Episode 3 final

[00:00:00] **Mr. Vernell:** How old you think I am?

[00:00:05] **Adrian:** How old do I think you are?

[00:00:06] **Mr. Vernell:** Yeah, guess my age--

[00:00:08] **Adrian:** 25.

[00:00:09] **Mr. Vernell:** I wish I was!

[00:00:10] **Adrian:** You're 26?

[00:00:11] **Mr. Vernell:** No ma'am. I'm 70-- I'm 70-- I'm 78. 78 o' 79, one of 'em.

[00:00:18] **Adrian:** When I met Mr. Vernell, he was wearing a cabby hat over his curly white hair and a big smile that showed two gold teeth.

[00:00:26] **Mr. Vernell:** I'm a Gemini. Bo'n 1944.

[00:00:31] **Adrian:** He's had four strokes, which makes his speech a little hard to understand sometimes, but his eyes still sparkle. Mr. Vernell lives in the St. Paul's quadrant in downtown Norfolk.

How long have you been living in this neighborhood?

[00:00:47] **Mr. Vernell:** 35 years. I been livin' ov' there 35 years.

[00:00:52] **Adrian:** And when you look around where we're driving through, what has changed since, uh, 35 years ago?

[00:00:59] **Mr. Vernell:** [00:01:00] Ain't nothing changed but the weather. I seen so much stuff happ'n in this park. Yes ma'am. I been here long time.

[00:01:11] **Adrian:** Public housing communities used to be called parks, so older Norfolk residents like Mr. Vernell often refer to them that way. All three of the parks in St. Paul's quadrant look almost exactly the same --lines of brick apartments that face each other, two stories tall, each with matching windows, doors, and AC units.

It's a total of upwards of a thousand units and it's easy to get lost in the identical row houses, for an outsider like me. Vincent Hodges, a social worker and organizer, drove me and Mr. Vernell around all three of the public housing parks in the St. Paul's quadrant.

[00:01:50] **Vincent Hodges:** (voice fadesq in) ...when we roll through here. What do you think, Mr. Vernell? You think that's a good idea? Go over there?

[00:01:53] **Mr. Vernell:** Les' go through all of, les' see'em. See what's going on. All dese [00:02:00] parks!

[00:02:02] **Vincent Hodges:** Tidewater Garden, that whole area f-- floods out really bad.

[00:02:05] **Mr. Vernell:** Yes, it do.

[00:02:07] **Adrian:** St. Paul's is made up of three public housing communities, Young's Terrace, Calvert Square, and Tidewater Gardens. About three weeks before this recording, Tidewater was demolished.

[00:02:22] **Mr. Vernell:** I can't believe all this gone! I ain't been there for so long. I ain't know all these house gone, man. Tear'm down.

[00:02:30] **Vincent Hodges:** Yes, sir. Took them down just like that.

[00:02:31] **Mr. Vernell:** God knows, man!

[00:02:33] **Vincent Hodges:** I know. It's sad, right?

[00:02:34] **Mr. Vernell:** It sho' is. Dat's sad, man!

[00:02:38] **Adrian:** Tidewater Gardens had been in disrepair for decades as a result of intentional neglect and disinvestment in public housing from local, state, and national levels. It notoriously flooded the worst out of all of the public housing parks in St. Paul's, but flooding is the baseline here.

[00:02:56] **Vincent Hodges:** It's like two days after the flooding comes and you can get over [00:03:00] to the neighborhood and say, you okay? Were you able to get some sandbags? Yeah, it might be environmentalism, but it can't rain all the time, and then it's gunshots.

[00:03:09] **Adrian:** When it comes to safe, healthy, and affordable housing, residents of St. Paul's have more to deal with than just flooding. Environmental hazards are piled on top of a heap of other issues, violence, hunger, and the ever-present chance that their apartments will be destroy. For Mr. Vernell, it seemed like a shock to see his former home in Tidewater Gardens reduced to just a field marked with puddles of water from the previous night's rain.

Did you've family in Tidewater --friends in Tidewater?

