

THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

# Tangled Titles in Philadelphia

## Using data to inform urban problem solving

---

July 22, 2022 | Baltimore Data ~~Day~~ Week

[pewtrusts.org](https://pewtrusts.org)

# Philadelphia Research and Policy Initiative

The Pew Charitable Trusts

---



Photo: Lexey Swall

Pew's Philadelphia research and policy initiative seeks to inform discussions on important issues facing the city and the region and to provide policymakers and other decision-makers with data, analysis, and examples of promising practices that may help them address key challenges.

## What is a tangled title?

---

“Tangled Title” describes a situation in which the deed to a home bears the name of someone other than the apparent owner

Photo: Lexey Swall



## Key terms

---

**Title:** the legal right to ownership of a property

**Deed:** a formal written document that serves as proof of ownership

**Record owner:** the person named on the deed recorded with the Department of Records

**Probate:** The legal process of administering an estate after someone dies.

# Tangled Titles in Philadelphia

## Previous reports

A report from THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS | Nov 2017



### Philadelphia's Poor

Who they are, where they live, and how that has changed

A report from THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS | May 2016



### Philadelphia's Changing Neighborhoods

Gentrification and other shifts since 2000

Report THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS | Sept 2020

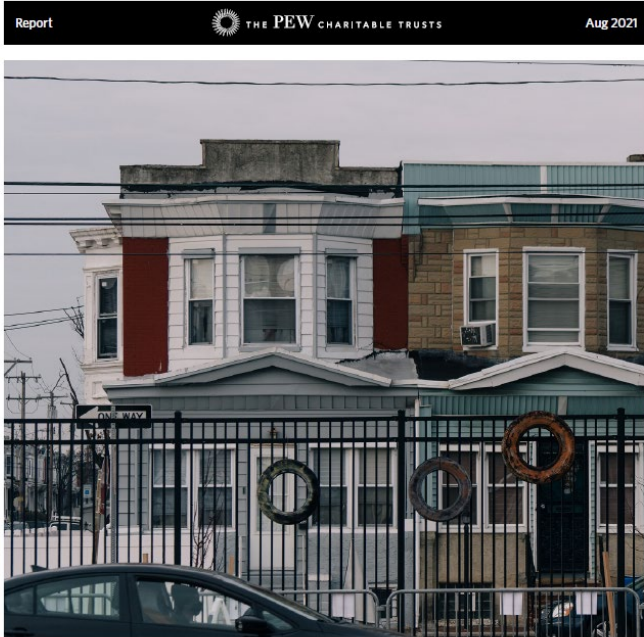


### The State of Housing Affordability in Philadelphia

Who's cost-burdened—and why



# How 'Tangled Titles' Affect Philadelphia (August 2021)



## Contents

- The Extent of Tangled Titles in Philadelphia
- How a Title Gets Tangled
- How Tangled Titles Put Owners and the Community at Risk
- How to Remedy a Tangled Title
- How individuals and families can prevent tangled titles
- Estimating Tangled Titles

## How 'Tangled Titles' Affect Philadelphia: Key Findings

---

- At least 10,407 tangled titles (2% of residential properties) – collectively worth over \$1.1 billion.
- North, West, and Southwest Philadelphia account for more than half of the city's tangled titles, but only about a third of all residential properties.
- The neighborhoods most affected tend to be those with relatively low housing values, low incomes, and high poverty rates.
- The hardest-hit areas are predominantly Black; the least affected are majority White.
- Without assistance, remedying a tangled title can cost thousands – an estimated \$9,200 for the median property in our analysis.

