

The Basics of Tenant Organizing

Getting Started

Why organize as tenants?

People organize because they agree there is an issue or problem and they believe that their collective actions can address that issue or solve that problem.

Consider your life as a tenant:

Is your apartment in decent condition?

Are repairs made in a timely fashion?

Is your rent affordable?

Do you know your neighbors?

Do you feel safe where you live?

Chances are good that if you can identify a problem that is serious to you as a tenant, others will share your concern.

Is it my right to organize?

Yes! Under ORS 90.385(C) tenants have the right to organize and landlords are prohibited from retaliating against tenants who organize or become members of tenants' organizations.

***Remember to document everything you do as part of your organizing efforts* Write things down, keep a record of all that you do.**

How do I go about the job of organizing?

The first step is simply to talk to your neighbors. (Handout #1). Find out what their concerns are, find out if they are willing to take leadership roles, find out if they would be interested in attending a tenant meeting.

How do I involve others?

Go door to door. Meet your neighbors. Do an Issue Survey (Handout #2) or invite people to a planning meeting.

What is the purpose of tenants meetings?

Meetings can help identify issues and set goals, provide people with information, assign responsibilities and identify new volunteers. Meetings can also be social events and a chance to get to know one another better. The best meetings are those that make people feel that they got something by coming (information, ideas, support, a plan), they have something to do when they leave (recruiting, phone calls, door knocking, baking cookies, etc.) and they want to come back to the next meeting to find out more.

Remember that time is very valuable to people. People will not come back to meetings if they feel meetings are a waste of time. To have good meetings, plan your meetings very carefully.

Preplan your meetings

To have a successful meeting, form a small committee to help you plan it. You will want to think about the following issues:

Determining the purpose or goal of the meeting;

Publicizing the date, time and location of the meeting;

Getting out a flyer with plenty of advance notice, knocking on doors, or calling people to make sure they are coming;

Communicating why this meeting is important, how it fits in with what the group is doing, and why they should come.

Make meetings convenient

Hold your meetings at a time and place convenient for the majority of the group.

Delegate the tasks of the meeting ahead of time. Decide who will:

Distribute flyers (Handout # 3)

Give reports

Chair the meeting

Provide refreshments

Draft and print agendas, etc.

Talk to as many people as possible ahead of time about the meeting to plan the agenda. Make sure people agree on the purpose of the meeting.

What can I do to keep people actively involved?

Maintaining a tenants' association can be challenging after the original issue or problem has been resolved. When starting your group, think about how you would like to see your association grow over time. Solicit everyone's input. The more people have contributed to a group, the more vested they will be in the groups development.

To keep people involved you will want to:

- Hold regular meetings to make decisions, share information and progress reports, identify new issues, and set goals. Contact people before the meeting to ensure that they come. Let them know how important their participation is.
- Make sure members are involved in sharing decisions about what needs to be done, and who is going to do it (Handout #4).
- Make sure there is a social or fun aspect to your meetings. People become involved in tenants' associations not only to resolve problems, but also to meet new friends and fulfil their social needs.
- Keep written records of whom your members are, where they live, how you can reach them, what they are willing to do, and what they like to do. Keep minutes of each meeting that detail what decisions were made and what jobs need to be done and who volunteered to do them. Distribute the minutes to all tenants so they can follow what the group is doing and hold each other accountable.

You should be aware that landlords and others may try to divide you. Your tenants' association may be viewed as a threat. These landlords hope that by taking undermining actions they can intimidate tenants into dropping out of the tenants' association. You should always insist on open discussions with the whole membership.

When management presses you or other individuals to make a particular decision, tell them that you have to bring the question to the whole group. In some cases it may be necessary to consult an attorney to help you counter threats. Remember - you do not have to allow managers and landlords to attend your tenants' meetings.

Have an Agenda

Print your agenda and distribute it to every attendee so that they can stay focused. Your agenda should include the items you want to cover in the meeting along with a time limit for each item. You may also want to outline what decisions need to be made regarding each item. Leave time for changes and general discussion. Limit your meeting to two hours. (Handout # 5)

Establish Ground Rules

It is important that everyone is treated with respect at tenant meetings. It is a good idea to establish ground rules for meeting conduct. The ground rules will help everyone stay focused on the task at hand and treat others with respect. Ground rules should be printed and distributed to every attendee and reviewed at the beginning of each meeting. (Handout # 6)

Select A Chairperson

The chairperson is responsible for leading the meeting, making sure it moves smoothly through the agenda, ensuring the group stays focused, summarizing the main points and what has been decided, and calling on people for comments. At the beginning of the meeting, make sure that everyone agrees to the agenda, to how the meeting will be conducted, and to how decisions will be made. Ask members to help the chair stick to the agenda and the rules to which you have agreed. (Handout # 7).

How Do We Get People To Come To Our Meetings?

Make your meetings fun and eventful. Serve refreshments, hold a raffle, bring in a guest speaker. Make sure you announce these upcoming events. Make it easy for people to come to your meetings by providing transportation and childcare as needed. Consider even awarding a prize to the tenant who brings the most other tenants to a meeting.

What Are The Tasks of a Tenants' Association (TA)?