[00:03:42] **Mr. Vernell:** Oh, yes, ma'am! I used to live o' heah.

(background musicw)

[00:03:48] **Adrian:** This is Wading Between Two Titans, a limited podcast series from the Repair Lab about sea level rise, housing and the history of race in coastal Norfolk, Virginia. [00:04:00] I am Adrian Wood. We spent the last two episodes looking at the deep and recent history of Norfolk, reviewing how the city government has worked hand in hand with the private housing market to create conditions that have led to poverty and housing scarcity in mostly Black neighborhoods.

Now we'll question some solutions imposed upon these same people, a cycle that repeats over time. Right now, real people are making decisions about where real people will and will not be able to live in Norfolk. In our last episode, we introduced Vision 2100, an urban planning document that divvies up Norfolk neighborhoods based on their value as future sites for home, work and play, given which parts of the city are projected to be underwater in the next 75 years. On the Vision 2100 map, many [00:05:00] formerly redlined neighborhoods like the St. Paul's quadrant are now being identified as ripe for gentrification. Meanwhile, wealthier, whiter areas along the coastline will become uninhabitable due to climate change- fueled sea level rise.

Vision 2100 follows a pattern called urban renewal. Urban renewal displaces poor people, usually people of color through construction projects that aim to increase property values and therefore income taxes for the city. They also clear areas to create space for economic drivers like Starbuckses and art galleries and stadiums that boost appeal on the real estate.

In this episode, we will hear how current processes of redevelopment in Norfolk echo historic urban renewal projects, projects rooted in white anxiety about poor Black people. [00:06:00] For residents like Mr. Vernell, who was born and raised in Norfolk, these processes are uncomfortably familiar.

(background music changes)

[00:06:12] **Adrian:** The St. Paul's redevelopment project will lead to the displacement of Black residents from the city's center to the benefit of real estate Investment and affluent newcomers to the city. The project embodies public-private partnership in the form of housing choice vouchers. You've probably heard of Section Eight, a program that uses government and private investment to help cover the cost of housing.

Section Eight vouchers are being offered to the displaced residents of St. Paul's as one tactic within an overall strategy called deconcentrating poverty.[00:07:00]

Deconcentrating poverty means forced relocation. In the case of St. Paul's, Deconcentrating poverty is also tied with government neglect of poor people and the demolition of brick and mortar public housing in favor of private housing that the public partially pays for. Deconcentrating poverty embraces the market and rejects taxpayer funded units.

This is a hot topic of conversation at Norfolk City Council meetings.

[00:07:37] **Chip Filer:** De-concentrate poverty

[00:07:39] **Unknown 1:** De-concentrate poverty

[00:07:40] **Unknown 2:** Deconcentrating poverty

[00:07:41] **Paul Riddick:** Deconcentrating poverty

[00:07:42] **Unknown 3:** Concentrating poverty

[00:07:44] **Unknown 5:** Deconcentrating poverty

[00:07:44] **Unknown 6:** Concentrated poverty

[00:07:46] **Unknown 7:** Deconcentrating poverty in Norfolk's public housing communities.

[00:07:49] **Unknown 8:** De-concentrate poverty? What about simply the reduction of it?

[00:07:53] **Monet Johnson:** If one more person says "Deconcentrating poverty" to me, I'm gonna lose it. Deconcentrating poverty, that whole concept is rooted in racism. [00:08:00]

[00:08:00] **Adrian:** Monét Johnson is the lead housing and environmental organizer for New Virginia Majority. During this interview, she had actually lost her voice due to the stress of her work. Monét often works advocating for residents of St. Paul's. As residents of public housing, their landlord is a government agency called the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, the N R H A.

[00:08:24] **Monet Johnson:** With everything that the N R H A does, I think they've sort of become like a one trick pony in which it's like, just displace people, we'll figure it out later.

[00:08:33] **Adrian:** Do you feel like the literal changing landscape of Norfolk with processes like sea level rise contribute to the N R H A working in that way?