## How tangled titles put owners and the community at risk

---

### **Risk to wealth building**

Cannot borrow against the property or pass on to heirs

### **Risk of deterioration**

Cannot participate in city home repair programs or get homeowners insurance

### **Risk of foreclosure**

Obstacles to entering payment agreements with city or water department

### **Risk of deed theft**

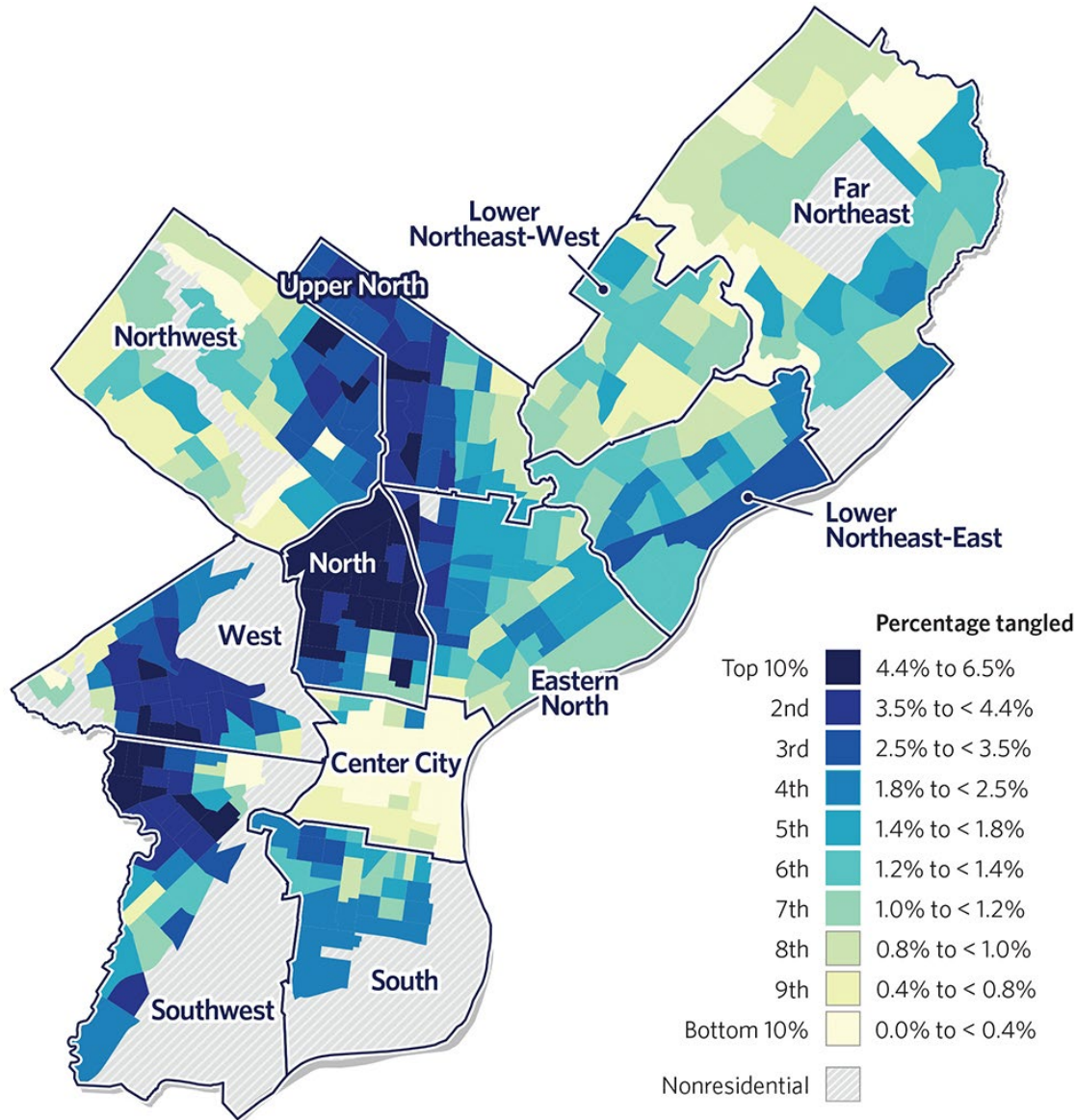
Deceased records owners are more vulnerable to property theft

### **Risk to neighborhood quality & stability**

Potential for abandonment, building collapse



## The extent of tangled titles in Philadelphia



- Across the City, an average of 2 percent of residential properties are affected.
- In the most affected areas, tangled titles comprise as much as 6.5 percent of residential properties.

