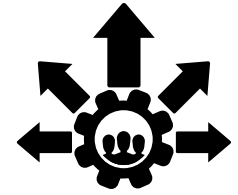


Resident and Tenant Organizing



By Mary Kolar, NLIHC Field Director

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 her apartment and the landlord keeps saying it will be addressed but it never is, 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. It doesn't have to stop at the building level. An organized group of tenants may identify issues, such as crime, 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 police department.

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 reevaluate 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 chaos or dispute.

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 have the same issues. Tenants should also learn about federal, state, or local laws, whether regarding the right to organize, affordability restrictions, or conditions 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 the building.

Find a location to hold meetings. A local church, community center, or library may be willing to provide space. Does the group need to photo copy meeting notices? A community based organization in your neighborhood may be able to help.

Set your goal as a group. Most importantly, tenants must determine their goal as a group, identify and engage allies that can help achieve the goal, make sure everyone who wants to be involved has a role to play, and develop solidarity among 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 better the direct implications and effects of housing policies than the residents who live them. A tenant organization can solve immediate problems in a building, but can also play an important role in advocating for better, more just policies.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

New York State Tenants & Neighbors, 212-608-4320, http://tandn.org/how_to001.html

TIMELINE OF A TENANT ASSOCIATION

The timeline for development of a tenant association will vary from building to building, depending on the given issues facing the building, the dynamic of the resident base, and other factors. Here is a sample timeline that contains some useful tips.

WEEK ONE: RESEARCH

To start, ask yourself the following questions:

- What issues do you think the building is facing?
- 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 are facing the community at large?

WEEK TWO: DOORKNOCK

- **Prepare.** Make sure you have everything you need to doorknock effectively: a clipboard, a sign-up sheet where people can provide 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 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 to not only 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 pre-determine leaders, let leaders emerge.
- Doorknocking is about listening, observing, and beginning to build trust.

WEEKS THREE AND FOUR: PLANNING MEETINGS

- **Get the group started.** After doorknocking, engage a small group of tenants who seemed most active and enthusiastic about the problems facing 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(s)? 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 make, copy, and post flyers? Who is going to lead the meeting? Who is going to take notes? Will you need translation? Who will fill that role?

- **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 FIVE: 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 – churches, community centers, or libraries often have adequate space that is open to the community.
- **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 his or her role. Keep the agenda very tight. Address why you are meeting, build consensus around a goal, 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 SIX: DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

- **Begin the process of creating an action plan** once you have determined your goal as a group and have developed some immediate next steps.
- **Figure out contingency plans.** For example, if you are writing the landlord a letter asking him or her to meet with your group, what are your next steps if he or she says yes? What are your next steps if he or she says 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?
- **Plot out your steps and expectations as a group,** even though your action plan will develop and change over the course of your campaign as events unfold.

WEEKS SEVEN THROUGH TEN: ELECTIONS AND BY LAWS

- **Begin formalizing leadership and decision-making processes** after you have developed your action plan and taken initial steps in your campaign.
- **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 committee structure make the most sense for them? 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 committed to paper. 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. While 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.** While it is usually an issue in the building that brings a tenant association together, there may be broader issues in the community around which a tenant group can organize, such as crime or issues with the public transportation system. 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?
- **Find ways to maintain a strong tenant association.** Although the group may win one fight, another crisis could arise any day, and having a strong and unified body in place means you will hit the ground running. ■

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/how_to001.html.