[00:08:44] **Monet Johnson:** Um, no, I think that they've just innately been terrible to Black people, to be honest. I think this is just the newest excuse. And even if we were to talk about deconcentrating poverty, why is it always pick up the Black people and the poor people and move them somewhere else as opposed to making [00:09:00] where they live more desirable?

[00:09:02] **Adrian:** As an urban renewal project, deconcentrating poverty stretches back generations in Norfolk. Most of these projects have been stewarded by the N R H A. Established in 1940 as a housing authority, the N R H A would become the primary entity responsible for redevelopment and resulting displacement that is now notorious in the city of Norfolk.

(sinister background music) Let's review the NRHA's track record. 1955.

[00:09:36] **Paul Riddick:** Our mayor back then was named Fred Duckworth.

[00:09:39] **Adrian:** You might remember Paul Riddick, who was two months from retiring from Norfolk City Council at the time of this recording in September 2022. He was remembering his childhood in the fifties in the Atlantic City neighborhood. (nostalgic background music)

[00:09:55] **Paul Riddick:** It was a community. Working class Blacks slash [00:10:00] poor Blacks, working class whites slash poor whites.

[00:10:04] **Adrian:** Atlantic City doesn't exist anymore. Mayor Duckworth used the city's power of eminent domain to seize the entire neighborhood and handed over to the N R H A to be redeveloped.

[00:10:19] **Paul Riddick:** But records showed that he tore down 3,500 homes and apartments to keep Blacks from going to school over there. When Duckworth tore down Atlantic City, we were dispersed. Yeah. It was 9 27 West Olney Road. That was Atlantic City.

[00:10:42] **Joel Carlson:** (nostalgic music) Hello. (sudden shift to sinister background music stab) This is Tidewater Viewpoint. And I'm Joel Carlson. A quick look at Norfolk's plans for redevelopment of ...(fades out and under)

[00:10:50] **Adrian:** 1959.

[00:10:51] **Joel Carlson:** A downtown area...

[00:10:51] **Adrian:** The city of Norfolk was recognized by the US government for their slum clearance projects. Eloquent prayers and speeches inaugurated the [00:11:00] NRHA;s plan for redevelopment.

[00:11:02] **Announcer:** This, family, signalizes the start of that downtown project. I said it represents a kind of a D-Day. Fortunately, however, the attack we're now making is one that cannot be repelled.

[00:11:16] **Adrian:** An attack that cannot be repelled? What do you think they're attacking? What do they think they're attacking?

[00:11:25] **Announcer:** This is not a funeral. It is really resurrection. First, I would like to read a... (fades out and under)

[00:11:35] **Adrian:** 1968. The Scope Arena is built in downtown Norfolk when N R H A director Larry M. Cox mis appropriates funds from the Federal Housing Act. Funds that were intended to support construction of affordable housing in the city. Blocks of downtown, where many Black communities were rooted, are razed.

[00:11:58] **Joel Carlson:** (fading in) ... with Mr. Lawrence M. [00:12:00] Cox, the executive director of the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority. The slums, as I understand it, are concentrated in the area that is planned for redevelopment in this project. Is that right?

[00:12:10] **Larry Cox:** That's correct. No land in this area will go back to residential uses. (construction sounds in background -- hammering) And this will rid the city of a large segment of blight.

[00:12:20] **Adrian:** (sinister background music) 1969. Perhaps the NRHA's most notorious hit: the redevelopment of Ghent.

[00:12:29] **Paul Riddick:** Before they decided to redevelop Ghent, they sold those homes in Ghent while they had a, a lifespan or maybe four or five years, to Blacks. Well, then they decided-- meaning the redevelopment housing authority, and the shadow government-- they started going in and buying these homes, telling the Blacks that they gonna be able to come back-- this is revelopment housin' 'thority-- gonna be able to come back. [00:13:00] Well, they could go back, but they weren't told that they going to need 300 or $350,000 to go back.

[00:13:07] **Adrian:** Black residents who left East Gent were not able to return to their homes because they couldn't afford the new houses in the area. The housing authority didn't really care where they ended up, and many families were pushed into neighborhoods with a higher concentration of poverty.

