



Building Tenant Power:

Your Guide to Protecting
Tenant Rights in Your City

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I. Why organize?

Lately, your neighborhood has started to change. New development is happening everywhere! Shops, luxury housing, restaurants, bars—and new people are moving into your neighborhood who can afford to pay more for housing than you can.

Now your landlord is putting pressure on you to move out of your apartment. The place is already in poor condition. They haven't made repairs that they're supposed to in several months. But even though the place isn't that nice, you can't afford to move out into one of the new, luxury developments in the neighborhood. And you really don't want to leave the community you've called home for a long time. But what other choice do you have?

You can organize to stay in your home and neighborhood!

Imagine conditions in the building where you live are different. Instead of the landlord having power over you and the conditions you're living in, they have to respond to your needs. You and your neighbors have all come together. Your landlord takes you seriously and because of that, you can stay in your apartment. Your building conditions are safe and clean. Repairs have been made in your apartment, and you know that if you have any problems, management will be responsive to your concerns. Plus, your tenant association has power in your community. Elected officials visit you regularly to campaign for your vote. When a new development happens in your community, your tenant association has power in determining what happens in your neighborhood. When we come together as tenants and neighbors, we have the power to determine what happens in our community!

So you're ready to organize, but don't know where to start? If you're at risk of eviction, are facing an unfair rent increase, or have poor conditions in your housing, you can start by organizing a tenant association in the building where you live. Or, if you're more interested in organizing for change in your neighborhood, you can read: [Building Neighborhood Power](#).

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II. How to start a tenant association

What is a tenant association?

A tenant association is a group of neighbors who come together around a shared set of interests in their building. Tenant associations fight for repairs. They organize against landlord harassment, illegal rent increases, and advocate for improved conditions for residents in a building. When residents in a building come together around a shared set of concerns, their voices are amplified, and they have more power to get their needs met.

"United together [we] can win something. If you do not unite together, you cannot do anything... But [at] Chauncey House, all the tenants come together. Even if they don't all come to the meeting. They have the tenant association. They can keep connected and win something." - Baolin, Chinese Progressive Association (Boston)

How do I start a tenant association?

The first step in forming a tenant association is talking to other people who live in your building to see if you have shared experiences. When we have problems with our housing, we think we're alone. We feel like we're the only ones in our building with



leaks in our ceilings, have gotten our heat cut off in the winter, or taken to court for no reason. When you start talking with other people in your building, you'll begin to see that other people are having the same issues as you. Once you've gotten to know the other people in your building, you're ready to host your first tenant association meeting.

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III. Reaching out to tenants in your building

The best way to meet other people in your building is to knock on their door and introduce yourself. If you're nervous when you start out, here's a [sample doorknocking script](#) that you can use to guide your opening conversation.



"We have outreach days every month where we do door knocking. We ask questions about relationships with the landlord, how long have they lived there... Obviously the signs we see [are that landlords] neglect their needs, are unresponsive, don't cash rent checks, and ask them to sign things. If we get a sense that residents in a building are having the same issues, it doesn't have to be a red flag around eviction, if the landlord is abusing their power, we get a sense the building is in need of support, and we identify a point of contact"

- Charlotte, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (Los Angeles)

IV. Holding a tenant association meeting

The first tenant association meeting is a place where you can connect with other people in your building and start to build a relationship with each other and discuss the changes you would like to see in your building. You can also invite a lawyer or tenant advocacy group to help you get to know your tenant rights-- especially if you're experiencing harassment from your landlord. Tenant associations don't just have to be spaces where you meet when there are problems. You can also have meetings to socialize and get to know your neighbors! Here's a [sample agenda](#) you can use to guide your first meeting.

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V. Building leadership in your tenant association

Tenant associations usually have a leadership team that sets the agenda for their meetings, reaches out to others living in the building, and liaises with a lawyer and community organizations. Some tenant associations have a lot of structure with officer positions and formal procedures. Other tenant associations have steering committees, or a model of shared leadership that is non hierarchical. Whatever the leadership structure is, the leadership should engage more people in your meetings—the more people feel like they have a stake in what’s happening in the organization, the more likely they are to participate! See [here](#) for an additional list of recommended roles.

VI. Planning a campaign to improve conditions in your building

Once you’ve started to organize your tenant association, and have gotten a sense of the problems in your building, it’s time to start your campaign.

What is a campaign?

A **campaign** is your plan to win lasting change on an issue that you care about. In a tenant association, campaigns can be to improve conditions, stop an unjust rent increase, or stop evictions in your building.

A **strategy** is a thought out action plan that will help you reach victory. No matter the issue, every campaign has a strategy.

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The first step in your organizing campaign strategy is to do more research about the building where you live and its owner.

Here is some research you can do to be more prepared before you start your campaign:

1. Identify who owns your building

Your landlord may be an individual that you're well acquainted with, or it could be a larger developer. Sometimes you will have to do additional research to find out who really owns your building. For help with this, you can reach out to a community organization to assist you.