# Visualizing the extent of tangled titles

## 1000 properties

---

# Visualizing the extent of tangled titles

1000 properties: **two percent tangled** (citywide average)



Visual for illustrative purposes only



# Visualizing the extent of tangled titles

1000 properties: **six percent tangled** (most affected areas)



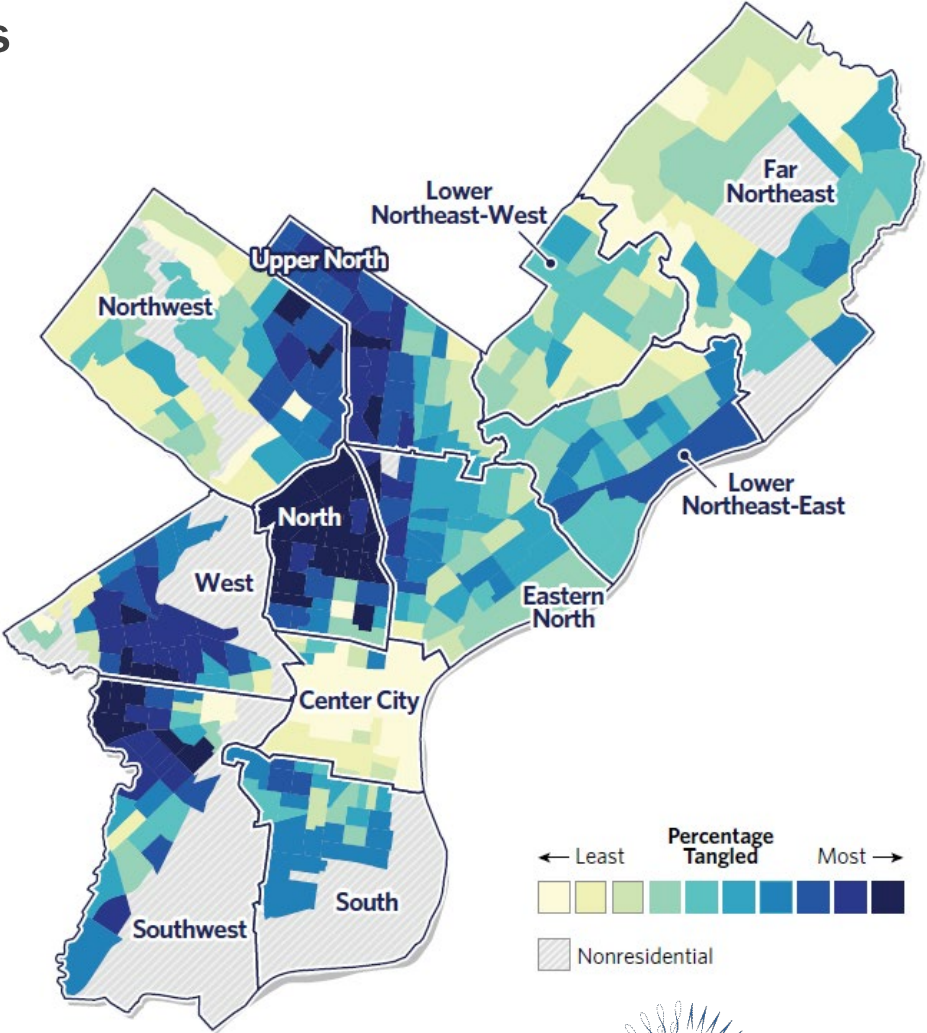
Visual for illustrative purposes only

# Tangled Titles in Philadelphia

## Neighborhood characteristics: financial

Characteristics of Census Tracts by Presence of Tangled Titles

	Tracts	Percentage tangled	Median house assessed value per square foot	Median household income	Poverty rate
	Top 10%	4.4% to 6.5%	\$40	\$28,636	34%
	2nd	3.5% to < 4.4%	\$57	\$30,426	32%
	3rd	2.5% to < 3.5%	\$78	\$33,533	31%
	4th	1.8% to < 2.5%	\$103	\$42,692	25%
	5th	1.4% to < 1.8%	\$122	\$46,907	23%
	6th	1.2% to < 1.4%	\$118	\$54,340	20%
	7th	1.0% to < 1.2%	\$120	\$44,233	24%
	8th	0.8% to < 1.0%	\$132	\$54,920	21%
	9th	0.4% to < 0.8%	\$154	\$66,676	17%
	Bottom 10%	0.0% to < 0.4%	\$294	\$75,098	17%
	Philadelphia	0.0% to 6.5%	\$103	\$45,927	24%