[00:13:24] **Vincent Hodges:** (slow keyboard chords) (car sounds) They got all kinds of stuff in here for you to eat.

[00:13:32] **Mr. Vernell:** Oh, okay.

[00:13:33] **Adrian:** When I in Ghent with Mr. Vernell and Vince, we stopped again for lunch.

[00:13:39] **Vincent Hodges:** Mr. Vernell. I know a place where-- you like meatloaf? (laughs) (pause)

[00:13:42] **Adrian:** (laughs)

[00:13:45] **Mr. Vernell:** I cain't complain, but I ain't no meatloaf person.

[00:13:47] **Vincent Hodges:** Well, do you like club sandwiches?

[00:13:48] **Mr. Vernell:** Yep, sound-- sandwich, good!

[00:13:49] **Vincent Hodges:** Okay, good. I got you then. (car passes)

[00:13:51] **Mr. Vernell:** Oh yeah. I u'ed to live ova heah. Back in da days, 1955 I was livin' in Ghent.

[00:13:58] **Adrian:** And did you lived with your [00:14:00] family?

[00:14:00] **Mr. Vernell:** Oh yessuh, my mom and dad and my sister an' brother. Dem tearin' it down-- like they get all these big houses. That's what it did.

[00:14:08] **Adrian:** Mr. Vernell used to live in Ghent with his family. They all got displaced when the N R H A redeveloped it. Just like their neighbors, Mr. Vernell and his family were told that they would be able to come back to Ghent. But they weren't told that they wouldn't be able to afford the steep prices on the fancy new houses in the redevelopment.

Residents of Tidewater Gardens are facing a similar offer from the N R H A-- one that eerily echoes what happened to Mr. Vernell and his family decades ago.

[00:14:34] **Mr. Vernell:** Yep!

[00:14:34] **Vincent Hodges:** Came here, tore everything down, kicked Black folks out.

[00:14:37] **Mr. Vernell:** Sho' did! Tol' us we could move back. Tol' us we'd move back, da rent too high. Tol' us we could come back, (sad laugh).

[00:14:46] **Vincent Hodges:** And that's kind of the same thing that they're telling these folks is like, yeah, you have a right to return. If you can afford the rent.

[00:14:50] **Mr. Vernell:** Yeah, sho' did!

[00:14:51] **Vincent Hodges:** If you can afford the rent.

[00:14:52] **Mr. Vernell:** Nope, sho' couldn. Dey knew what dey was doin'.

(Vincent mumbles something unintelligible)

[00:14:58] **Adrian:** They knew what they were [00:15:00] doing. (slightly more assertive keyboard chords)

The city first announced plans to redevelop the St. Paul's quadrant in the 90s, but it took 30 years for them to get the funding to go through with it. Since then, residents have had to carry the weight of potential displacement in the back of their minds. I got to speak to Monét Johnson, the housing and environmental Advocate from New Virginia Majority, on a day when she was feeling better and had her voice back. This is what she told me.

[00:15:31] **Monet Johnson:** The demolition of Tidewater Gardens was sort of like an urban legend for a long time. So I think there's a lot of, "I can't believe it's actually happening." There was just always this air of, you know, "They're gonna tear this down. Downtown's getting too nice, they're gonna tear this down."

[00:15:43] **Adrian:** That kind of latent worry is rooted in the history of how urban renewal projects have shaped Norfolk to assuage white anxiety, and it takes a toll on people. It showed up in public comments at the City Council meeting when the demolition was officially [00:16:00] announced in January, 2018.

This is Deborah Ross, a resident of Tidewater Gardens at the time.

[00:16:07] **Deborah Ross:** In the past, when changes came, you tore down. Things happened. You lef' a lot of people homeless. We know we going around in circle, up and down. One minute you gonna tear it down, one min' you're not. We ready to move forward. Either you're gonna do it, make your decision, do it. Just understand we are somewhere who need somewhere to stay at. (keyboard chords)

[00:16:27] **Monet Johnson:** What was once, "They're gonna tear this down," is like, "*They are going to tear this down.* They have the money, they've made the . Time. They're sending people letters. They're tearing this down." You know, it's hard to shift from like, yeah, they're always saying that to, no, it's happening where a lot of people that notice came with, like, "Get out in 120 days."

