

Resident and Tenant Organizing

By James Saucedo, Housing Advocacy Organizer, National Low Income Housing Coalition

Why organize? Organizing rebalances power. When ordinary people come together to take collective action on their own behalf, they have a greater ability to influence people in decision-making positions. This undermines existing social structures and creates a more just distribution of power.

Why do tenants organize? Tenants organize to address immediate problems and create ongoing solutions. If a tenant has mold in their apartment and the landlord keeps saying they will address it but never does, chances are other tenants in the building are facing the same problem. It is easy for the landlord to avoid each person individually, but when tenants come together and put pressure on the landlord as a group, they become much harder to ignore.

Organizing doesn't stop when an immediate problem is fixed. As a group, tenants can identify systematic problems in their building. They can see patterns of neglect or harassment, and demand long-term solutions that prevent problems, instead of just dealing with them once they occur. And it doesn't have to stop at the building level. An organized group of tenants may identify issues, such as local school conditions, that need to be addressed on their block or in their neighborhood as a whole. As a united tenant organization with experience dealing with their landlord and building management, they know how to work together as a group to demand accountability from people in positions of power, like the local school board.

Ultimately, tenants organize to get power. In an apartment building, a small minority of people hold almost all of the power. Landlords and management companies have the power to withhold repairs, to raise rents in many cases, and to refuse to renew leases and even evict people. In federally assisted buildings, tenants have rights and protections provided by the government. Some cities and states also provide additional protections, but even these are more effective if tenants are organized. Organizing gives tenants more power to draw

attention to problems and get them resolved.

Typically, there are several types of issues that prompt tenants to organize:

- Substandard living conditions.
- Systematic harassment or intimidation.
- The threat of an end to assistance programs that keep units affordable to existing tenants.

TENANT ORGANIZING TIPS

Be open. To function well, a tenant association must be open to all residents in a building. If it is not, competing tenant organizations can develop and landlords or management companies can exploit this lack of unity among residents.

Be democratic. For long term success, it is crucial for a group to function democratically. When the special interests of only a few members begin to dictate group decisions and interactions with landlords or management companies, the cohesion of a group is weakened, and therefore so is its strength.

Keep an eye on process. There is no one-size-fits all decision-making process or leadership structure for tenant associations, but it is important for residents to figure out what works well for them, build consensus, and formalize their processes in some way. A group may re-evaluate and change its structure at some point, but it is critical to have a defined and agreed upon method, so that when decisions need to be made, they can be made without conflict disarray.

Be informed. Tenants need to know what is going on in their building and in their community. Tenants should determine if their landlord owns other buildings in the neighborhood or city, and if residents in those buildings experience similar problems. Tenants should also learn about federal, state, or local laws, whether regarding the right to organize, affordability restrictions, or living-condition standards. They should figure out if and who in the community can help them get the resources they need to be successful.

Know your elected officials. Tenants should learn who their elected officials are at every level of

government and engage them on the issues facing residents in the building.

Find a location to hold meetings and access community resources. A public library, community center, or local church may be willing to provide space. Does the group need to create and photocopy meeting notices? A community-based organization in your neighborhood may be able to help you access a computer, a photocopier, and other useful resources.

Set a goal or goals as a group. Most importantly, tenants must determine their goal(s) as a group, identify and engage allies that can help achieve the goal(s), make sure all interested residents have a role to play, and develop solidarity within the group. Strength of numbers and unity of purpose are instrumental forces in organizing.

Ultimately, an organized tenant group becomes a critical resource for advocates. No one knows the direct implications and effects of housing policies better than the residents who live them on a daily basis. A tenant organization can solve immediate problems in a building, but can also play an important role in advocating for better, more just policies over the long term.

Timeline of a Tenant Association. The timeline for developing a tenant association will vary from building to building, depending on the given issues facing the building, the dynamics among the residents who live in it, and other factors unique to any given community. Here is a sample timeline that contains some useful tips.

WEEK 1: RESEARCH

To start, ask yourself the following questions:

- What issues do residents in the building experience?
- What are the relevant affordability programs affecting the building? Does it have a subsidized mortgage? Is there a federal rental assistance program in place? Are there state or local assistance programs at play? Who governs and regulates these programs? Are there protections in place for the tenants as a result of these programs?
- Who are the elected officials representing the area where the building is located?
- What other issues do community members face?

WEEK 2: DOORKNOCK

- **Prepare.** Make sure you have everything you need to doorknock effectively—a clipboard, a sign-up sheet where people can share contact information, and a place to make notes about the conversations you have with people. Bring a copy of any regulations, federal or local, ensuring your right to organize in case you are confronted by the landlord, property manager, or building security. Bring business cards or information about your organization.
- **Knock on Doors.** There is no more effective way to find out the issues facing tenants and how likely they are to organize than by talking to them face to face. It is usually most effective to doorknock in the evening, since that is when most people will be home from work.
- **Identify Potential Leaders.** Use doorknocking as a way not only to identify problems, but also to identify potential leaders. Note whether there are any tenants people seem to defer to or listen to. Who are the long-time tenants? Who seems enthusiastic about taking action? Don't predetermine leaders—let leaders emerge.
- Door-knocking is about listening, observing, and beginning to build trust.

