

First Edition

HOW TO DEFEND YOUR HOME



American
Friends
Service
Committee



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INTRODUCTION



America is in the midst of a housing crisis.

In 2019, 1 in 4 households were at risk of eviction. There was not a single county in the country where a full-time worker earning minimum wage could afford a 2 bedroom apartment, and over half of all renters were cost-burdened, meaning they spent more than 30% of their monthly income on rent. Rapid gentrification was leading to the mass displacement of entire communities after decades of disinvestment, while large and wealthy developers benefitted from tax cuts and subsidies. And that was all before the pandemic.

Beginning in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns only exacerbated the existing crisis in housing affordability. The sudden loss of income led millions of people to fall behind on their rent or mortgages. An unprecedented surge in home prices (which increased a staggering 20% between 2020 and 2021) eliminated the chance of home ownership for most people. Most home buyers were unable to compete with all-cash offers from real estate investors. 1 in 5 homes were purchased by investors, many of them converted to rentals, causing rent to spike up to 30%. Large institutional investors are becoming known for sharp rent increases and aggressive eviction policies as they seek higher and higher yields for their clients. Combined with a weak patchwork of local and state protections for tenants (virtually non-existent in the south), the looming eviction crisis is a disaster waiting to happen.

The good news is that more and more of us are fed up, unwilling to stand back and let our homes, our communities, and our futures disappear, while the wealthiest among us amass ever more riches. People all over the country are organizing and fighting back to reclaim our homes and our dignity. What we know is that together we are stronger. When we fight, we win!



BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

The pages of this manual are meant to guide you through the steps of a campaign to defend your home. If you are delaing with an immediate housing issue (such as an eviction, lease termination, or severe living conditions), this manual is for you-- whether you rent or own your home. While this resource is not meant to be exhaustive, it will help you get the key components of your campaign started.

One important note before you proceed: Depending on your situation- If you live in an apartment complex or other multifamily housing, you may want to consider whether to launch your campaign as an individual or as a group.

Whether you're dealing with a slumlord, safety problems, or excessive fees and penalties, chances are, you're not the only one. Since your target in this situation would be the same (landlord or property management), it can be extremely beneficial to fight as a group. Remember, there is power in numbers. It is easy for a landlord to intimidate and overpower an individual, but it is more difficult for them to push back against a large group of tenants working together.

Ask yourself, is this a ME fight, or a WE fight?

Once you have decided whether to launch an individual or group campaign, the rest of the steps in this guide are the same.

HOW TO FIGHT

01

Do Your Research

Knowledge is power. Identifying where you are in the eviction process, and/or who you are fighting against to defend your home are crucial first steps to putting your campaign together.

02

Share Your Story

Transform shame into power! Sharing your story is the best way to mobilize people to support your fight. Remember, most people in this country have lost or know someone who has lost their home at some point in their lives. A simple, compelling narrative helps people understand the situation and feel connected to the cause.

03

Build Community Power

Landlords, banks, and developers often have lots of money and politicians at their disposal, but organized communities can still fight back together, no matter how powerful they may seem. If you're willing to commit to the fight, you'd be surprised to see how many others will stand with you. It doesn't take thousands of people and large organizations. Most home defense fights have been won by just a few dozen neighbors coming together.

04

Public Pressure & Escalation

Most banks and real estate companies spend billions of dollars every year on advertising to protect their image. By mobilizing people to take direct action that tarnishes that image, we build power that gives us the leverage we need to win.

05

Toward Victory & Beyond

This final stage of a campaign involves important steps that help make real tangible victory possible. This is where we leverage the power we've built and use it to negotiate for what we want.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

An important first step in defending your home is being able to identify the **problems** you are facing, **where** you might be in the eviction process, and **who** you are fighting. This will help you understand the timeline, targets, and tactics that you choose to use. Be sure to **gather as much documentation as you can find** regarding your home. Any and everything. You never know what might be useful.

What is your situation?

Understanding the challenges you are facing, and/or where you are in the eviction process is crucial to developing a timeline and knowing what your options are.

- **Are your living conditions threatening your health and safety?**
- **Have you been served with an official eviction notice from the court?**
- **How many months behind are you on rent?**

Check out this resource for more information on the eviction process and timeline in Georgia.



[Housing Justice League Eviction Defense Manual](https://www.housingjusticeleague.org/evictiondefense)

www.housingjusticeleague.org/evictiondefense

What are the details?

Once you've established what the problem is, and where you are in the process, now it's time to do a little research on the people who have the power to fix it. They will become the **target** of your home defense campaign.

