want to talk about the unhealthy conditions in their homes. Many people may feel embarrassed about unhealthy conditions in their homes. They may feel that other community members will not respect them if they live in unhealthy conditions.

Unsafe and unhealthy housing conditions are not the tenants' fault. It is the landlord's responsibility to keep a property safe and in good condition.

In addition, discrimination causes unhealthy housing conditions. Laws, policies, and government actions have discriminated against Black families, other families of color, disabled people, LGBTQ+ individuals, and low-income people. For example, some laws make it harder for governments and private companies to invest in better housing in Black communities. Past

laws protected landlords and community members who openly refused to rent their property to Black families and other minorities.

Discrimination, laws, and policies make it harder for minority families to find stable, healthy housing. These conditions also make it harder for families to exercise their rights to safe housing.

You are the best advocate for yourself and your family. You have a right to advocate for healthy housing and your voice matters. Use this toolkit to advocate for yourself and connect with others who can help you.

Learn more about housing discrimination at:

- [Georgia Department of Community Affairs Fair Housing Resource Page](#)¹
- [US Department of Housing and Urban Development](#)²

ADVOCATING TO YOUR LANDLORD WHEN YOU NEED SOMETHING FIXED IN THE HOME

My rental home needs repairs. What can I do?

The law requires your landlord to keep your rental home in safe condition and good repair.

Landlords must:

- Maintain the building structure.
- Keep electric, heating, and plumbing in working order.
- Keep the home safe for tenants.

What should I do if my rental home needs repairs?

Immediately write a letter or email to your landlord with

a list of any dangerous conditions and needed repairs. Keep a copy of the letter or email.

Your landlord should fix the dangerous conditions and make the repairs in a reasonable amount of time.

What should I do if my landlord refuses to fix the problems?

You can:

- Call housing code enforcement;
- Make the repairs yourself; or
- Sue the landlord in court.

If you try any of these, your landlord may try to evict you. This practice is illegal (learn more on page 13). If your landlord files an Eviction Warrant in court to evict you, write in your Answer that the landlord is evicting you because you complained about dangerous conditions in the rental home.

Call Housing Code Enforcement

Local governments have special officers who inspect rental homes to make sure that they are safe. These officers are part of the housing code enforcement office. Find contact information for code enforcement on the internet or call your local government office.

Pay someone to make the repairs and then take money out of the rent

This is called **Repair and Deduct**. If you try this, your landlord may try to evict you for not paying your full rent.

To repair and deduct you should:

1. Send your landlord a letter or email listing the problems. In the letter or email, say that you will pay someone else to fix the problems if the landlord does not. Write that you will deduct the cost of the repairs from the rent. Keep a copy of your letter or email.
2. Give your landlord a reasonable amount of time to fix the problems.

3. Hire someone to make the repairs and keep the cost as low as possible. Keep all the receipts.
4. When your next month's rent is due, subtract the cost of your receipts from the full rent. Give your landlord a copy of the receipts to prove what you paid. Keep a copy of the receipts.

File a lawsuit against your landlord in Magistrate Court.

If your landlord fails to fix serious problems in a reasonable time, then you can file a lawsuit against your landlord for damages.

I need help!

Call Atlanta Legal Aid at (404) 524-5811 or Georgia Legal Services Program at (833) 457-7529 for free legal advice and help.

You can also visit georgialegalaid.org for more information about landlords and repairs.

This information applies only in the State of Georgia and does not constitute legal advice. Anyone seeking specific legal advice should contact an attorney. The law changes and the information in this brochure may no longer be correct after 2023.

What do I do if my landlord wants to evict me?

If you are facing a possible eviction from your rental home, you should call a lawyer for advice. Call Atlanta Legal Aid at (404) 524-5811 or Georgia Legal Services Program at (833) 457-7529 for free legal advice and help. You can also visit georgialegalaid.org for more information about what to do if your landlord tries to evict you.

Can my landlord force me to leave?

A landlord cannot force a tenant to leave without going to court first.

It is illegal for landlords to force you to leave by:

- Threatening you;
- Changing the locks;
- Cutting off power or water; or
- Taking your possessions out of the house.

How can a landlord evict me?

Your landlord must first ask you to leave. Then the landlord can go to court to begin an eviction case against you. A police officer will deliver an **Eviction Warrant** to you or tack it to your door. This warrant will have information about the case against you.

Your landlord can ask a court to evict you because:

- You did not pay the rent.
- You damaged the property.
- You did not move out after your lease ended.
- You broke promises you made in the lease.