WEEKS 3 AND 4: PLANNING AND MEETINGS

- **Get the group started.** After doorknocking, engage a small group of tenants who seemed most enthusiastic about addressing the problems facing residents in the building.
- **Organize one or two smaller meetings,** likely in one of the tenants' apartments. Brainstorm with this small group: What are the underlying common issues facing the building? Who seems to be the decision maker? How *should* things change? How *can* things change?
- **Determine a goal for the building that has consensus among the small group.** Pick a date for a building-wide meeting. Develop an agenda for the big meeting. Delegate roles and tasks among the group: Who is going to create, copy, and distribute meeting notices? Who is going to facilitate the meeting? Who is going to take notes? Will you need spoken-language translation or sign-language interpretation? If so, what community resources are available to provide translation or interpretation?

- **Make sure that everyone who wants a responsibility has one.** Remember that the role of the organizer is not to lead, or even talk much; it is to provide the resources the tenants need to meet their goals, and to facilitate this small group's leadership.

WEEK 5: FIRST BUILDING-WIDE MEETING

- **Once you have picked a date, determine the location.** Many buildings have a community room. Community rooms are a great resource because they don't require people to travel anywhere to get to the meeting. If the building does not have a meeting place, try to find a space in the neighborhood. Public libraries, community centers, or churches often have adequate space that is open to the community. Ensure that your meeting location and time are accessible to all interested in attending.
- **Create and distribute flyers with the logistics of the meeting.** Make sure that everyone is aware of the meeting. Not every tenant will come, but everyone should have the opportunity to attend if they choose.
- **Finalize the agenda.** Make sure that everyone who will speak knows their role. Keep the agenda very tight. Address why you are meeting, build consensus around your goal(s), and determine the date for your next meeting and the next steps that need to happen. Make sure every action item has a person assigned to it.

WEEK 6: DEVELOP AND ACTION PLAN

- Once you have determined your goal(s) as a group and have developed some immediate next steps, **begin the process of creating an action plan.**
- **Figure out contingency plans.** For example, if you are writing the landlord a letter asking them to meet with your group, what are your next steps if they say yes? What are your next steps if they say no? At what point will you engage your elected officials to put pressure on the landlord? At what point might you go to the media? If your city has a tenant advocate or public advocate within the local government, at what point will you involve that office?
- Your action plan will develop and change over the course of your campaign as events unfold, but it is useful to plot out your steps and expectations as a group in advance.

WEEKS 7 THROUGH 10: ELECTIONS AND BYLAWS

- After you have developed your action plan and taken initial steps in your campaign, it is useful to begin formalizing leadership and decision-making processes.
- **Determine the group's leadership.** There are many different leadership structures. Tenants should consider different options and determine what makes most sense for their group. Do they want a president? Co-chairs? Does a non-hierarchical structure make the most sense? Does a committee structure make the most sense? Tenants must determine the basic functions that need to be fulfilled within their group and then craft a leadership structure that meets those needs.
- **Determine the decision-making process.** This should be a process all active members of the group are comfortable with, and one that is formalized in writing. Without basic rules and regulations in place, a group can fracture, and a fractured group loses power.

SUSTAINING THE TENANT ASSOCIATION

- Many tenant groups are galvanized in crisis. After the immediate problem that brought a group together is addressed, the group often loses steam, stops meeting, and peters out.
- **Stay engaged, but set realistic expectations.** It is important to keep residents engaged, yet also important to understand that the level of a tenant group's activity can vary, depending on whether they are facing an immediate crisis. During an active campaign a group may meet every week. Once the crisis passes, they may decide to scale back to meeting once a month. Scaling back is okay. Although you want to keep the group going, you don't want to burn people out or make them feel like they are meeting for no reason.
- **Look to the community.** Although it is usually a problem in the building that brings tenants together, there may be broader issues in the community around which a tenant group can organize or stay organized once initial problems are resolved, such as conditions of the local school or public transportation systems. Give

members of the tenant association space to raise issues of greater concern. If common issues arise, brainstorm ways the tenant association can influence the community as a whole.

- **Look beyond the community.** Does the tenant group have issues with the way a federal or local program is regulated or run? How can they weigh in and advocate for themselves and their neighbors?
- Finding ways to maintain a strong tenant association is important. Although the group may win one fight, another crisis could arise at any point, and having a strong and unified body in place means you will be ready to respond quickly and effectively.

Adapted from New York State Tenants & Neighbors' 2008 Organizers' Manual, by Michele Bonan. For more information, contact Katie Goldstein at kgoldstein@tandn.org, or visit Tenants & Neighbors' website at <http://tandn.org/>