



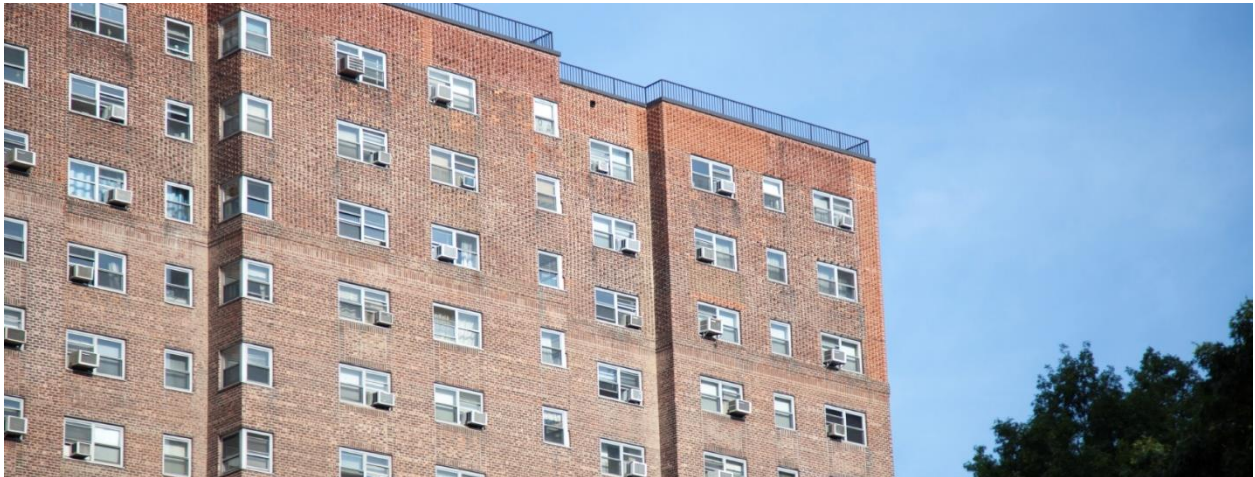
Room to Breathe

Lessons from Atlanta's First Healthy Housing Program

November 2024

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Key Takeaways

- Room to Breathe is Atlanta's first program to provide low-income renters with efficiency and healthy housing assessments. It is a partnership between SEEA, the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation (AVLF), and SK Collaborative.
- A review of 11 completed healthy home assessments revealed inadequate standards of habitability, potential health and safety hazards for residents, and energy-inefficient housing conditions.
- All participating homes had evidence of water damage, which can exacerbate and even trigger respiratory illness in both children and adults.
- 60% of participating households utilized their home assessment reports to halt impending evictions, obtain critical repairs, or self-advocate in their eviction case.

Introduction

It is well known that Atlantans are facing a shortage of affordable housing, but less known are the housing quality challenges faced by tens of thousands of homeowners and renters who live in the city's naturally occurring and subsidized affordable housing.¹ According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Housing Survey (AHS), in 2021, over 76,000 housing units in the Atlanta metropolitan area were deemed "moderately inadequate" while 16,600 housing units were considered "severely inadequate."² People living in these homes struggle with unsafe and unhealthy housing conditions and face steep barriers to keeping up with home maintenance. These issues can have wide-ranging ramifications, with impacts from exacerbating health risks to undermining community stability.

In 2022, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* highlighted these issues in an award-winning investigative series, "Dangerous Dwellings," which illuminated housing quality problems in some of Atlanta's low-income apartment complexes. The newspaper found that 272 apartment complexes in the city were violating the city's housing code, resulting in substandard housing conditions that range from pest infestations to apartment fires, spotty electricity, structural damage to ceilings, walls, and floors, water damage, and mold. These issues had wide impacts. Pests and defective appliances like refrigerators, for instance, exacerbated food insecurity faced by residents. In addition, residents of these units often experienced respiratory problems and high rates of violence in their neighborhood, including homicides, gun violence, robberies, and cases of sexual assault.³

While there are programs designed to support homeowners with residential upgrades that can address health and safety hazards, renters face unique barriers to addressing these issues. This is often a result of the split incentive between renters and landlords, in which upgrades to a residence must be approved and funded by landlords, while the efficiency and health benefits go to the renter.⁴ The result is that housing and efficiency assistance is typically geared toward homeowners, and renters have fewer options in securing improvements to their living space.