If the landlord wins the case against you, the court can issue an **Eviction Order**. This order is called a **Writ of Possession**. When the Court gives the landlord a writ of possession, a police officer may force you to leave.

Can I fight an eviction?

Yes. You must go to the **Court Clerk's** office and file a document called an **Answer**. Then you must go to a **Court Hearing**.

How do I file an answer?

You file an answer at the court within seven days after you received the warrant. The court clerk will have an answer form that you can use. The court's address will be on the warrant. When you file your answer, the court will give you a **Court Hearing Date**.

On your answer form, tell the court the reasons why you should not be evicted. These reasons are called **Defenses**.

Some defenses are:

- The landlord did not tell you that he was going to file a warrant.
- You paid your rent on time or you offered to pay your rent on time.
- Your landlord wants to evict you because you complained about mold, pests, or other serious problems.

You can also list complaints against your landlord in your answer. These complaints are called Counter-Claims. Some common counter-claims are:

- The landlord did not make repairs.
- The landlord turned off your utilities.
- The landlord locked you out of the rental house.
- The landlord broke other promises in the lease.

What do I do at the court hearing?

You must be on time at your court hearing. Bring your lease and the documents and witnesses that can prove what you wrote in your answer. Evidence might be rent receipts, a repair record, and your lease. Tell the judge the reasons why you should not be evicted.

Can I come to an agreement with my landlord?

Yes. You can come to a private agreement with the landlord to end the landlord's lawsuit. This agreement is called a **Settlement**. You should write or type the settlement. You and the landlord should sign and date it.

You should answer the landlord's warrant within 7 days even if you have a settlement. Include your settlement with your answer. Go to court on your court hearing date. Bring a copy of the settlement to show the judge.

What if I lose the lawsuit?

The court will give the landlord a special document called a **Writ of Possession**. The writ orders a police officer to remove you and your belongings from the rental home. You may choose to leave before a police officer forces you to leave.

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Use the internet and social media to find out more about the organizations that can help you. You can also ask the librarian at the local public library for help.

HOW DO I ADVOCATE IN MY COMMUNITY?

Communities need healthy housing for all tenants and families. Communities can do a lot to improve housing conditions.

Here are a few examples:

- Cities and county governments can fine landlords who do not keep safe conditions or provide financial support for repairs.
- Churches and local organizations can help families move to healthier homes.
- Local organizations and residents can collaborate to ask legislators to pass new laws and create new programs that improve housing conditions.

Local organizations, such as non-profits, churches, and local schools, can help you. These organizations will connect you with other families who advocate for healthy housing. Working together can be more powerful and effective than working alone.

Read over the list of community organizations in the next section, **What Community Organizations and Agencies Can Help Me Advocate?** Reach out to the organizations in your community and ask who is working to improve the lives of tenants and families. Ask the organization to put you in contact with those advocates.

WHAT COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND AGENCIES CAN HELP ME ADVOCATE?

Every community has organizations that can help you advocate for stable, healthy housing for you and your family.

The list below contains information about some of the organizations that may be in your community. You can search for these organizations on the internet. Your public library, local government, and public school staff may also have information about them. Your neighbors, friends, family, and others in your community may also have information.

Churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship

often provide financial assistance and engage in advocacy for low-income community members.

Housing agencies and housing authorities

may offer financial support and counseling in financial management, rental housing, homebuyer education, services for the homeless, credit workshops, and more.

Look for [housing agencies approved by the federal government](#)³. You can find information about [local services to avoid homelessness](#)⁴.

Housing code enforcement officers

are law enforcement officers who enforce housing and property maintenance codes to make sure that housing is safe. You can submit a complaint to your local housing code enforcement office for unsafe living conditions in rental homes, including pest infestations, leaking roofs, plumbing, and electrical problems. Look on the internet or call your local government for more information.

Local schools

understand that a healthy home makes for more successful students. Unstable or unhealthy housing has emotional and behavioral impacts on school children. Children living in unhealthy housing are more vulnerable to school suspensions, expulsion, and involvement in the justice system. Some schools in Georgia work with parents to advocate for better housing for their students.

If you are concerned about your child's school climate or school attendance, Georgia law requires that every county have a Student Attendance and School Climate Committee, a special partnership between your local court and the school district. You can call your local superior court or juvenile court and ask for information about the committee's next meeting.