2. Find out what other buildings they own

Does your landlord own buildings anywhere else in your city or state? Or even the country? When you are connected with other buildings they own, you have more power to challenge your landlord.

3. Search the city records for "code violations"

In a lot of cities, it's possible to file "code violations" or complaints about conditions to the city or state Department of Housing. Check to see if any of the people in your building have already registered complaints, or if the landlord's other buildings also have similar conditions. Seeing the building violations in your building can also be a good way to find other tenants to join your tenant association, because these will be people who've already engaged in taking some action about their living situation.

4. See if your landlord is mentioned in the media

Have there been any other stories about the landlord's buildings and the living conditions in the media? Have other tenants organized before you? It's also possible that there are records of recent purchases they've made. For example, have they bought up a whole block in your neighborhood and not just your building? Some landlords are on city wide "watch lists" which include the worst landlords in the city. Knowledge is power - find out as much as you can!

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5. Find out as much as you can about your landlord

Do they participate in local organizations? Do they attend a local place of worship? Do they donate to any charities? If you have a good sense of who your landlord is as a person, you can identify ways to persuade them to meet your demands. The more you know about them, the better your chance of being able to influence them.

VII. Meeting with your landlord



Once you have a solid leadership team within your tenant association, you're ready to hold a meeting with the landlord.

Make sure your group is prepared:

Draft your list of demands

Make sure you have a list of demands ready before the meeting so that you can present it to the landlord. You can email it to them before the meeting or

bring a handwritten copy. You could even organize a press conference or demonstration to deliver the demands to the landlord. The option you use depends on your existing relationship with the landlord and how much pressure you think they'll need to meet with you or be responsive to your needs.

Finalize speaking roles

It's good to have two to three representatives at most prepared to speak about the conditions you're dealing with in the building and what your demands are as a group. Each speaker should have talking points and consider having a practice meeting, so you know what each of you will say.

Know your rights

The landlord may try to intimidate you or other tenants at the meeting by telling you that you don't have the right to organize, yelling at you, singling out individual tenants, or

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even threatening to call the police or ICE. It may be helpful to have an attorney with you to help you feel safe.

What if my landlord doesn't come to the meeting?

Sometimes landlords won't come to a tenant association meeting. If that happens, you can take more visible public action, like a press conference or demonstration to get their attention. Alternately, you could file housing code violations with the city, or a lawsuit in court. You have a range of tactics which could get the landlord's attention.



What if my landlord agrees to our demands?

Sometimes the landlord will agree to meet your demands. Be wary of this. It's possible that they will make only a few minor changes, and that the problems will continue if they haven't dealt with all of the building-wide issues. Always have a backup plan for how you want to take action if they don't meet all of your demands. It's also important to keep meeting regularly as a tenant association, as landlords will be more responsive to your requests if they see that you are organized.

What if my landlord says I'm not allowed to meet in the building?

Landlord-tenant laws are different in each state or city. Some laws protect the right to organizing, including the right to meet in your building. Others don't. It's important to understand what your tenant rights are, including what the law says about tenant organizing in your city. You can contact a local tenant rights organization or your city or state housing department to find more resources.

VIII. Taking action to win your campaign

After you've met with the landlord, keep finding ways to put pressure on them to meet your demands until you feel satisfied with the conditions in your building.

Here are examples of other actions you can take to get your landlord's attention:

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Call the City to register code violations

Most cities have a department that oversees building safety that you can call to report a code violation. In some cities registering a code violation costs the landlord money, so having a lot of code violations can be an incentive for them to make repairs. But a lot of times reporting code violations isn't enough, because the fines aren't as high as the profit a landlord can make from evicting a tenant. For this reason, you may want to bring your landlord to court or organize a protest as well.

Bring the landlord to housing court

Tenants in the U.S. have the right to a “warranty of habitability” which means that the landlord is responsible for general upkeep and maintenance of the apartment (repairs, heat, hot water, mold, lead abatement, and pest control). If your landlord isn't making repairs to these, you can take them to court to force them to make the repairs you need.

A disclaimer about lawsuits: Having a legal strategy can be a powerful force in bringing your landlord to the table. But it can also be limiting. Be careful about relying too much on a lawyer to solve your problems. Working through the legal system takes a long time, and it can be discouraging for tenants to go through that process.

If you want to proceed with a lawsuit, here are some tips for doing so as part of an organizing campaign:

- Consider filing a group lawsuit with your tenant association— these are far more effective than one-on-one lawsuits - remember, an individual tenant has less power than the collective voice!
- Before you file a lawsuit, make sure there is active participation in your tenant association. Consider hosting other actions (for example a press conference, rally) which will be more powerful than a lawsuit on its own.
- Make sure you have a regular method of communication between tenants before you file the suit. You'll need to be able to communicate with tenants regularly to set appointments with the city building inspectors to record code violations, about your court date, and to fill out regular petitions as asked for by your attorney. Make sure expectations for participation in the group action are clear (for example, the tenants are required to attend all the court dates, and a certain number of meetings).

