

Putting Power Back into Community Hands



LEGAL SERVICES OF EASTERN MISSOURI

For more than a decade, a house on the 3600 block of Hydraulic Avenue stood empty—boarded windows, graffitied walls, and littered floors. Today, you'd never know. Fresh paint brightens the exterior, the spiral staircase has been restored, and new appliances have transformed it into a modern, two-family home. What once reminded neighbors of loss and disinvestment is now a place to call home.

But transforming the property into a community asset took more than a bucket of paint. This was the result of collaborative partnership between Legal Services of Eastern Missouri Neighborhood Advocacy program (LSEM) and Tower Grove Community Development Corporation (CDC). Over the last 10 years, Tower Grove CDC has invested in more than 20 vacant buildings on the blocks of 36–3700 Hydraulic and the neighboring 36–3700 blocks of Bamberger Avenue, alone. However, acquiring vacant property is often entangled in legal hurdles too complex to tackle solo. That's where LSEM steps in.

Staff attorney Brittany Hubbard explains that they cut through the red tape, representing neighborhoods in the courts to acquire abandoned and vacant properties and turn them into affordable housing. Residents are always at the helm, identifying problem properties, prioritizing cases, and setting expectations for developers. The goal is to create security, vibrancy, and economic opportunity in neighborhoods, without displacement—whether through transforming vacant properties or helping families stay in their home through estate planning and title clearance.

“We come in where code enforcement is not meeting the needs of residents,” said Hubbard. “For the neighborhood, it's empowering them to take legal action. We're a tool they can use to tackle the problem themselves.”

In 2020, Tower Grove CDC sought to acquire a vacant property on the 4000 block of Potomac Street but faced a series of legal issues: the owners had filed for bankruptcy, and the ownership was legally murky after the property had been improperly foreclosed for back taxes—twice. LSEM intervened on behalf of Tower Grove CDC by filing an abandonment lawsuit. The court awarded Tower Grove CDC the ability to rehabilitate and eventually secure ownership of the property, removing code violations and renovating with the community in mind.

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Through LSEM's free legal assistance and additional Neighborhood Preservation Act credits, Tower Grove CDC was able to renovate the property at a lower direct cost and pass the savings to the buyer. In four years, Tower Grove CDC transformed a house crumbling at the seams into a welcoming home for a new family in the neighborhood.

“Without Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, we don't have a path to legal support,” said Executive Director of Tower Grove CDC Sean Spencer. “These property owners will very irregularly come to the table to work out issues with these problem properties. The lawsuits force them to answer to the nuisances that they're bringing to our communities.”

While CDCs are the boots-on-the-ground support for both residents and the City in tackling vacancy,



Before (left) and after (right) photos of improvements to a home on the 4000 block of Potomac. Photos courtesy of Legal Services of Eastern Missouri.

Spencer adds that working with LSEM clears the legal pathways not only to address vacant properties but also to stabilize neighborhoods.

“Vacancy is one of the most destabilizing aspects of neighborhoods,” said Spencer. “Once you have vacant properties on a block and there aren’t additional investments coming behind it, that only spurs people’s fear of the market and their neighborhood. If we can provide more stable

neighborhoods, that’s how we create more places where people want to live.”

From the 4000 block of Potomac to neighborhoods across the area, one thing is clear: LSEM provides a lifeline for neighborhoods to shape the future of their community, one problem property at a time.

Learn more at <https://lsem.org/neighborhood-advocacy>

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