

# 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.

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 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

### 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 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 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 that 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.

### **Timeline of 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?
- 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: DOOR KNOCKING**

Prepare. Make sure you have everything you need to door knock 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 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 as a way not only to identify problems, but also to identify potential leaders. Note whether there are any tenants that 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 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. 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.

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/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 multilingual/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.

## **SUSTAINING THE TENANT ASSOCIATION**

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.

### **Stay Engaged, but Set Realistic Expectations**

It is important to keep residents 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.

### **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 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 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, visit the Tenants & Neighbors' website at <http://tandn.org/>.