[00:16:53] **Adrian:** (dramatic background music) Once the neighborhood is torn down, what happens to the people who used to live there? The idea from the housing [00:17:00] authority and the city is this. Those people will move into nicer neighborhoods using Section Eight vouchers to cover most of their rent. The goal is to create more mixed income communities. This is a popular goal among both residents and City Council. Residents of St. Paul's have expressed their desire for mixed income communities in public hearings. But the strategy of deconcentrating poverty is what hurts.

[00:17:33] **Monet Johnson:** Their theory is that the issue is not that people have actual systemic roadblocks to where they wanna be. It's just that they're around too many like-minded people. And so if we break them up, they'll just magically get into better situations.

[00:17:48] **Adrian:** Deconcentrating poverty as a strategy doesn't necessarily take into account the kinship networks that support the lives of people living in Young's [00:18:00] Terrace, Calvert Square, and formerly Tidewater Gardens. For example, Mr. Vernell has eight family members who also live in Young's Terrace. That doesn't count the dozens of friends, chosen family and neighbors who support him and each other in webs of care that are critical to their survival and central to their lives. People who walk him to the door, who give him a ride to the store, check in on him, even come play dominoes with him, bring him food.

This kind of network isn't necessarily special, but it is exactly what's being targeted by proponents of deconcentrating poverty, unconventional family structures that don't fit the male breadwinner nuclear family mold.

(simple background music, car sounds) As we drove out of Young's Terrace, Mr. Vernell asked that we pause and roll down the window so he could say hi to his chosen daughter.

[00:18:56] **Mr. Vernell:** Roll the window down a minute, I'm gon' holla at my [00:19:00] daughlah -- hey, dahlin'!

[00:19:01] **Unknown 9:** (shouting from sidewalk) Mr. Vernell!

[00:19:01] **Mr. Vernell:** (shouting) Hey, dahlin'!

[00:19:02] **Unknown 9:** Luh' you, Mr. Vernell!!

[00:19:03] **Mr. Vernell:** I love you, dahlin'-- (choking a little)! That's my daughter right there, I wanted to holla at... (voice fades under and continues under Adrian)

[00:19:05] **Adrian:** Just one of many folks Mr. Vernell waved to or said hi to as we drove through the neighborhoods. But this time, in the same breath-- in the same minute, Mr. Vernell pointed out a memorial that his daughter was standing next to.

[00:19:19] **Mr. Vernell:** Somebody got killed right there. See on the thing. On the fence.

[00:19:22] **Vincent Hodges:** That's where the five women were murdered last year.

[00:19:23] **Mr. Vernell:** Yeah. Tal'mbout murdered, the five women--

[00:19:25] **Vincent Hodges:** Or the, uh, it was three women, women that died.

[00:19:28] **Mr. Vernell:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:19:28] **Vincent Hodges:** But five women were shot.

[00:19:30] **Mr. Vernell:** Yeah. Right theah.

[00:19:31] **Vincent Hodges:** Uh,

[00:19:32] **Adrian:** Yeah.

[00:19:32] **Mr. Vernell:** Yeah.

[00:19:32] **Vincent Hodges:** Two of them were part of the LGBT--

[00:19:34] **Mr. Vernell:** Oh le' take the picture with your camera.

[00:19:35] **Adrian:** You can hear it in his voice.

[00:19:37] **Mr. Vernell:** Oh, take the picture.

[00:19:37] **Adrian:** Take a picture of it?

This is important. He wants to make sure that we see it. Acknowledge what the memorial means and remember it. Kinship networks like Mr. Vernell's exist alongside both extreme and mundane tragedies that punctuate the daily lives of residents. There's gun violence that has [00:20:00] gotten worse since the beginning of the redevelopment project. It's also challenging for residents to access fresh and healthy food at prices they can afford. Residents who still live in Young's Terrace and Calvert Square don't receive adequate attention for maintenance requests, and some of the maintenance issues are severe.

