

Creating and Participating in a Tenant Group

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The United States has a rich history of tenant organizing, and the tenant movement has built a stronger foundation following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the increased evictions and discrimination that occurred to tenants during the pandemic, many tenants used their experiences with housing injustice to fuel their tenant organizing. While there are many different models for tenant groups, this article will highlight three models in particular: the tenant association, a statewide resident network, and the National Alliance of HUD Tenants. Not every model mentioned below will work for every group, but this article should serve as a starting place for your organizing.

WHY ARE TENANT GROUPS IMPORTANT?

Addressing issues as a tenant are often much stronger when done in a group.

On your own:

- If rents are rising, you may have to find a higher paying job, hope that your landlord doesn't cancel your subsidy.
- If your management is neglectful, you can get an attorney or write a complaint.

With a Tenant Group:

- You can negotiate a multi-year section 8 subsidy to keep rent affordable.
- Organize with tenants to keep rents reasonable.
- Organize with the group to present a list of grievances.
- Organize things like protests and media outreach to pressure the landlord.

TIMELINE FOR DEVELOPING A TENANT ASSOCIATION

The timeline for developing a tenant association will vary from building to building, depending on the issues facing residents in the building, the dynamics among residents, 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 such as the national Housing Trust Fund, HOME, or the Low Income Housing Tax Credit?
- Does the building have a subsidized mortgage?
- Is there a federal rental assistance program in place?
- Are there state or local assistance programs supporting the building or its tenants?
- 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: DOOR KNOCKING

Prepare. Make sure you have everything you need to door knock effectively: a clipboard or an electronic tablet that includes both 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. This is the most effective way to find out about 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 door knock in the evening, since that is when most people will be home from work.

Identify potential leaders. Use door knocking to identify both problems and potential leaders. Note whether there are any tenants who people seem to defer to, listen to, and respect. 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 door knocking, engage a small group of tenants who seem the most enthusiastic about addressing the problems facing residents in the building.

Organize one or two smaller meetings. Meetings will likely take place in one of the tenants' apartments. Brainstorm with this small group about the following:

- 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 that the tenants need to meet their goals and to facilitate this small group's leadership.

Consider a resident survey. Organizers should consider developing and conducting a resident needs/satisfaction survey to measure resident perceptions about building maintenance, security, responsiveness of management and maintenance, interest in social activities, etc. Organizers could conduct in-person interviews and/or distribute surveys under tenant doors with return information included.

WEEK 5: FIRST BUILDING-WIDE MEETING

Once a date is determined, choose a location that is physically accessible to all who may want to attend. Many buildings have a community room, which is a great resource because these rooms 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.

Create and distribute flyers detailing 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.

Consider multilingual and sign language needs. Not all residents may speak the same language. Additionally, some residents may be hearing impaired and need sign language interpretation. Therefore, it is important to consider interpreter needs in terms of fliers and translation. A great way to accomplish this is by reaching out to bilingual and hearing-impaired residents for help with translation.

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 that every action item has a person assigned to it.

WEEK 6: DEVELOP AN 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? If your city has a tenant advocate or public advocate within the local government, at what point will you involve that office? At what point will you engage your elected and appointed public officials? At what point might you go to the media? How might a combination of your local media and public officials place pressure on your landlord, if your group considers it necessary?

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 BY-LAWS

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 and bylaws. There are many different leadership structures. Tenants should consider different options and determine what makes the 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. The organization's bylaws document should answer these questions

and provide processes for your organization's operation.

Determine the decision-making process. This should be a process that 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.

CREATING A STATEWIDE RESIDENT ORGANIZING NETWORK

Statewide organizing networks can be created through different methods, but the main method mentioned in this article is adapted from Community Change's Housing Trust Fund Project. The goal of this project is to build a powerful movement of people impacted by lack of affordable and accessible housing. In addition to empowering residents, the project also aims to shift the culture found within non-profit housing organizations and service providers so that residents are included in the work at the same level that staff is. This often means that non-profit community must be willing to take a risk and equally join forces with individuals who have experience with housing injustice. Non-profits and service providers play an important role here because they can provide the leadership and skill development needed for residents to become the strongest advocates they can be. To properly address the housing crisis, it is important for residents to be a part of the organizing.