Nonprofit organizations

provide many different housing-related services, including; financial and rent support for families, training on tenants' rights, and free legal services. They also help tenants organize together to fight against abusive landlords, change laws, and increase support for families.

Here are a few nonprofit organizations that help people across Georgia and in metro Atlanta:

- United Way connects you with mental health services, disaster services, housing, and legal services. Find them at [unitedway.org](#).
- Georgia Legal Services provides free legal services to Georgians living on low incomes outside of metro Atlanta. Call (833) 457-7529 or visit [glsp.org](#).
- Atlanta Legal Aid Society provides free legal services to Georgians living on low incomes in metro Atlanta. Call (404) 524-5811 or visit [atlantalegalaid.org](#).
- The Georgia Legal Aid website at [georgialegalaid.org/issues/housing](#) offers free legal resources in Spanish and English.
- Georgia ACT supports a network of advocates, organizers, and individuals to advance housing equity across Georgia. Visit [georgiaact.org](#).
- Georgia Justice Project (GJP) assists Georgians with housing by helping clear their criminal criminal history. Visit [gjp.org](#).

- The Georgia Advocacy Office is a non-profit organization that works to protect the rights of people with disabilities and/or mental illness. Visit thegao.org.
- The Latin American Association (thelaa.org) offers a program in both English and Spanish called the Latino Basic Need Program, which includes advocacy to address housing, health, and hunger for Latinos.
- CHRIS 180 channels individuals and families to emergency housing assistance, rapid re-housing, permanent housing, and additional resources for those in the Atlanta area. Visit chris180.org/safehousing.
- The Housing Justice League provides information and support to families and helps them organize advocacy together. Visit housingjusticeleague.org.

EXAMPLE OF ADVOCACY IN ACTION: LOCAL COMMUNITIES MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN

In Clayton County, Georgia, 50% of residents live in rental housing. 5% of school children are homeless.

Many of the rental homes have unhealthy conditions. Children exposed to unhealthy living conditions or who lack stable housing may struggle to learn and succeed in school. Unstable housing can also impact children's behavior and cause unique learning challenges, making them vulnerable to school suspensions, expulsion, and justice-system involvement.

Clayton County is also home to resilient communities and residents who want to make the county a better place for all their children. These community members reached out to Atlanta Legal Aid Society, Georgia Appleseed, the Clayton County Magistrate Court, police, and county leaders for help. Together, we

created an initiative called HIP, or the Homelessness Intervention Program. HIP meets regularly to create programs that make it easier for low-income families to find stable, healthy homes.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hurt families struggling to pay rent or face eviction, HIP responded by developing an eviction diversion program. In just a few months, HIP members pooled together resources and expertise to keep over 1,000 families in their homes.

ADVOCATING TO THE GOVERNMENT

Government is an important target for your advocacy. Our government's job is to represent you. You have the right to ask the government to increase access to healthy housing. You also have the right to criticize government actions that you disagree with.

In Georgia, there are local governments and a state government. Local governments make decisions for counties, cities, schools, and even neighborhoods. The state government makes decisions that directly impact the entire state, such as how to use state tax dollars.

Both local and state governments have three main parts or branches:

1. The executive branch includes the governor, mayors, and agencies, like the Georgia Department of Health, Georgia Department of Education, and police and housing code enforcement departments. These leaders and agencies enforce the laws made by the legislative branch, spend tax money, and sometimes make rules that have the force of law.
2. The legislative branch includes the state legislature, county and city councils, and school boards. These groups create laws and direct the executive branch to spend tax dollars in specific ways—like improving access to healthy housing.

3. The judicial branch includes the state courts. The courts resolve disputes between citizens, like landlords and tenants. Courts also determine whether a citizen has committed a crime. And courts can order citizens to do certain things, like pay money to resolve a dispute or clean up a dangerous rental property.

How do I advocate to local government?

For local governments, look for contact information for government offices and officials. Also, find the dates and times of government meetings. You can find this information on government websites and social media (like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), by calling government offices, and by talking to other advocates.

Tell government officials that healthy housing matters to you, what changes you would like them to make, and share some of your stories.

Send letters and emails to your government officials. Advocating in person is very powerful. Make appointments to see your local officials and attend government meetings. Many government meetings include time for comments from the public. Just make sure that you sign up to speak ahead of time, if possible.

Social media is a powerful tool to reach your local and state representatives. Most of them have Twitter accounts. Tagging them will reach them and is an effective way to get your message to them and to your community.