[00:20:18] **Monet Johnson:** So this is not even like maintenance like, "Oh, my screen door is broken." Like these are serious issues that people don't care about. People's bathrooms, they're all upstairs, so people's toilets are leaking onto the dishes downstairs on their dish racks. People don't care about that. It's a lot of pretty egregious stuff.

[00:20:38] **Adrian:** The demands residents and advocates are making are pretty reasonable.

[00:20:42] **Monet Johnson:** Safe, healthy and dignified housing.

I wish they would've started building. I think if I can change one thing, it was you should have started building. So, move people one time.

[00:20:52] **Adrian:** It's not even, "Don't move us. We're not going." It's just, "Give us somewhere to go, that's worth going to." [00:21:00]

Residents of the St. Paul's quadrant cannot stay there the way that it is, that much is clear. But the mode of redevelopment isn't just about deconcentrating poverty. It also reinforces persistent patterns of segregation and environmental racism across the city, pushing Black people out of the places that are slated to receive the most protection from sea level rise.

Tidewater Gardens floods --flooded --the worst out of all of the public housing communities, because it was built over top of a filled in riverbed.

Think Tidewater Park flooded the worst out of the three --

[00:21:43] **Mr. Vernell:** Oh, yes, it do! Yeah, dis park the worst. This park here the wors'n' any o' 'em. Cause it's on 'e sea level, dis park here. Thas' wha -- this one, make right close to da river.

Hmm.

That's why dey get flooded mo'.

[00:21:56] **Adrian:** With the redevelopment, 44 acres of what was [00:22:00] formerly Tidewater Gardens will receive a new stormwater system and a blueway that restores that river that was originally filled in. (background musicq)

The blueway is a flooding protection that aligns with and emerges partially from the Vision 2100.

St. Paul's is in the red zone on Vision 2100's map, which means that it's slated to receive some of the most intensive protections the city offers through their infrastructure projects. Before the St. Paul's redevelopment, the red zone on the Vision 2100 map was demographically proportionate in terms of race to the city of Norfolk as a whole, which means about 60% white, 40% Black. After the redevelopment, accounting for the assumed removal of the Black population of St. Paul's, the red zone becomes grossly, disproportionately white.

The imaginary [00:23:00] crowds who will flock to the market rate apartments at the new St. Paul's will receive the best of Norfolk's infrastructure protection from sea level rise. Not the families who suffered through the worst of the flooding, the demolition, or the multiple forced moves from unit to. Because deconcentrating poverty disregards those family's experiences.

In 2020, the plan for St. Paul's was to demolish all three public housing communities upwards of a thousand units. But that plan changed after January, 2021, when Monét Johnson was a plaintiff with the New Virginia Majority in a lawsuit against the N R H A advocating for St. Paul's residents who were being displaced by the redevelopment.

[00:23:49] **Monet Johnson:** Yeah, so that was us. That was our community group, and I think it's considered like the largest discrimination lawsuit that the city of Norfolk has faced. All of the residents of St. Paul's are Black [00:24:00] people. It's like upwards of 95% African American over there. The lawsuit was about like the right to return, the right to stay in Norfolk as a Black resident and not be threatened because the land you're on is now considered valuable.

[00:24:14] **Adrian:** This lawsuit, filed and decided in 2021, alleged that the N R H A was perpetuating segregation through their historic urban renewal rearrangements of Norfolk. The city, through the N R H A, was forced to pay the residents of St. Paul's a cumulative total of $200,000, and set aside an additional 41 units at the market rate apartment complex across the street from St. Paul's. It's called Market Heights.

The other thing that the lawsuit did is stop the other two communities in St. Paul's quadrant from being redeveloped, at least for now.