Here are some steps Community Change wants to organizers to consider when creating a statewide resident organizing network:

- To help with capacity building, seek commitment to build a network from a statewide housing/homeless nonprofit organization or service provider.
- Be strategic when deciding who will be in the network and where in the state you will need to work harder to build people power.
- Assess organizing capacity by looking at where you need to build relationships and what organizing mode you will need to use.

- Spend time planning how to train and provide leadership development to residents/tenants in your movement.

Another statewide model you may consider, is New York’s Housing Justice For All group, which formed in 2017. Since then, they have fought for tenant protections in New York state. To learn more about Housing Justice For All, view their website: <https://housingjusticeforall.org/>

PARTICIPATING IN A NATIONAL TENANTS’ UNION

The National Alliance of HUD Tenants (NAHT) is an alliance of tenant organizations that advocate for the 2.1 million low-income families in privately owned, multi-family HUD assisted housing. Through advocacy, NAHT aims to implement stronger tenant protections, empower tenants, promote resident control and ownership, and improve the conditions of HUD assisted housing. NAHT’s membership includes a diverse list of groups including building-level tenant unions, area and state-wide coalitions, tenant organizing projects, legal service agencies, and other housing-related tenant organizations. These groups convene bi-weekly via Zoom meeting.

To get more involved with NAHT, you can e-mail naht@saveourhomes.org to join the NAHT Network ListServe. NAHT has 2 types of memberships: voting membership which is open to tenant organizations and non-voting membership which is open to non-profit organizations. You can find out more about how to become a NAHT member at https://www.saveourhomes.org/join_naht_network

SUSTAINING A TENANT GROUP

Many tenant groups emerge in moments of crisis. After the immediate problem that brought a group together is addressed, the group may lose momentum, stop meeting, and begin to dissolve. Below are some tips to preserve the group.

Stay Engaged, but Set Realistic Expectations

It is important to keep members engaged, but it is just as important to understand that the level of

activity within a tenant group can vary depending on how urgently tenants wish to address issues at hand. During an active campaign a group may meet every week. Once the issue is resolved, the group 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. Whether you meet once a week, once a month, or even once a quarter, holding regular meetings is a good way to build and maintain rapport with your fellow tenant and neighbor. Keep in mind that these meetings should be held in a safe and public space for all your members.

Look to the Community

For tenant associations, it is usually a problem in the building that brings tenants together. However, 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 schools 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 address those issues and influence the community.

Look Beyond the Community

- Does the tenant group have concerns about the way a federal or local program is regulated or run? How can they best advocate for themselves and their neighbors?
- Finding ways to maintain a strong tenant group 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.

Consistently Engaging New Members

It’s important for tenant groups to grow on a consistent basis. You can engage new members through a variety of methods. For more locally based groups, you can go door-knocking to spread the word about your organization. If you

are a larger organization that is statewide, you might consider attending or putting on events to engage potential members. It is important to maintain a sign-on form of some sort to keep track of new members.

Maintain Shared Values and Goals

As the tenant group continues to grow, keep track of shared issues and grievances among the group to help inform the groups values and goals over time. These goals will then help inform the group's action plan. To help guide your shared values, goals, and regulations, you can delegate shared leadership roles in your tenant group.

Organizing with a Team

If you are organizing a building, you will want at least 7 other team members to help organize people in your building. If you are working statewide or even nationally, it's important to get involved with other tenant groups and other advocacy groups to help spread the message of your tenant group.

Preparing for Virtual Organizing

New York State's Tenants & Neighbors works to help tenant organizations prep their Zoom accounts for tenant organizing. You can learn more about how to get assistance by calling their office at 212-608-4320.

The information in this article has been adapted from several sources including:

- ONE DC: https://www.onedconline.org/tenant_organizing.
- Community Change Housing Trust Fund Project: <https://housingtrustfundproject.org/>
- National Alliance of HUD Tenants: <https://www.saveourhomes.org/>.
- New York State Tenants & Neighbors' 2008 Organizers' Manual, by Michele Bonan. For more information, visit the Tenants & Neighbors' website at <http://tandn.org/>.