As you get farther along in the process, you may want to establish a formal Tenants' Association. The first step is to establish your goals, what you want to accomplish with your TA. Make a list of the things you think your group will need to do to accomplish these goals. You will need to find volunteers or you may even want to form committees to accomplish the following tasks:

Communications/ Outreach

Some of the volunteers may be interested in publishing a TA newsletter that could contain the minutes from meetings, reports on activities or issues of concern, the names and phone numbers of leaders, what the group needs help with, when the next meetings are, etc. The communications/ outreach team may also distribute flyers door-

to-door, contact people through a phone tree, conduct surveys or collect grievances.

Community Support

In order to wage successful campaigns within your development or for traffic safety or against drug dealing in the neighborhood, your TA should consider contacting neighbors or other organizations to enlist their support. These volunteers should be knowledgeable about your TA, the development, and the issue and they should have lots of enthusiasm.

Research

Knowledge is power. Your TA may need to research community resources, social service agencies, legal services, your landlord, the management company, etc. You will need legal advice from an attorney well versed in housing law if you are considering taking action that might jeopardize your status as a tenant or if your landlord tries to retaliate against you for your actions by trying to evict you. You should also keep a history of the problems tenants have had in your complex.

Publicity

Your TA may want to draw public or media attention to its efforts. You may want to form a team of people who are knowledgeable about the TA and the issues you are dealing with. This team will contact the press, write and distribute press releases, and speak on behalf of the association.

Finances

Every association needs some money to print flyers, pay for postage, consultants, childcare, refreshments, transportation, special events, etc. You will need people in your association who can deal with keeping financial records and others who are willing to lead efforts to raise money for the association through membership donations, recycling drives, bake sales, barbecues, raffles, etc.

Should we ask people to become members of the association?

There are a couple of ways to establish membership in a TA:

- You may want to consider every resident of the complex a member of the association;
- You may want to consider every resident who has attended a meeting or shown interest in the TA a member or;
- You may want to ask tenants to sign an authorization form appointing the tenants' association as their official representative. (Handout # 8)

Do we need to have a certain number of tenants involved to form a "Tenants' Association?"

No. There are no laws that state how many people make up a tenants' association. If only three of the tenants are interested in getting something going, then those three tenants will be your development's first "Tenants' Association." Set realistic goals so that people won't be disappointed by the number of tenants who get involved. It is important to do outreach to **everyone** in the development to maximize the potential for

involvement.

Do we have to incorporate, have by laws, etc. to be a tenants' association?

No. In fact you should be cautious and take time in the beginning to work together and get to know each other before formalizing your association's structure. You will want to decide which structure best suits your association. You may find that electing a steering committee, setting up a few committees and writing some flexible rules for the group to govern decision making may be all you need to do.

There are a few specific reasons why you may want to incorporate. Some TA's formalize their existence in order to become a nonprofit corporation. While you **do not** need to be incorporated to exist as a legitimate association, you **do** need to be incorporated if you want to accept tax-deductible contributions and grants from foundations. You **do not** need to be incorporated to represent yourselves in court, you **do** need to be incorporated if you want to avoid personal liability for major events your association sponsors.

On the other hand, if you are incorporated, you have to comply with the formalities of your by laws and fulfill state and federal filing requirements. Many TA's prefer not to incorporate until they are sure the tenants are firmly committed to the association and they have identified leaders who can support its growth.

Once a fair number of people have become involved, you'll need to establish some rules and structures to make things work. If you don't come to agreement about how decisions will be made, who can speak for the group, when meetings will be held, etc., you're just asking for confusion, disagreements, and misunderstandings.

How should we structure our Tenants' Association?

Before you set up a steering committee, elect a board of directors, form committees, etc., make a list of all the things you want the association to do. When you have made your list, think about how many tenants are involved with your group, what kinds of skills each one has and what they like to do. You will want to set up a structure that works with all of these factors in mind. For example, if only ten tenants are active in the association, it doesn't make sense to set up a variety of committees to get things done. Instead consider designating the group of ten as the association's steering committee until more members can be recruited.

What are the components of your average tenants' association?

Your TA can be as structured as you like. The following are some examples of how a TA can operate. You should not feel confined by these definitions. Feel free to add your own committees and officers.

Steering Committee (SC)

The SC meets on a regular basis to plan strategy and recommend policy for the TA as a whole. It handles the day to day affairs. While the SC meetings should be open to all

tenants, only a designated number of tenants, who are elected by the TA as a whole, should have voting privileges. All SC members should attend all meetings and should be members in good standing of the TA.

Officers:

Chairperson/ President

Sets up SC meetings (helps plan agendas and call meetings), chairs meetings or finds a chair, keeps informed on issues of concern to all tenants and reports on them. Speaks to public and is often a liaison to outside groups. Qualifications: Must represent the interest of all tenants, even if she or he disagrees with particular decisions of the association, must be able to chair a meeting and mediate disputes and work with everyone involved. Should be warm and encourage participation. Good public speaking skills a plus.

Vice Chair/ Vice President

Fills in when chairperson cannot do things. May take on responsibilities that chairperson delegates. Qualifications: Same as above.

Secretary

Takes minutes at meetings and prepares them to give to full TA. Helps with correspondence from the SC and tenants. Keeps files of correspondence, meetings, and activities of the tenants' association. Qualifications: Must be good at accurately summarizing what's been said at a meeting. Must be willing to write correspondence on behalf of the whole association even if she or he disagrees with a particular association position. Must keep accurate files.

Treasurer

Collects dues and keeps a record of expenses and income. Qualifications: Must be accurate with numbers and know how or learn how to keep good records.

Other positions:

Newsletter editor, Building/ Floor reps, Translator, Bulletin board keeper, Press spokesperson.

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