- **Who owns your property?**
- **How many other tenants are impacted?**
- **Is it a company or an individual?**
- **Do they own multiple properties?**
- **Who is in charge of decision making?**
- **Where are they located?**
- **What other networks are they a part of?**
- **What is their contact information?**

Some pieces of information will be easier to find than others, and unfortunately there is no one path to finding it. Some resources to try include Google, the superior court, the tax assessor, and the Secretary of State. Sometimes, it can be as easy as asking your neighbor or property manager. Here are some links to help guide you.

Find out who owns the deed:
[Georgia Superior Court Clerks' Cooperative Authority](http://www.gsccca.org)



www.gsccca.org

Find out who owns a business:
[Georgia Secretary of State Business Search](http://ecorp.sos.ga.gov/BusinessSearch)



ecorp.sos.ga.gov/BusinessSearch

SHARING YOUR STORY

When's the last time a book made you laugh out loud? Or a movie made you ugly cry in public? (happens to the best of us). Chances are you empathized with compelling characters, related to a struggle integral to the plot, or were shocked by a twist you didn't see coming. **Bottom line: you were moved.** That's what good messaging is: **storytelling.** But when we're talking about messaging around a campaign to defend your home, we're upping the ante. We're not just vying for an Oscar or shooting to dominate The New York Times Bestsellers list. **We're asking people to take action.**

Given all the time constraints people already grapple with between school, work and family, moving people to take action can be a tough sell. Heck, even getting their attention can be a challenge. However, if your message is **concise, clear and compelling**, you will be able to draw people in and allow them to care, just like your favorite authors and directors.

Sharing your story publicly is the best way to mobilize people to support your campaign.

A good story will be short and to the point, and will pull at both people's head and heart strings. Some questions to ask yourself:

- *How long have you been in your home?*
- *What does your housing mean to you?*
- *How did you get into your current situation?*
- *Do you have children?*
- *What other connections do you have to your community?*

All of these things will help put your story and situation into context and help people to relate.



ONLINE PETITIONS

Petitions send a clear message: You are not alone in this fight.

Online petitions have become a powerful tool for organizing community support around a shared cause. We've created an easy to use tool that is a great way for you to get your story out there and build support for your campaign. In just a few steps, you can get your petition up and running and easily share with your friends and family to get as many signatures as you can.

To get started, use the template below to help craft a strong and powerful petition for your campaign.

When you are ready to post your petition, visit this link to access our housing justice petition platform:

housingjustice.controlshift.app



PETITION TITLE:

Get attention with a succinct headline for your petition. What's your petition trying to do? Try to make it short, urgent, and solution-oriented.

Example: Post Properties: Don't Evict the Jones Family

.....

.....

TARGET:

Who can make it happen? Who has the power to give you what you want? The more specific the better.

Example: David Stockert, CEO of Post Properties

.....

.....

DEMAND:

What needs to happen? What do you want them to do? Make sure your demand is clear and winnable.

Example: Don't evict the Jones family and work out a solution to keep them in their home.

.....

.....

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

This is where you write the main part of the story-- what you would say to someone if you wanted them to support your campaign?

.....

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.....

.....

TIPS FOR A STRONG PETITION:

- **Adding a picture is one of the most important things you can do.** It helps to put a face to your story and makes it more likely to be shared online using social media.
- **Keep it short and simple.** Clear sentences are the most persuasive. Try to keep it to 3-5 paragraphs.
- *Although it is tempting to lay out every detail of what you've been through, this will not strengthen your story. Explain how you have been wronged, but keep the extra commentary to a minimum.*
- *Direct your petition to the person who actually has the power to help you. Your landlord or the CEO of the property management company would be a good example.*
- *Try to answer questions like "Why did you choose this house?", "What does the neighborhood mean to you?" or think about specific memories that took place in the home.*
- *Stay strong. Resentful and cynical stabs might feel good in the short term, but it's not always the best way to mobilize people to be on your side.*
- *Quotes are powerful. Try to add a quote from a family member or neighbor about the value of your home.*

GETTING SIGNATURES:

Your petition is only as powerful as the number of signatures you get. Explain to people what you're doing and why it is important to you. You will be surprised how many people will support you if you ask. Here are some things you can do to share your petition:

- *Send the link to every email in your address book. Don't just ask them to sign it, but also to forward it on to their friends.*
- *Post your petition on social media. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are good places to start.*
- *Make phone calls and send text messages to people you know and ask them to sign.*
- *Print out a paper version of the petition and take it with you to church, school, or any other place where you think you could get a lot of signatures.*
- *Ask 10 people you know to get 10 signatures each from their friends*
- *Keep a copy of the petition in your purse or briefcase. You never know when you'll get into a conversation with someone who supports you.*

Once you have started getting signatures, you can use the petition platform's built in tools to email supporters and ask them to take action!

BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER

While online actions are important, they are no substitute for having on the ground support for your fight. After all, someone halfway around the country isn't going to be there if the sheriff knocks on your door. Start talking to people in your community about what you're doing and get their commitment to help you fight.

The first and easiest place to start is by mapping your own community and networks: your neighbors, family, and friends. What are some other places you could look for support? Are you a member of a church? Other organization? If so, make a point to go to the next gathering or meeting and ask people for their support. Make a list of as many people as you can and then think about how to bring them together. Luckily, by now you should already have your story put together and a petition up which is a really easy primer for your case.

Here are some ideas for ways to build community power to support your campaign:



Get Your Neighbors Involved

You can try distributing flyers around your complex, going door-to-door and having conversations, or striking up conversations in common areas or whenever possible.



Plan An Event

Plan an "Eviction Free Cookout" or a community event to draw people to. Offering food is always a good way to turn people out to hear what you have to say.



Put Up Signs

Putting up signs in your yard or on your door accomplishes two things- not only will it spur the curiosity of people driving or walking by, but it also sends a clear message to your landlord that you're not leaving without a fight. You don't need to be an artist or pay for professionally made signs. Some posterboard and markers, or a bed sheet and some spray paint will work just fine. Use simple slogans like "We're not leaving," or "Eviction Free Zone."



Engage with Elected Officials

It is important to learn how your local government works, and which elected officials have the power to help you achieve your goals. Find out when city council meetings happen, and sign up to speak about your fight. Encourage your friends and family to attend and support you. You can also urge your petition signers to contact elected officials on your behalf.

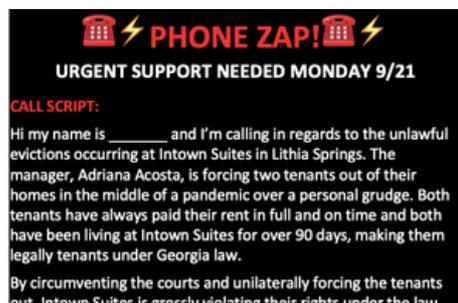
Make sure you have a clear ask of people. Can they share the petition with their friends and neighbors? Would they be willing to attend a protest or march?

PUBLIC PRESSURE

04

Many large landlords and real estate companies spend billions of dollars every year on advertising to protect their image. Even smaller or less well-known landlords prefer to maintain a good reputation. By mobilizing people to take direct action that tarnishes that reputation, we build power that gives us the leverage we need to win.

Each home defense campaign is different and requires different types of tactics and levels of escalation. Some are easier than others. Usually, when our target is not willing to immediately give in to our demands, we use escalation to try and persuade them that making a deal is a better bet for them in the long run. This can range from phone zaps and Twitter blasts to sit-ins and marches. As a general rule, you want to start small and build up. Here are some ideas of ways to escalate your campaign.



Phone Zap

A phone zap involves a group of people calling your target and urging them to honor your demand(s). They are an easy way to escalate and build power for your campaign. A few dozen phone calls are certain to get your target's attention. Make sure you find a direct phone number and write a short script to make it easy for people to take action.



Petition Delivery

The petition platform makes it easy to generate a PDF document of all the signatures you have collected so you can print and deliver them directly to your target. Get your allies together and have them accompany you.



Marches & Vigils

Marches and vigils are some of the most tried and true escalation tactics. Pick a location that is relevant to your campaign and to your opponent (like their office or other public location). Grab a megaphone and get some chants ready!



Press Conference

A press conference is a great way to build power for your campaign. You can get a lot of attention without a lot of people or risk involved.

These are just a few ideas to help you think about tactics for escalation. Some others include sit-ins, banner drops, and flash mobs. Get creative and try to have fun with it. Most importantly, make sure that it is public and that you are sharing the action far and wide.