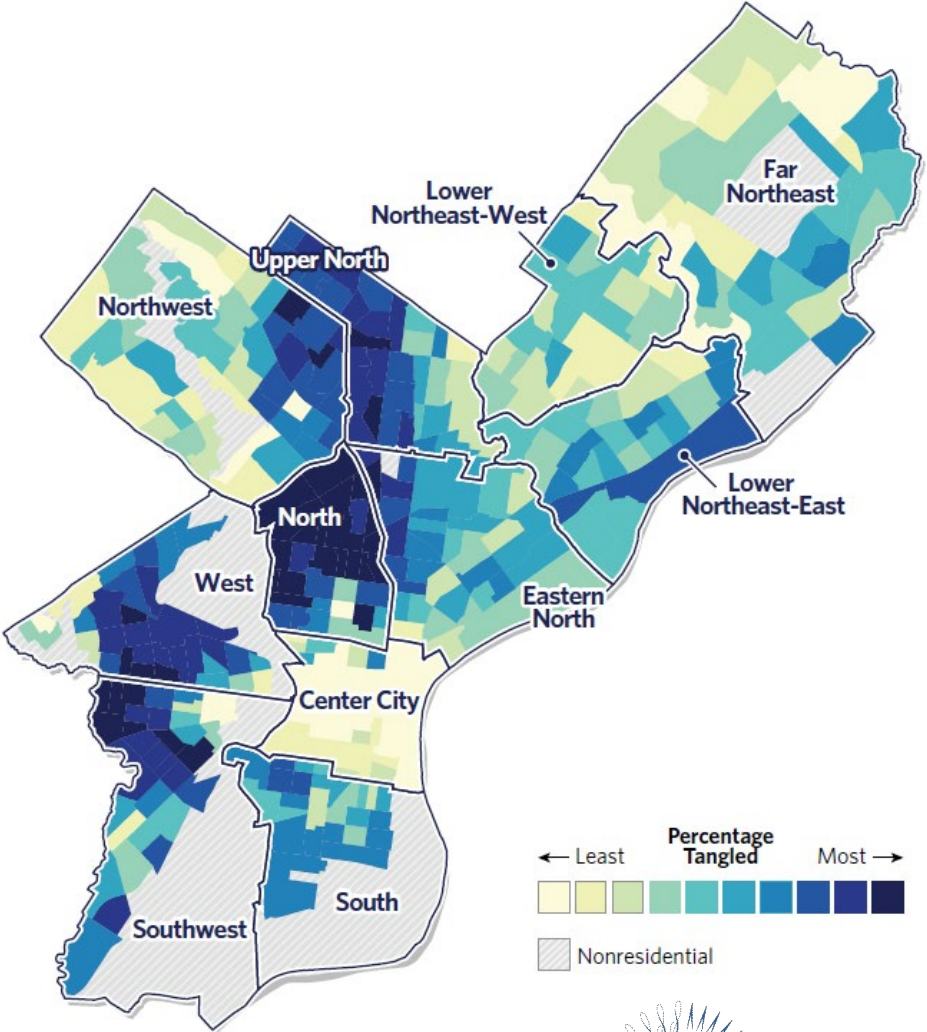


# Tangled Titles in Philadelphia

## Neighborhood characteristics: race and ethnicity

Race and Ethnicity in Census Tracts With Tangled Titles

		Percentage tangled	Population	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other/ two or more
	Top 10%	4.4% to 6.5%	129,084	5%	87%	4%	2%	3%
	2nd	3.5% to < 4.4%	162,464	4%	84%	9%	1%	2%
	3rd	2.5% to < 3.5%	148,701	9%	73%	13%	3%	2%
	4th	1.8% to < 2.5%	156,013	40%	31%	20%	6%	2%
	5th	1.4% to < 1.8%	163,153	41%	30%	21%	6%	2%
	6th	1.2% to < 1.4%	167,118	41%	28%	20%	8%	3%
	7th	1.0% to < 1.2%	178,225	44%	27%	16%	10%	3%
	8th	0.8% to < 1.0%	183,511	45%	23%	19%	10%	3%
	9th	0.4% to < 0.8%	162,943	52%	21%	13%	11%	4%
	Bottom 10%	0.0% to < 0.4%	114,009	62%	13%	7%	14%	3%
	Philadelphia	0.0% to 6.5%	1,579,075	34%	41%	15%	7%	3%





## How we came up with our estimate

---

- Identify residential properties
  - City property tax assessment data
  - 509,258 single family homes, condo units, small apartments, and neighborhood-scale mixed use properties
- Determine who is on the deed
  - City property tax assessment data and real estate transfers data
  - 709,303 total record owners
- Check for deceased record owners
  - “Deceased suppression service”
  - 29,315 deceased record owners

