

Resident and Tenant Organizing

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WHY ORGANIZE?

Organizing balances 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. Organizing 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 tenants have mold in their apartments and the landlords keep saying that they will address it but never do, chances are that 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. It is important to acknowledge that low-income people, and especially low-income women of color, tend to be the highest percentage of people living in affordable housing. Often these groups of people need to be the central agent of change to ensure tenant organizing initiatives can flourish. It's important that tenants also lead the movements and drive the change themselves.

Organizing does not stop when an immediate problem is fixed. As a group, tenants can identify systemic problems in their building. They can see patterns of neglect or harassment and demand long-term solutions that prevent problems instead of only dealing with them once they occur. It does not 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. A united tenant organization with experience dealing with their landlord and building management knows 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 gain power. In an apartment building, a small minority of people hold almost all 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.
- Extreme increases in rental pricing.

TENANT ORGANIZING TIPS

Learn From Others

Unfortunately, tenants around the country, if not the world, must organize against unfair housing practices. Organizing, however, presents a learning opportunity as there are many examples to use. Find out what other communities have done, what was successful, and what challenges they faced.

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. Look for unlikely partners or allies and tap into existing networks.

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 and strength of a group is weakened.

Keep an Eye on Process

While there is no one-size-fits-all decision-making process or leadership structure for tenant associations, 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 or disarray.

Be Informed

Tenants need to know what is going on in their building and in their community. Tenants should determine whether 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 that apply to the right to organize, affordability restrictions, or living-condition standards. They should figure out who 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. For local offices, attending neighborhood and city meetings can often be a great way to make connections with elected officials or their staff.

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 who can help achieve the goal(s), make sure that all interested residents have a role to play, and develop solidarity within the group. Strength in 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 policy better than the residents who live each day in subsidized housing properties. A tenant organization can solve immediate problems in an individual building and can also play an important role in advocating for better, more just public policy over the long term.