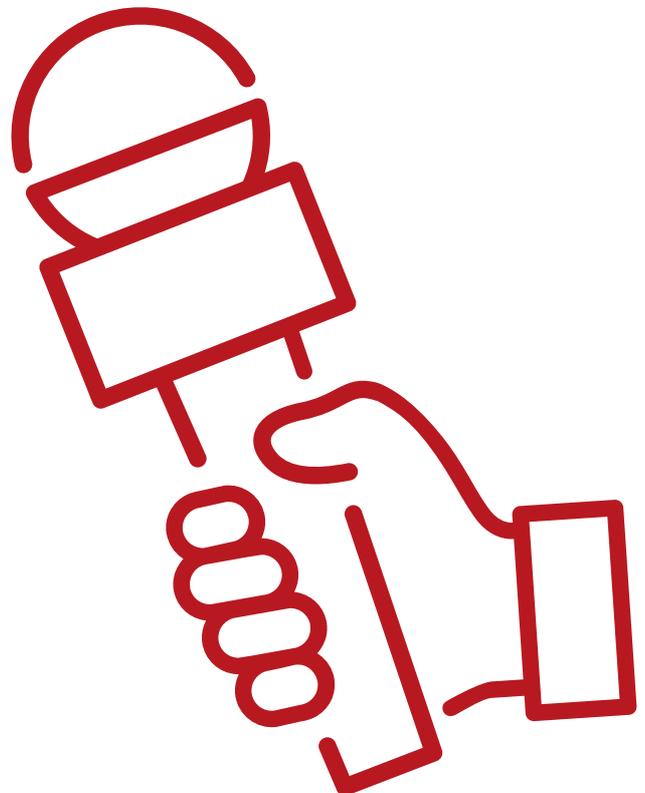
PRESS

Getting press coverage is a key factor in our public pressure model. Remember that we are going up against institutions that spend billions to make their brands seem good for the community. We want to make it in their best interest to make a deal that not only keeps you in your home, but builds community power for the next person, and inspires others to fight publicly for a place to call home. Many folks we've worked with have decided to fight for their home because they saw or read reports of others doing the same thing, and were inspired to join the fight. And while getting dozens of calls from your supporters will get your target's attention, a call from a media outlet asking for a statement about your situation will let them know you're serious.

There are two ways to get press to cover your campaign. You can invite them to cover an action, or you can hold a press conference at a specific location. Either way, you will want to put together a press release.

Make a list of all the local press outlets in your area, and find an email address for the newsdesk (you can generally find this on their website). If you are the first person in your town to do something like this, you have a really good chance of getting them to send someone out to cover your action or event.

Put together a press release to send out the night before. Remember that less is more. The most important line is the subject line. If your email was a movie, the subject line would be the preview- make it urgent and exciting enough for them to open. Double check logistical information and have it upfront and bold, including the phone number of a press contact- someone who can field calls from reporters.



SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 14, 2021

1

Neighbors to protest eviction of senior East Decatur resident from her home of 27 years

Press Advisory: Neighbors and community members will be coming together to support Ms. Juliet Brown, and protest against the gentrification of her neighborhood.

2

WHEN: Saturday 10/16/21 at 12:00 pm

WHERE: Cultivate Food and Coffee, 1952 Howell Mill Rd SW, Suite 200, Atlanta GA 30318

PRESS CONTACT: Amber Jones, (XXX) XXX-XXXX

3

4

Atlanta, GA — On Saturday, neighbors of a senior resident in East Decatur will protest outside Cultivate Food and Coffee to demand that the owner, Ryan Bowersox, hold his business partner, Dustin Maxwell, accountable. On Monday, Maxwell is taking his senior tenant, Ms. Juliet Brown, to court to evict her from her home of 27 years. Bowersox and Maxwell are lifelong friends, who sit together on the board of real estate investment firm Jetsetter Capital.

Ms. Brown's neighbors will be joined at the protest by Housing Justice League, which has been assisting in the fight to save Ms. Brown's home.

Ms. Brown, a Black elder of Decatur, is a beloved community member and has worked at a local public school serving food for 15 years. In the 27 years that she has lived in her home, Ms. Brown has paid what the house is worth with her rent at least two times over. Now her neighborhood is gentrifying, and Maxwell is refusing to renew the lease so he can sell the house for a profit. Ms. Brown is a single, low-income widow with chronic health issues, and she does not have the funds to move.

When Maxwell bought Ms. Brown's home 3 years ago, he promised her that he wanted her to stay. Now, he's going back on his word and is trying to kick her out just to make a profit. Maxwell has failed to do basic maintenance on Ms. Brown's home, including leaving her without heat for 3 months in the winter. Maxwell is a big time investor with over 400 rental units.

###

5

1. Begin with a headline that is brief, but descriptive.

2. Include the time, date and address of your event.

3. Include the name and phone number of someone that members of the press can reach out to with questions about the logistics of your event. This should be someone who will be free to answer their phone before and during the event.