Additionally, renters in Georgia have had few protections and little leverage to secure housing quality upgrades or compel landlords to make critical repairs. Although §44-7-24 of the Georgia Code protects

¹ On affordable housing see Dan Immergluck, *Red Hot City: Housing, Race, and Exclusion in Twenty-First Century Atlanta* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2022); *Final Recommendations to Advance Affordable Housing and Community Retention* (Atlanta, GA: House ATL, 2018); *Housing at its Core: Residential Affordability in Atlanta's Five-County Core Area* (Atlanta, GA: KB Advisory Group, 2023).

² U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Housing Survey (AHS). Available at: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/ahs/data/interactive/ahstablecreator.html?s_areas=12060&s_year=2021&s_tablename=TABLE5&s_bygroup1=1&s_bygroup2=1&s_filtergroup1=1&s_filtergroup2=1

³ Alan Judd and Willoughby Mariano, "At violent apartment complexes, business model thrives on housing shortage, government inaction," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 9, 2022; Alan Judd and Willoughby Mariano, "Making money from misery," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 13, 2022; Alan Judd and Willoughby Mariano, "Tenants beware," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 16, 2022; Willoughby Mariano and Johnny Edwards, "Local governments outmatched by landlords of blighted apartment complexes," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 18, 2022.

⁴ Stephen Bird and Diana Hernández, "Policy options for the split incentive: Increasing energy efficiency for low-income renters," *Energy Policy* 48 (September 2012): 506-14.

renters from retaliation by landlords if they provide landlords notice of “life, health, safety, or habitability concern” or contact a government code enforcement body, retaliatory evictions still occur. Bradford and Bradford (2023) find that states with a law prohibiting landlord retaliation had 11% fewer evictions filed than states without these laws, suggesting the scope of retaliatory evictions.⁵ The Department of Community Affairs’ *Georgia Landlord Tenant Handbook* even cautions tenants that “contacting a code inspector might further strain your relationship with the landlord and this should usually be done as a last resort.”⁶

Low-income renters in Georgia too often face critical housing quality and maintenance shortfalls that can impact their health and financial stability. Yet programs designed to support low-income households with energy efficiency and home improvement assistance are mostly available to homeowners. This disconnect leaves Georgia renters without ready places to turn to address key health and safety concerns in their home.

Our Room to Breathe pilot program was focused on supporting low-income renters in Atlanta, and many were facing the threat of eviction. According to Princeton University’s Eviction Lab, more than seven million renters in the United States are at risk of eviction annually. Eviction disproportionately affects low-income individuals, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) renters, and families with children.⁷ Eviction can be a significantly traumatic experience that is associated with numerous health risks, including premature death.⁸ Eviction risk is also closely intertwined with energy affordability, as households struggling to pay rent are often struggling to pay their utility bills. Eviction forces families into a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape because having an eviction filing on record can make it challenging to secure housing again.

Room to Breathe

Because of the housing quality issues faced by many Atlanta renters and the lack of assistance for these issues, in 2021 staff at SEEA, SK Collaborative, and the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation (AVLF) collaborated to develop a program that could provide renters with a pathway to upgrade unhealthy and

⁵ Ashley C. Bradford and W. David Bradford, “The Effect of State Housing Policies on Eviction Filings and Judgments in the United States, 2001-2018,” *Housing Policy Debate* (2023): 13.

⁶ *Georgia Landlord Tenant Handbook* (Atlanta, GA: Georgia Department of Community Affairs, 2021), 11.