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- If there's a scheduled court date, ask all the tenants from the tenant association to attend together. There is strength in numbers, and judges are more responsive when they hear from many tenants who are all dealing with the same problems.

Hold a press conference outside your building

- A public demonstration or press conference outside of your building can be a great way to increase public pressure on your landlord and get them to meet your demands. Invite people from the press to attend, including local or ethnic media. Use social media like Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp or WeChat to spread the word in your community.
- Consider holding a demonstration when you file a lawsuit to get additional coverage in the press for your case.



Work with your local government

- Contact your City Council members' office and ask them to get involved in your fight.
- Find out which local government agencies exist to protect tenant rights-- usually there are state or city agencies that can hold your landlord accountable.
- Contact your Attorney General's office, which can provide you with more information about your tenant rights and will sometimes get involved to prosecute landlords.

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Target the bank or lender who made the loan to your landlord for the building

- Your landlord has a mortgage, and the lenders who created that loan have a responsibility to ensure that the landlord isn't engaging in unethical practices. If your landlord isn't responsive to your concerns, you can increase pressure on them by targeting the bank that originated the loan for your building.

Organize a rent strike

- A rent strike is the most powerful organizing tool a tenant association can use to fight back against the landlord. Before beginning a rent strike you should consult with an attorney, who can guide you and help you understand the legal process in your city.
- Some cities protect a tenant's right to "repair and deduct" from the rent—but make sure you understand what your city's laws are before a rent strike.
- If you are organizing a rent strike, you will need to form an escrow account to hold the rent from all the tenants in the building. Your organization will need to manage this account (it's important to make sure everyone has the rent and you don't spend it—otherwise your tenancy can be at risk).
- Some cities have a tenant "blacklist" which reports tenants in the legal system and can impact a tenant's ability to rent in the future (if this is the case in your city, make sure everyone in the building is aware of this, so they know the risks).

Protect your neighbors who are at risk of eviction

- Your landlord may file frivolous lawsuits as a means to intimidate you or others in your building. If a tenant is facing an eviction proceeding, everyone from the building can show up together to show them support. This type of support builds morale and community in your building. It can also help you have more power - fighting alone is difficult but together you have collective power!

X. Sustaining Engagement for the Long Haul

My tenant association has been fighting for a while. But we're starting to lose momentum, how can we retain our engagement?

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Keep in mind that tenant organizing is a long fight

Your building may be active in organizing for years, even decades-- that's why it's important to invest in making sure you have enough help to sustain your work. A strong tenant association will withstand intimidation from a landlord, delays from a court process, harassment, or any other challenges that come with this work. Strong leadership and a shared sense of community will help your tenant association get past these challenges.

Focus on bringing people together and uniting groups of people across communities

This is especially important across cultures - groups may have assumptions or existing relationships from community to community which impact their ability to work together. It's important to give people a chance to get to know each other authentically for who they are and address cultural divisions early on.

Make organizing fun!

Celebrate your wins-- however big or small. And take time to sustain your relationships to each other as neighbors.

Continue to build your organization's leadership

If you've been in charge for some time, maybe it's time to pass on the baton!

XI. Building long term power for your community

Our work to build tenant power starts with our individual tenant association. But what we know from experience is our voices together are stronger than we are alone! For this reason, it's important to help other tenants who have been through the same struggles you have!

Here are some ways you can be involved in building tenant power in your community:

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Form or join a tenants association with other residents who have your same landlord

In many cases you'll find it beneficial to be organized and connected with residents in buildings that your landlord owns.

Organizing beyond your individual building is often inevitable

Sometimes the strength of one tenant association isn't enough pressure to get management to respond to your demands. In this case you have no choice—you need more power, and you can get it by organizing with tenants in other buildings that they own. The more you are organized the more power you will have collectively.

Organizing in your neighborhood helps other renters

You may not have immediate problems that need to be resolved, but you can help other residents who may be facing the same problems. Seeing you organize can be inspiration for them to start their own tenants association. Being organized can help other residents like you in your community get needed repairs, or stop them from being evicted or harassed out of their apartment.

"After...tenant meetings with all the buildings, it started getting easier. People saw that it wasn't just their building. It brought the community aspect along. We celebrate the small victories. There was a building that had gas out for the whole winter. We got a court order to turn the gas back on. We held an action in front of a building [with tenants from all the other buildings] to support them. [Another group of tenants from a different building] who attended that, saw that actions are powerful and the tenants wanted to hold their own action. Linking with each other, with different buildings helps to prevent burnout too." -Jagpreet, Chhaya CDC (New York City)

Form or join a neighborhood residents association

Many cities have local resident associations made up of tenants from different buildings in their community. These residents associations are a way for you to get

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involved in helping other tenants like you fight for their rights. They're also a way to meet other people in your community who are concerned about issues that you care about, like tenant protections and affordable housing.

Organize for tenant protections at the city and state level

Once you're engaged at the building and neighborhood level, you can get involved in campaigns to ensure that tenants in your city are protected in the long term. If you want to get involved in the fight for policy change at the local or state level, here are some [examples of policies that benefit you as a renter](#).