4. Finally, add a more detailed summary of the event with some context about your situation. Try to keep this to just a couple hundred words. The full press release should be no more than one page.

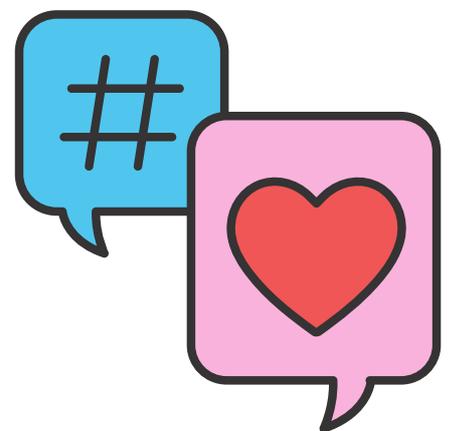
5. Adding three pound signs indicates the end of the press release.



BE YOUR OWN MEDIA

Today's technology allows us to create and be our own media. You can use social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram or Facebook to share your story with people around the world instantly. Look for online guides on how to effectively use **hashtags**, **memes**, and **videos** to get attention. You can also try to find social media accounts that are associated with your landlord, bank or property management company. Tag them in posts about your campaign, or leave comments about your campaign on their posts. Some big companies have entire departments dedicated to resolving issues that make them look bad online.

Make sure to have someone at every action and event to take pictures and video. Don't worry about production quality- the camera on your phone will work just fine. Most social media platforms allow you to broadcast live. The key is to get photos and videos out as soon as possible so that your landlord knows what you're up to.



TOWARD VICTORY & BEYOND

05

This final stage of a campaign involves important steps that help make real, tangible victory possible. This is where we leverage the power we've built and use it to negotiate for what we want.

NEGOTIATIONS

If you are able to call a lot of attention to your fight and put enough pressure on your landlord/bank/property manager, they might approach you to negotiate a solution to your situation. A few pointers to remember when negotiating for the win:

- Be careful about asking for specifics in the beginning. It's important to keep your demands simple and general. For example: "I want to make a deal that prevents an eviction."
- Develop a top line (what you REALLY want) and a bottom line (what you can live with). Establish this early on before a campaign is even launched and stick to it. In the negotiation session, lead with your top line, and don't budge past your bottom line.
- Always let the bank/property manager/landlord put their offer out first. It's best to force them to the table.
- Remember that when we are in the streets we make noise, but in face to face or phone negotiations, the name of the game is diplomacy and effectiveness. During negotiations we must be calm and civil to strike a deal that we all can live with.
- It's not a victory until paperwork is signed, and preferably looked at by a lawyer.

EVICITION DEFENSE



If all of your efforts so far haven't resulted in negotiations with your landlord, you may be facing eviction. Eviction defenses can be powerful actions, but it's important to think about what your expectations are before you decide to take that step. No amount of locks and barricades can keep them from taking your house if they really want it. The main goal of eviction defense is to buy time and mobilize people. Plan out a strategy that will get the largest number of people in your yard/unit as possible when the time comes. Have a list of phone numbers ready for both supporters and the media. Develop a plan to make sure those numbers are called when needed. Think about whether or not you're willing to be arrested, and if so prepare yourself for what that might be like.

CONCLUSION



***TOGETHER WE CAN WIN THIS FIGHT.
JOIN THE MOVEMENT TO DEFEND OUR HOMES.***

This manual was designed to help people dealing with immediate housing crises, whether they rent or own their homes. Another key piece of home defense, particularly for tenants, is connecting with neighbors to establish a tenant union. While this manual touches on core aspects of community organizing, it does not go in-depth about how to build and maintain a tenant union. For more information about tenant organizing, please visit the link below.

**Kansas City Tenants Union
Organizing Toolkit***
tinyurl.com/56shvpkm



*This guide was written for tenants in Missouri during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the tips it contains are applicable to all tenants, no matter the context or location.

Some information is easier to learn in a live setting. We have developed a "How to Defend Your Home" training based on this guide. If you would like to request an in-person or virtual training for your complex, neighborhood or organization, please email atlej@afsc.org

Our team is standing by to provide support to individuals who need help amplifying their campaigns. Due to the ongoing crisis, we don't have the resources to connect with everyone who reaches out. However, if you launch a campaign and gather at least 25 petition signatures on your own, we'll do our best to reach out and lend support.

If you'd like to volunteer to support others fighting for their homes, you can do so by visiting www.housingjusticeleague.org/take-action