Remember, you are not alone. Talk to other community members. Many local groups (including houses of worship, clubs, and other groups) want to help advocate for healthy housing. The internet is a great way to find other individuals interested in healthy housing.

How do I advocate to state government?

You can reach state government leaders, like the governor and legislators, through social media, email, phone call, or in person at public meetings or the Capitol when the legislature is in session.

Tag officials on social media.

Send letters and emails to your government officials or advocate in person. Tell government officials that healthy housing matters to you, what changes you would like them to make, and share some of your stories.

Attend government meetings.

Many government meetings include time for comments from the public. Just make sure that you sign up to speak ahead of time or right when you arrive.

Make appointments to see your local officials in person.

You may find it's easiest to meet with legislators when the legislature is not in session. During the summer, fall, and winter, legislators return to their communities and their regular jobs. They may live close to you and have more time to meet with you.

[Find contact information for your legislators⁵.](#)

[Find contact information for the Governor.](#)

Georgia Appleseed's How to Vote Guide

Voting for candidates who support healthy housing is one of the most powerful forms of advocacy. You can find out how to register to vote and voting rules in Georgia Appleseed's **How to Vote Guide**.

Download the guide at HowToVoteGeorgia.org

EXAMPLE OF ADVOCACY IN ACTION: GOOD LAWS START WITH YOU

In 2019, Georgia enacted a new law with protections for tenants looking for healthier housing. The new law allows tenants to sue landlords who retaliate when the tenants ask for fixes to serious problems with a rental home.

The law ([O.C.G.A. § 44-7-24](#)) was passed because parents of sick children in local hospitals advocated for their children. Parents told doctors that the rentals they lived in made their children sick. These parents were afraid to ask the landlord to fix the rental home because the landlord would evict them if they complained. These doctors and parents asked Georgia Appleseed and the Atlanta Legal Aid Society for help.

Together, we wrote a new law, worked with tenants and other organizations, and found Representative Sharon Cooper from Marietta, Georgia, to introduce and fight for the law. Families living in rental homes called their legislators and showed up at the Capitol to ask their politicians to vote for the law. The legislature passed the new law, and the Governor signed it. Because those families advocated for their children, many Georgians live in safer, healthier homes today.

HERE ARE A FEW ADVOCACY TIPS:

1 Tell politicians what you want.

Politicians make decisions based on their own experiences, requests from state agencies, and suggestions from citizens. For example, legislators often introduce new laws that their constituents ask for. That's one reason why citizen advocates like you can be so effective.

2 You can make a difference at any time.

At every stage of a new law, citizen advocates can make a difference. Prepare to participate early and often throughout the legislative process. You can impact whether laws get passed and how politicians make decisions. To have an impact, you must let the politician know what you want.

3 Learn from your politicians' social media and campaign websites.

You can learn a lot about your legislators from their online postings. Almost all legislators have Facebook pages, and many have Twitter and LinkedIn accounts. Use Google to search for your legislators. Ask friends, family, and other people you know—you may have common interests or friendships that can help you make contact.

4 The best time to start communicating with politicians is before you have an "ask."

Reach out to local politicians and legislators to introduce yourself and begin building a relationship. Having that personal relationship will make a difference when you need their support.

HEALTHY HOUSING ADVOCACY WORKSHEET

Step 1: Identify the goal.

What do I want to happen?

What needs to change about my current housing?

Step 2: Make a list of individuals or organizations that can help.

Who can help me reach my goal?

Examples: neighbors, friends, family, church members, legal aid services.

You may want to do a search on the internet to see if there are community or government agencies that can help.

Step 3: Write out your plan.

How will I convince them to help me?

What am I going to do to advocate for my goal?

Your plan can be bullet points or full sentences. Ask other people to help you make a plan.

Step 4: Decide when you will get started.

Having a start date written down will help you begin to get things moving.

As you identify steps to take in reaching your healthy housing goal, put a goal date with each step.

ENDNOTES

Full links when not shown inline

- 1 <https://www.dca.ga.gov/safe-affordable-housing/rental-housing-assistance/housing-choice-voucher-program-formerly-known/fair>
- 2 https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/fair_housing_act_overview
- 3 <https://apps.hud.gov/offices/hsg/sfh/hcc/hcs.cfm>
- 4 <https://www.hud.gov/states/georgia/homeless>
- 5 <https://georgia.gov/contact-your-state-legislators>
- 6 <https://gov.georgia.gov/contact-us>



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