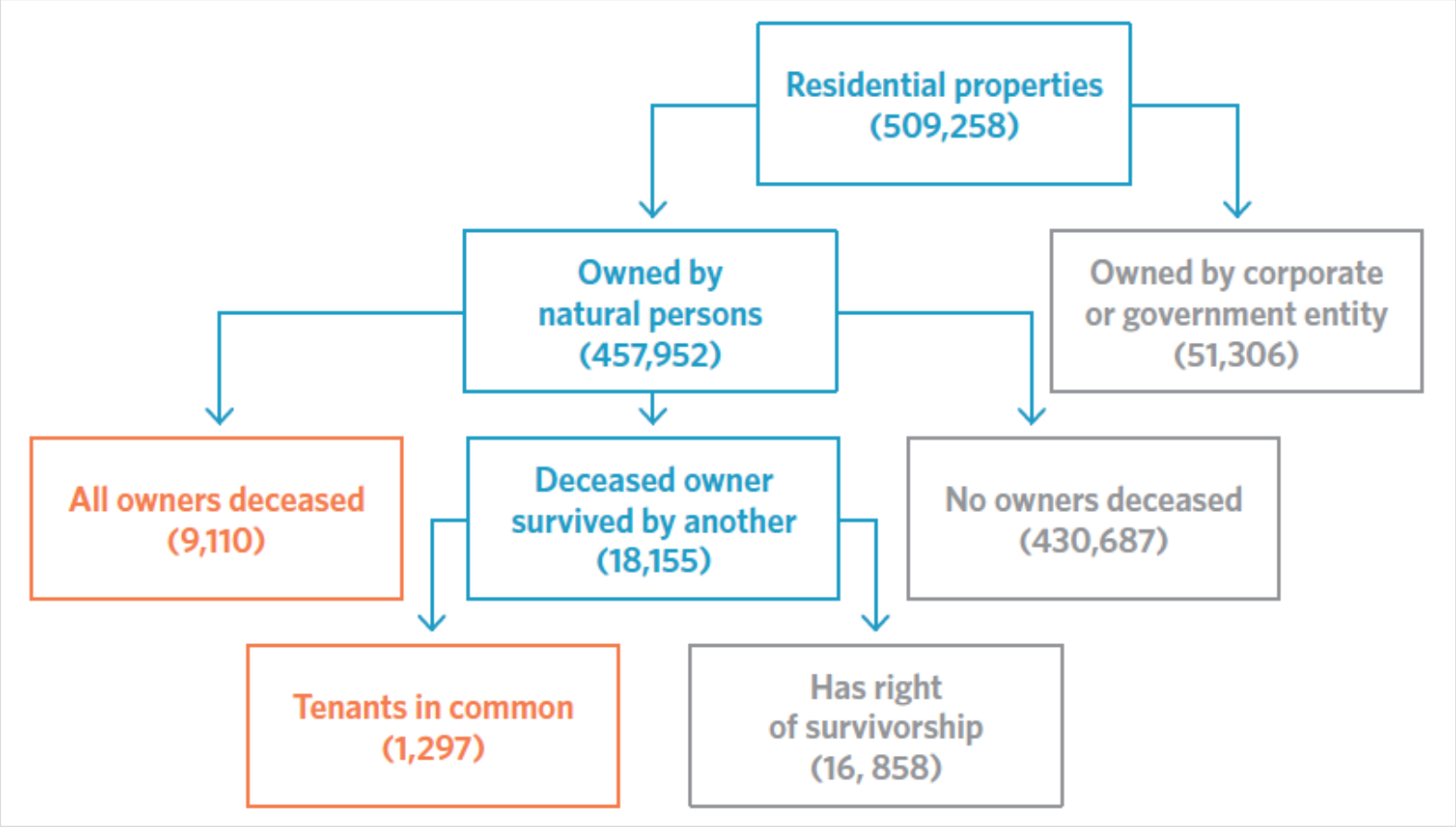
## Limitations of methodology

---

- Only able to identify one cause of tangled titles
- Deceased suppression service methodology not transparent
- Record owners who changed names or had multiple addresses likely missed
- String match inherently imprecise

# Tangled Titles in Philadelphia

## Estimating tangled titles



All record owners are deceased	9,110
	+
Deceased record owner survived by another owner; property owned as tenants in common	1,297
<hr/>	
Total	10,407



# Tangled Titles in Philadelphia

## Media coverage

**The Philadelphia Inquirer**

### Tangled titles in Philly threaten more than \$1.1 billion in generational wealth

Over 10,400 homes have unclear ownership, which keeps people from qualifying for government help with home repairs, keeps them from being able to sell homes, and leaves them vulnerable to deed theft.



Angeliene Howard, 44, of North Philadelphia, (left) poses for a portrait with her daughter, Angeliene Howard-Johnson, 10, (center), and sister Gabrielle Howard, 65, at her home. The Howard family was able to straighten out the home's tang...

**The Philadelphia Tribune**

### Tangled titles can derail homebuyers' dreams

Brian Saunders TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER Feb 15, 2022



**newsradio kyw**  
1060 AM • 103.9 FM

LISTEN

NEWS: Wall Street's rally slows, stocks mixed after data...  
ENTERTAINMENT: Court closes restraining order case against Ricky...

### More than \$1B lost for low & middle income Philadelphians due to tangled titles



**The Post and Courier**

SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM

# TANGLED TITLES

Philadelphia explores heirs' property solutions to boost generational wealth


BY DAVID SLADE DLSLADE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM  