⁷ Nick Graetz, Carl Gershenson, Peter Hepburn, and Matthew Desmond, “Who is Evicted in America,” *Eviction Lab Updates*, October 3, 2023. Available at: <https://evictionlab.org/who-is-evicted-in-america/>

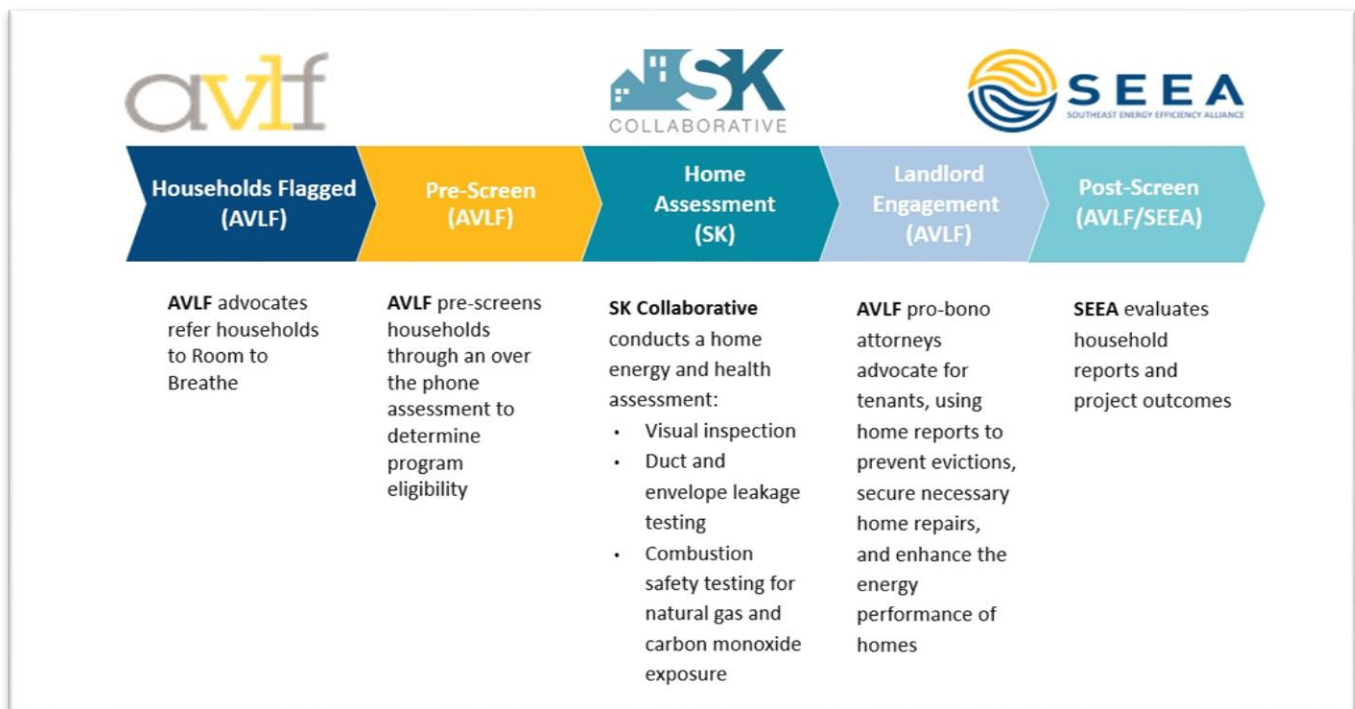
⁸ Nick Graetz, et al., “The impacts of rent burden and eviction on mortality in the United States, 2000–2019,” *Social Science & Medicine* 340 (2024): 116398.

inefficient housing. The resulting pilot program, called Room to Breathe, ran from 2021 to 2023 and was developed to foster cross-sector partnerships aimed at identifying and addressing housing quality issues affecting metro Atlanta's most vulnerable households. At no financial cost to participants, this program provided health and energy home assessments to low-income households as well as legal support to address housing issues through collaboration with landlords or legal action.