[00:24:56] **Monet Johnson:** There is something in there that basically says, "And you can't turn around and do this [00:25:00] again. You need to look into the effects of what you've done and try to make equitable decisions for the other communities." and somehow the time span of five years is on that. So the city went from, "We're gonna tear down Tidewater Gardens, then we're goin' to Young's Terrace, then we're goin' to Calvert Square," to very specific conversations about, "We're not tearing all of this down, we're only tearing down Tidewater Gardens." But I think that the writing is on the wall.

[00:25:26] **Adrian:** But that also means that Young's Terrace and Calvert Square will not be receiving the new drainage system. Or the fancy blueway that keeps their neighborhoods dry. They'll be protected from storm surges by the downtown floodwall, but they're gonna keep flooding.

(slow background keyboard music; restaurant sounds) Do you remember a time when it flooded really bad?

[00:25:51] **Mr. Vernell:** Oh, yes ma'am.

[00:25:53] **Adrian:** When was the last time that happened?

[00:25:55] **Mr. Vernell:** Three months ago. Real bad. Now I do. Flooded, couldn't get out.

[00:25:59] **Adrian:** How long could [00:26:00] you not get outta the house?

[00:26:01] **Mr. Vernell:** A day an' a half. Had to wait to the water to go down.

[00:26:06] **Adrian:** Water makes existing problems worse. The city announced to residents that the demolition of Tidewater Gardens had released loose asbestos. Residents who were still living in Tidewater units at the time of the demolition were exposed to it before they got moved out. This is Vincent Hodges.

[00:26:27] **Vincent Hodges:** Adrian, like they're doing construction across the street from one of my tenants, like right there. I mean construction right there. Open asbestos, *right there*. My dad died o' mesothelioma, due to dealing with asbestos on naval ships. (pause, sighw) We know it's harmful. At minimum. And we know we're moving it. At minimum. It's exacerbated when rains come. We had a series of rains a couple of weeks ago. You could drive into Tidewater Gardens and the air smelled different, and I mean, noticeably different. Chemicals.[00:27:00] *Something.*

Water is taken care of there at the rate of convenient displacement. Water is taken care of at the speed of redevelopment.

[00:27:08] **Adrian:** The speed of redevelopment is negotiated by the powers that plan it: the City Council and the N R H A. Their relationship allows both to avoid accountability.

[00:27:18] **Monet Johnson:** It's like the meme of the two Spider-Men pointing at each other. That's my job. I go to the city, I'm like, "Can you help these people?" They're like, "Ask the N R H A." I go to the N R H A. I'm like, "Hey, can you help these people?" They're like, "Ask the city."

[00:27:31] **Adrian:** As of Fall 2022, 618 low income units in chronically flooding Tidewater Gardens have been demolished, to be replaced with a total of 714 brand new units on site. For the families that Monét is trying to help, the ones that are being moved out due to the redevelopment, choices are limited. About half signed up to return to the small percentage of new [00:28:00] units that are set aside for former residents. The idea is that they'll live somewhere else until the new units are built, then come back.

The N R H A offers housing choice vouchers to facilitate this process. They're also known as Section Eight vouchers. Section eight is the main tactic within the strategy of deconcentrating poverty. The vouchers are intended to supplement rent payments for low income families. About a third of the new units are voucher eligible.

[00:28:29] **Monet Johnson:** The last time I checked the waiting list to get a voucher, not even the waiting list of people with a voucher at apartment complexes, is about 7,800 people. It was closed for a while up until at least March, April-ish, if I'm not mistaken. They opened it for three days and 4,000 new families were on the list. It's closed again, so we're at like a 7,800 ish.

[00:28:56] **Adrian:** Most families tried to apply for the vouchers, but only a few [00:29:00] were able to get them. Even if they made it to the top of the 7,800-applicant-long wait list, got a voucher and applied for a rental, the hoops to jump through just get higher and narrow.

And, although it is technically illegal, landlords still discriminate against rental applicants using vouchers. In fact, they always could. When Section Eight became the default tactic for deconcentrating poverty, there were no protections alongside it to prevent discrimination.