APR 8, 2022



**10 ISSUE**

### TANGLED TITLE

YOU OWN YOUR HOME  
NAME NOT ON DEED  
COULD COST YOUR EVERYTHING




11:42 79°

**AXIOS Philadelphia**

Oct 22, 2021 - News

### Philadelphia's \$1 billion problem: Tangled titles

Taylor Allen



**The Legal Intelligencer**

Law Topics Surveys & Rankings Cases & Verdicts People & Community Public Notice & Classifieds All Sect

### 'Tangled Titles' Put Philadelphia Homeowners at Risk, According to New Pew Report


The legal remedies to the issue of unclear title tend to be fairly straightforward, but the cost of obtaining the necessary help can stand in the way of resolving them.

August 04, 2021 at 04:45 PM

4 minute read

Real Estate

Aleeza Furman  
Litigation Reporter



Elfreth's Alley in Philadelphia, referred to as the nation's oldest residential street, dating to 1702. Credit: f1photo/Shutterstock.com



# Tangled Titles in Philadelphia Influence

ghincken

### Tangled titles bill passed in City Council

Brian Saunders TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER Dec 2, 2021 0

1 of

Councilmember Katherine Gilmore Richardson says "Philadelphians have called out for equity and inclusion, and expanding generational wealth through

Philadelphia  
VIP

Menu

Give Now

VIP IN ACTION

PUBLISHED JANUARY 26, 2022

Following the Data: VIP  
Volunteers Serve in Hardest-Hit  
Neighborhoods

This month, the Thomson Reuters Foundation published an article exploring the ways U.S. cities use data to help underserved communities during the pandemic. A VIP homeownership client's story helped illustrate the point. Here is an excerpt:

“ Donald Gadson and his wife had been meaning to sort out their financial affairs when she died after a sudden illness – plunging the family and their century-old Philadelphia home into legal limbo.

