

CREATING AND PARTICIPATING IN A TENANT GROUP

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The United States has a rich history of tenant organizing, and to this day, many tenants use their experiences with housing injustice to fuel their organizing. Creating a tenant union is not always easy, but the goal of this article is to equip advocates with useful tools and guidelines on how to start a group and ensure that the work is centered around tenants facing unfair housing conditions. It's important to remember that the purpose of forming a group is not just to create one for its own sake, but to improve the conditions of people's lives, their housing, and uphold their rights. There are various models of tenant-led groups, including tenant unions, tenant associations, resident councils, and many more. While this article will not cover the specific steps for starting each type of group, it will provide some general guidelines on how to create a tenant-led group. The article will also highlight examples of existing groups tenants can join.

Why Tenant Groups Are Important

Addressing issues with your landlord or property manager 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 or 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 union or other tenant-led groups:

- You can negotiate a multi-year 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.

Recommended Guidelines for Developing a Tenant-Led Group

The steps to develop a tenant-led group will vary depending on the building, location, and state. These differences are influenced by factors such as the issues tenants face, the dynamics among tenants, and other characteristics unique to each community. Here are some helpful guidelines and useful tips for communities hoping to start a tenant-led group. Regardless of where you are in your journey to develop a tenant union, do not let that prevent you from being involved or advocating for tenant rights.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Before starting a group, it's important to build relationships with fellow tenants in your community. If you're a tenant, do you know others who live in your building or neighborhood? What issues matter most to them? Building strong relationships is a key part of this process. It's crucial to establish these connections to successfully start and sustain a group. While you don't have to be a current tenant to get started, it is essential to ensure that current tenants are included in the

planning and creation of the group—either by directly involving them or by centering the work around their needs and what they want to see.

RESEARCH

To start, ask yourself the following questions:

- What issues do tenants in your building or community experience?
- Are tenants aware of their rights?
- 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?
- Are there any tenant protections provided by the local jurisdictions?
- Who are the elected officials representing the area where the building is located?
- What other issues do community members face?

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 yourself or any organization you might be affiliated with if you are doing this work through your employers.

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.

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 tenants in the building or community.

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 common issues faced by building residents?
- Who seems to be the decision maker?
- How should things change?
- How can things change?

Determine a goal for the community that has consensus among the small group. Pick a date for a community-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?
- Are there any other accommodations that need to be made for tenants to participate (e.g. childcare)?

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 group's leadership.

Consider a tenant survey. Organizers should consider developing and conducting a tenant 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.

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.

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.

ELECTIONS AND BYLAWS

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.

Participating in a Statewide Resident Organizing Network

Statewide organizing networks can be created through different methods, but here are some steps:

- 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 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.

To learn more about the impactful change facilitated by statewide networks, you can delve into the achievements and contributions of the following organizations:

- Residents United Network (RUN): Established in 2014, RUN is California’s statewide resident organizing network that helps advance people-centered housing and homelessness solutions.
- Resident Action Project (RAP): Started in 2015, RAP is a program of the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance that is led by people who live in low-income/affordable housing, and those with lived experience of housing injustice, instability, and/or homelessness.
- Residents Organizing for Change (ROC): Formed in 2020, ROC stands as Oregon’s statewide network of residents dedicated to fostering community-driven housing policy initiatives.

- Residents Organized for Housing Louisiana (ROHLA): Launched in 2022, HousingLOUISIANA created the ROHLA program, which includes 9 chapters across the state. Its mission is to catalyze a robust tenant movement and addressing housing challenges in Louisiana.
- Tenants Together: Based in California, Tenants Together is a statewide coalition of tenant-led groups that work to improve and advance tenant rights. New York’s Housing Justice For All: Formed in 2017, this group has consistently fought for tenant protections in New York state.

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

- Tenants Together: <https://www.tenantsaltogether.org/>
- Tenant Union Federation: <https://tenantfederation.org/>
- ONE DC: https://www.onedconline.org/tenant_organizing
- National Alliance of HUD Tenants: <https://www.saveourhomes.org/>
- New York State Tenants & Neighbors’ 2008 Organizers’ Manual, by Michele Bonan.