It's just the logic of the housing market, which if you heard episode two you'll recall is deeply flawed and profoundly racist logic. Vincent Hodges has seen the Section Eight system from the inside, alongside some of the residents that he assists.

[00:29:54] **Vincent Hodges:** The voucher system is just so, so insultingly, insufficient. And then the injustices that [00:30:00] tenants are facing for it-- because they're not being considered for housing. They're showing up with, you know, Section Eight tattooed all over their application. People are having to apply with other names, you know, anglicized names to try to get approval. It's crazy.

[00:30:13] **Adrian:** This kind of thing happens all the time. If a landlord wants to reject an applicant because they have Section eight support, they'll find a way. Whether it's just making it a hassle for them to get to the rental office or adding extra paperwork or finding something in their record to justify the rejection.

If it's so hard to get a voucher, where, then, do displaced families go?

[00:30:40] **Monet Johnson:** Oh, so it depends on the family. More likely than not, not Norfolk. Other families have gone to other N R H A neighborhoods with their vouchers where they're not subjected to necessarily the impending demolition, but the same poor housing conditions, mold, all of that good stuff.

There are people who have moved as far as Oklahoma. [00:31:00] And then there are people who just were scared by the continuous notices from the city and were like, I gotta get outta here. (sounds of destruction and demolitionw)

From before the first building was torn down or vacated, they were informed by us, by residents, by others, that there's not gonna be a place to go with these vouchers. They ignored that when they started tearing things down. They ignored it when they started moving people from one part of a neighborhood to another part because they couldn't find places to go, they ignored it. And now that half the community is gone and there's only a few families who are subjected to some really, really horrible conditions and are still saying, I don't necessarily have anywhere to go, it's still being ignored.

[00:31:44] **Adrian:** For people still living in poverty in the St. Paul's quadrant, the high-handed interest in deconcentrating them has led to some really painful circumstances. On our ride together, Mr. Vernell [00:32:00] rolled down his window and said hi to almost everyone we passed. There was one friend who he hadn't seen in quite a while.

[00:32:09] **Mr. Vernell:** Shoday! Happ'ned to you, man? Why you'n't been 'round de house?

[00:32:22] **Adrian:** The man was a white-haired elder like Mr. Vernell. He was sitting on some pallets next to a general store. He seemed a little out of it. (slow keyboard background musicw) It took him a while to recognize Mr. Vernell and to wave back, and he didn't answer when Mr. Vernell asked him what had happened to him. (deep breathe) I wonder if he used to be Mr. Vernell's neighbor.

This is how deconcentrating poverty actually works. There are no updates. There's no reports. It's confusing, [00:33:00] and the next thing you know, someone who you used to see every day-- who felt like family to you-- you see sitting outside of the store and they don't look the same. It's a slow unraveling of the web that was holding you all together.

Deconcentrating poverty doesn't resolve poverty. It just disperses people and makes them less noticeable. Networks of kinship that had offered some kinds of regulation and stability to people get unraveled through processes like these. And the cycle continues because the system continues unless we choose a path that aims to create conditions in which poverty can be healed from, rather than rendering the poor, invisible, and isolated (background keyboard music continuesq) [00:34:00]

In the next episode, we'll look at a really different public housing community in Norfolk called Grandy Village, and its neighbor, Chesterfield Heights. A major grant finally supported some large scale landscaping work that protects a majority Black, working class neighborhood from flooding due to sea level rise.

But residents there have lingering questions about who exactly this was for.

[00:34:30] **Johnny Finn:** Well, the Ohio Creek project is helping a, a majority Black neighborhood. It is. But it's also, it has the perverse effect of making the land more gentrifiable.

[00:34:44] **Paul Riddick:** All of the homes that are being bought over there now are being bought by whites that are coming back to Chesapeake Heights.

[00:34:51] **April Hatfield:** I feel like there's going to be some type of buffoonery that they're gonna come up with, that is going to almost [00:35:00] resemble the St. Paul's Quadrant, that is going to probably force a lot of the residents out.

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Thanks for listening.