This report consolidates the findings of 11 healthy home assessments conducted by SK Collaborative between 2021 and 2023. The households in this pilot were made up of two different housing types: three single family homes and eight low-rise multifamily homes.⁹ Initially, participating households were pre-screened through an over-the-phone questionnaire that evaluated if the household was a candidate for an in-depth home assessment (see appendix). Home assessors then visited participating households where they evaluated the home's indoor air quality and energy efficiency. Each assessment consisted of a thorough visual inspection, performance testing to quantify HVAC, duct, and envelope leakage, and combustion safety testing to examine the potential for exposure to natural gas and carbon monoxide.

Home assessment reports were evaluated by SK Collaborative and used by AVLf pro-bono attorneys to advocate for tenants during the litigation process. These reports were instrumental in halting impending evictions and securing home repairs for more than half of the participating households.

Figure 1. Room to Breathe program model. This model can be replicated without the large outlays of start-up capital required for most energy efficiency or healthy housing programs.



⁹ No demographic data was collected or reported for this program.

Project Findings

A review of all home assessments revealed patterns of inadequate housing conditions, potential health and safety hazards, and energy inefficiencies in participating homes.

The following were the most frequently reported issues, as indicated in Figure 2:

- All homes showed evidence of water damage, and SK Collaborative’s reports identified damage to the roofs, ceilings, floors, walls, and in some cases, foundations.
- 80% of homes exhibited damage to the building envelope, such as gaps, holes, and penetrations.
- 80% of homes had excessive dust, suspected microbial growth, and evidence of pests, such as roaches and rats.
- Half of homes had inadequate weatherstripping around doors and windows, leading to air leakage.
- 50% of homes had an air filter in poor condition at the central HVAC system.
- 30% of participating households had a missing air filter from the central HVAC system.
- 30% of households also reported that a child in the home suffered from respiratory issues.

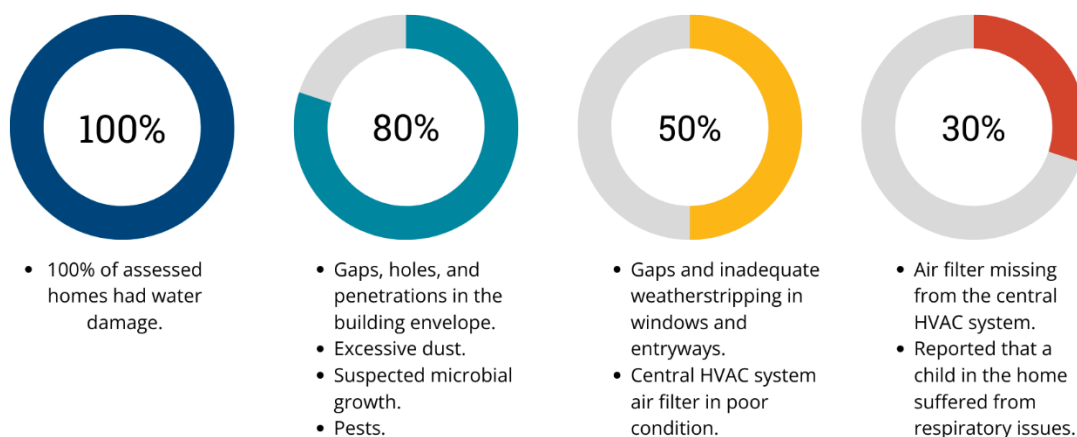


Figure 2. Home Assessment Results. This figure highlights the common housing quality challenges observed across participating households.

Research on the relationship between housing quality and health indicates that dampness, poor ventilation, and pests can trigger respiratory illness in both children and adults.¹⁰ Additionally, a leaky

¹⁰ “Energy Efficiency and Health,” American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy and Physicians for Social Responsibility, October 27, 2015. Available at: <https://www.aceee.org/fact-sheet/ee-and-health>

building envelope stresses the heating and cooling systems by allowing excessive amounts of outside air to enter the building. This leads to inefficiencies in the home's energy performance and drives up energy costs for residents. The upshot is that participants in this study faced both affordability and health risks derived from their housing.

Special Cases:

This section outlines the assessment findings from four households that were living under distressing circumstances at the time of inspection. These homes are labeled 1-4 to protect confidentiality and ensure clarity.