Five years on, Gadson recently got matters in order with help from a legal aid organization, ensuring that the family home – which had been in his wife's name – will eventually pass to his two sons.

“A home is a place where you can start building wealth – because it's something stable, something you know,” Gadson, 62, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

Many more city residents beset by “tangled title” issues may now be able to access similar legal assistance thanks to a pioneering analysis of home ownership data released last year.

Officials say the research will help them pinpoint aid for

“Ensuring that we are addressing tangled titles and deeds for the more than 10,000 families that are suffering across the city is one of the most monumental things we can do in the housing arena for individuals here in the city of Philadelphia,” Gilmore Richardson said.

There will be a \$7.6 million investment over the next four years to resolve tangled title situations, which amounts to \$1.9 million per year.

FOR ASSISTANCE CONTACT  
ROW.PDI@PHILA.GOV OR CALL (215) 686-6250

PHL  
Records

IS YOUR HOME IN THE NAME OF A DECEASED PERSON?  
YOUR HOME IS LIKELY IN A  
"TANGLED TITLE"

FOR ASSISTANCE CONTACT  
ROW.PDI@PHILA.GOV OR CALL (215) 686-6250

PHL  
Records

¿SU CASA ESTÁ A NOMBRE DE UNA PERSONA FALLECIDA?  
SU CASA ESTÁ PROBABLEMENTE EN UN  
"TÍTULO ENTRECRUZADO"

FOR ASSISTANCE CONTACT  
ROW.PDI@PHILA.GOV O LLAME AL (215) 686-6250

Archivos  
PHL

MAKE A WILL!  
EVERY WILL IS ONE LESS  
TANGLED TITLE

¡HAGA UN TESTAMENTO!  
CADA TESTAMENTO ES UN  
TÍTULO ENTRECRUZADO MENOS.

### TANGLED TITLE INFORMATION SHEET

You are being given this sheet in accordance with Bill No. 210671-A, introduced by Councilmember Gilmore Richardson and passed by Philadelphia City Council on September 17, 2021. The law went into effect August 1, 2022. Under this law, financial service providers must provide the survivor of the deceased with a copy of this information sheet, and a certified death certificate within (5) five days of receiving the certified copy of the death certificate from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

This information sheet provides you with information about probating estates in Philadelphia. Many Philadelphians are unaware of the need to probate, which has led to a tangled title crisis in Philadelphia.

#### Important Definitions

**Estate**  
An estate is all property owned by a person when they die.

**Probate**  
Probate is a legal process that determines that a will is valid and should be carried out. This process allows for the heir(s) to take legal ownership of the deceased individual's property. This includes, for example, homes, vehicles, bank accounts, etc.

**Tangled Title**  
Tangled title describes problems related to the legal ownership of real estate. If you live in a home and consider yourself the homeowner but your name is not on the deed, you may have a tangled title. This often occurs when a relative passes and an estate is not probated.

## Tangled Titles in Philadelphia

### Quotes from affected homeowners

---

*“Just recently, the main sewer line broke, and I thought I was going to have to pay over \$2,500 to fix it, which I can’t afford because I live off Social Security. I didn’t qualify for repair programs, since I’m not on the deed of the property.”* - Gina Miller, 60, West Philadelphia

*“My mother passed away, and I had the house, but I never put the house in my name. I was her only heir. I was thinking it automatically went to me.”*

-Monique Spicer, 48, North Philadelphia

*“I went to a lot of places, and they told me, ‘You don’t own the house and you can’t get the help. And now I do, and now I can. I can now say, ‘Here’s the deed, what can we do?’”*

- Michael Schwartz, 60, Northeast Philadelphia