

# 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. Tenants 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.

## **SUSTAINING A TENANT GROUP OR TENANT ORGANIZING**

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.

## 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.

## CREATING AND PARTICIPATING IN A TENANT GROUP

If you're seeking guidance on navigating the next steps after establishing your tenant group, be sure to consult the NLIHC's Advocates' Guide article on Creating and Participating in a Tenant Group.