Fire Hazards

Fire hazards were identified in homes #1 and #2. At the time of inspection, both homes had been disconnected from their central HVAC systems, leaving them without heating or cooling. Home #1 had previously experienced an electrical fire.

In home #2, the natural gas service had been disconnected by property management because of safety concerns, leaving occupants without hot water. The furnace and water heater in home #2 were not safely isolated from the living space and did not meet the Georgia Energy Code requirement for fuel-burning appliances (R402.4.4). The GHC applies only to new construction but serves as guideline for home energy inspectors, and in this case, the CAZ layout was non-compliant.

Heat Stress

Tenants living in home #3 experienced pressing food insecurity and health issues resulting from a faulty refrigerator, a non-operational HVAC system, and improper cooling from a portable air conditioning unit. Residents reported that the refrigerator provided by their property management was defective and failed to keep food at an adequate temperature, which resulted in repeated food spoilage.

Additionally, the central HVAC system in this home was non-operational. While the property manager provided home #3 with a portable air conditioner, it did not effectively heat or cool the home. This heightened the residents' exposure to heat, with residents reporting that children in the home had experienced "fainting spells" due to high indoor temperatures during summer.

Indoor Air Quality

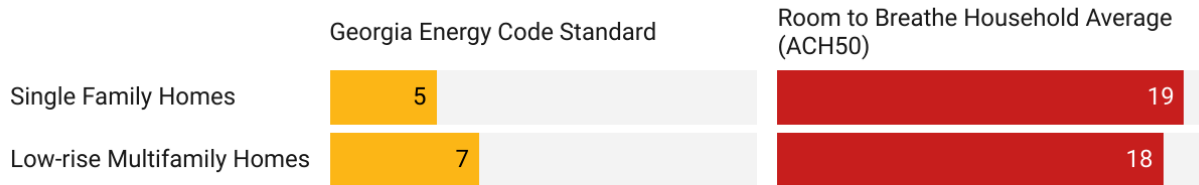
Home #4 had an HVAC system air filter that had not been replaced in six years. Air filters should be changed quarterly to keep ventilation equipment functioning properly and efficiently. Residential air filters capture and remove indoor air pollution from circulating through the air.

With a clogged air filter, airflow becomes restricted, and the system must work harder to circulate the same amount of air through the house, which increases energy consumption and costs, causes wear and tear on the equipment, and can lead to the HVAC system overheating.

Energy Efficiency Results:

SK Collaborative conducted envelope leakage tests, duct leakage tests, and, when applicable, combustion appliance zone (CAZ) tests for all participating households. These tests are the standard for assessing home energy building performance and indoor air quality.

Blower Door Test Results



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Figure 3. Blower door test results to determine envelope leakage indicate that most homes served by the program experienced significant levels of air leakage compared to the current standard in the Georgia Energy Code (GEC).

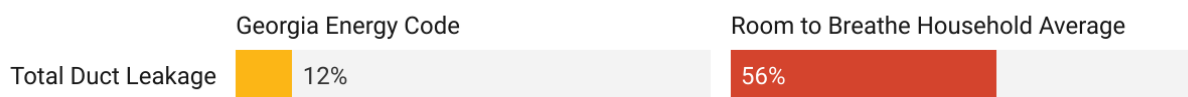
The current energy code in Georgia is based on the 2015 International Energy Conservation Code (IECC) with 2020 amendments. While this standard applies only to new construction, it can be used as a benchmark to evaluate the energy efficiency of existing residential buildings.

One way to assess building efficiency is through blower door testing, which measures how much air enters or leaves a building, providing an indication of the building envelope's performance. Blower door tests measure the total volume of air within the home that is exchanged with outdoor air when the building is pressurized to 50 pascals. The Georgia Energy Code (GEC) requires new single-family homes to have less than five air changes per hour at 50 pascals (ACH50) and new low-rise multifamily homes to have less than seven air changes per hour at 50 pascals (ACH50).¹¹

As indicated in Figure 3, single-family homes in this program were about four times leakier than the GEC standard, and low-rise multifamily homes were 2.5 times leakier. These results indicate that all assessed homes had significant levels of air leakage, and these energy inefficiencies can result in high energy bills. Although all the units in this program were built under an earlier standard, comparing the results to the current GEC requirement is a helpful marker of the general efficiency of each unit.

¹¹ *Georgia State Supplements and Amendments to the International Energy Conservation Code, 2015 Edition* (Atlanta: Georgia Department of Community Affairs, 2020). Available at: dca.ga.gov/sites/default/files/iecc_2020_amendments.pdf

Duct Leakage Test Results



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Figure 4. Duct test results. On average, more than half of all ventilated air was lost due to inefficiencies in the ductwork.

Duct tests assess the integrity of the HVAC ductwork and are essential for identifying inefficiencies that can drive up energy use and impact indoor air quality. The current GEC requires that new duct systems contain less than 6% total duct leakage.¹² The average duct leakage for assessed homes was 56%, meaning that over half of the ventilated air was lost.

CAZ tests ensure the safety of gas appliances by checking for issues like carbon monoxide leakage that can cause health risks to occupants. 30% of assessed households had natural gas appliances which could be tested for CO leakage. No carbon monoxide leakage was identified in any of the tested homes (0 ppm).

Lessons Learned and Future Work

In March 2024, Georgia lawmakers passed HB404 to improve the standard of habitability for tenants, which Governor Brian Kemp signed into law in April. The “Safe at Home Act,” which went into effect on July 1, 2024, establishes a “duty of habitability” that makes landlords and property owners responsible for providing habitable housing free from health and safety risks and requiring that they address all maintenance requests in a timely manner. Tenants will now have the right to assert a claim against a landlord if these needs are not met. Additionally, the legislation caps tenant security deposit fees to no more than two months of rent and requires at least three days of notice from a landlord prior to filing for eviction.¹³ While tenants still face critical barriers to addressing health and safety issues in their homes, these protections may alleviate some of the burdens experienced in this study and provide new protections for vulnerable tenants in Georgia.

Additionally, there has been expanded interest in providing energy assistance and weatherization for low-income residents across Atlanta to mitigate the impacts of inefficiencies and support critical home repairs. One example is the City of Atlanta’s [WeatherRise](#), a weatherization program focused on low-income residents. This program provides energy-efficient home upgrades to owner-occupied single-family homes in Atlanta’s most energy-burdened neighborhoods. Atlanta Housing and the Solar and

¹² *Georgia State Supplements and Amendments to the International Energy Conservation Code, 2015 Edition.*

¹³ “Georgia Passes New Tenant Protection Law for Renters, Establishing Minimum Habitability Standards and Maximum Security Deposit Amounts,” National Low Income Housing Coalition, May 20, 2024. Available at: <https://nlihc.org/resource/georgia-passes-new-tenant-protection-law-renters-establishing-minimum-habitability>.

Energy Loan Fund (SELF) have also developed a [loan program](#) for Atlanta landlords who want to make energy efficiency upgrades to their property. This program provides landlords with low-rate loans to finance upgrades through SELF, and qualifying landlords receive an energy efficiency rent boost (EERB) from Atlanta Housing to offset any costs that might fall to tenants and ensure that upgrades are not financed through increased rents.

There are also existing programs that renters can access to provide support for home energy and health upgrades. Georgia Power offers weatherization assistance through its [Energy Assistance for Savings and Efficiency \(EASE\)](#) program for [income-qualified](#) households. EASE provides energy efficiency assessments and home upgrades at no cost to renters. Local community action agencies have additional weatherization options for low-income renters and homeowners through the [Weatherization Assistance Program \(WAP\)](#). This program delivers free energy efficiency upgrades to qualified households, prioritizing families with children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Home weatherization improvements can result in energy savings, water savings, and non-energy benefits, such as improved health and safety for recipients.

While these programs provide key sources of support, renters still face key barriers in accessing assistance through these various streams. We believe that scaling the Room to Breathe model offers another path to address many of the existing barriers to energy and housing assistance that renters face. Through this study, we obtained granular housing quality data from 11 Atlanta households. The pilot results indicate that families facing eviction often experienced subpar or poor housing conditions, which exacerbated health problems and related issues like food insecurity. Yet 60% of the project participants were able to use their healthy home assessment results to advocate in their eviction defense case, halt an impending eviction, and obtain home repairs from their landlord. This outcome suggests that expanding the program offers a compelling model for filling gaps in the types of support available to renters in Atlanta and similar cities.

Research on best practices in healthy housing programs suggests that future iterations of this program could build on partnerships with healthcare and insurance providers. Housing is a social determinant of health, and programs based on medical-legal partnerships show promise in addressing housing conditions that place residents at risk for a range of conditions.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, the original model for this pilot involved supporting families who lived in rental households that were making it difficult for children to control their pediatric asthma due to asthma triggers in the home. The project team initially sought to identify households by partnering with one or more of Georgia's Care Management Organizations (CMOs), which administer Medicaid services. In this plan, CMOs would connect patients making repeated visits to the emergency room for pediatric asthma with the project team, who could then determine if this was being caused by asthma triggers in the home through home audits and then support these households in getting these conditions addressed. This approach was based on successful medical-legal partnership models, however, the myriad effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the healthcare sector prevented the project team from working through Georgia's CMOs, and we pivoted to intake clients through AVLF's existing

programming.¹⁴ Yet we invite healthcare organizations to consider involvement in housing quality improvements and believe that this offers a compelling additional layer to this kind of program, particularly given the energy-health nexus and role of housing as a key social determinant of health.¹⁵

Room to Breathe is an effective model built through cross-sector partnerships between AVLF, SK Collaborative, and SEEA. It can be replicated in other places without large outlays of start-up capital, often required for energy efficiency and healthy housing programs. We hope that this model can be expanded and replicated across other areas in the Southeast as an intervention to leverage resilience for vulnerable households. By implementing program models like this at scale, we can increase housing affordability, improve energy efficiency, and reduce the negative health outcomes associated with both.

¹⁴ See D. R. Taylor, B. A. Bernstein, E. Carroll, E. Oquendo, L. Peyton, and L. M. Pachter, “Keeping the Heat on for Children’s Health: A Successful Medical–Legal Partnership Initiative to Prevent Utility Shutoffs in Vulnerable Children,” *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* Vol. 26, No. 3 (2015): 676-685.

¹⁵ Diana Hernández and Eva Siegel, “Energy insecurity and its ill health effects: a community perspective on the energy-health nexus in New York City,” *Energy Research and Social Science* 47 (2019): 78-83.

Appendix: Program Intake Checklist

We used this intake checklist to screen households that requested legal aid for healthy housing issues, so that we could ensure we were providing health and energy audits to households with risk factors for health risks. These questions were part of a phone-based intake process conducted by AVL staff attorneys.

Name of Client:

Home Address:

Best Contact/Phone:

Landlord:

- How long have you lived in this home?
- What type of home do you live in? [multifamily, single-family, duplex]
- What is the primary fuel used for space heating? [natural gas, oil, electric, wood, don't know]
- What is the primary fuel used for water heating? [natural gas, oil, electric, wood, don't know]
- What is your primary means of cooling? [none, windows, central AC, window AC, fans]
- Does any part of your home ever feel extremely cold or hot?
- Do you pay your utility bills or are they included in your rent? [Confirm for all utilities - gas, electric, and water/sewer]
- If yes, around how much do you pay in electric, gas, and water/sewer bills each month? [Give range]
- Have you had new carpets, paint, floor refinishing, or other changes at your house in the past year?
- Does your home sometimes smell stuffy, stale, or musty?
- Have you had water damage, leaks, or a flood in your home?
- Does your home have mold growing anywhere?
- Are all your windows sealed shut or don't open?
- When was the last time you saw any evidence of pests in your home?
- Do you or other members of the household smoke tobacco cigarettes or e-cigarettes inside your home?
- What health issues are you experiencing, and do they seem worse in certain parts of your home?
- Is there any other information you think we should know?