

PROGRAMS » SECTION 8 TENANTS ORGANIZING PROJECT (STOP)

Section 8 Tenants Organizing Manual

This manual applies to tenants in HUD multifamily (or project based Section 8) buildings. If you are looking for information about your rights as a Section 8 voucher tenant, see [Section 8 Vouchers](#) and [Section 8 Voucher Organizing](#).

The purpose of this manual is to help tenants in project based Section 8 buildings learn how to organize with other tenants to defend, assert, and expand their rights. If you organize well, you can help build a movement to not only protect and expand your rights but also win respect and a voice in your future. The most important existing right you have is your right to organize. Section 8 tenants in Minnesota along with tenants from around the country campaigned to win a federal law specifically protecting the right of Section 8 tenants to organize. It is through organizing that all your other rights have come to exist, and it is through organizing that you gain the power to decide which newer, stronger rights you need.

The history of the tenants movement and all movements for social change has shown that the single most powerful way for tenants to organize is to stand together in large numbers and take collective action against injustice. There are many different ways to exercise the power you gain from working together.

And since there are so many more of us than there are landlords, it is we who really hold the power. For instance, consider this: tenants could survive if there were no landlords, but landlords could not survive if there were no tenants. It makes one wonder, who is dependent on whom?

If we organize collectively, we can draw public attention to the fact that the system tenants are in is not unchangeable. We can set a powerful example by taking a stand together against a setup that is stacked in favor of the rich and powerful. And remember, the more tenants are educated, organized, and mobilized, the more control we will have over our lives and our future.

Why Organize a Tenants Council

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There are many reasons to organize a tenant council. The biggest one is that when we try to defend, assert, or expand our rights or position in society all by ourselves we are weak, ineffective, and constantly ignored. But when we stand together and make the same demands, we have power. We are much more effective and we cannot be easily ignored.

People come together in tenant councils for the same reasons they come together in labor unions, civil rights groups, women's groups and many other kinds of organizations: because working together wins concrete improvements in people's lives, builds a sense of community and personal power, and wins us more control over our daily lives.

When you make a decision to organize a tenant council, you are turning the day-to-day world of alienation, isolation, and greed on its head. By rejecting this model, you are making a commitment to your fellow tenants in the building to work together for the common good. At the same time, you are building community where community may not have existed before. If you organize well, personal issues and prejudices will no longer be able to keep you divided; as people organize, it's quite common for these divisions to dissolve. This is another great reason to organize!

[Read more on "Why Organize a Tenants Council" »](#)

Choosing Your Tenant Council's Structure

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There are many types of ways to structure your tenant council, and each has its individual advantages and disadvantages. Following are some of the typical ways that tenant councils are structured. Keep in mind that these are not set in stone, and that a mixture of any or all of these ways can be used. And of course, new ideas that you come up with of running a tenant council can also be used!

Parliamentary

In a parliamentary tenant council, there is usually an elected President, Vice-President, and a Secretary-Treasurer. The President is considered to be the head of the organization, and has the most authority. The Vice-President fills in for the President when needed, and carries out tasks delegated by the President. The Secretary-Treasurer keeps meeting minutes, records and maintains a bank account and a ledger of the tenant council's finances. Sometimes rather than electing a one-person President and Vice-President, a Steering Committee of 5 or 10 people is elected instead. The President usually writes the agenda of the meeting, but this task could be rotated. The officers sometimes make decisions without the other members.

[Read more on "Choosing Your Tenant Council's Structure" »](#)

How to Organize Your Tenant Council

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Anyone can organize. To be successful you may want to look at what others have done, as well as get advice from other tenants who have organized or from organizers at tenant organizations. The following is an overview of how to get started.

Outreach

The first thing you need to figure out is what the common problems are that you share with your neighbors. The best way to figure this out is to talk to your neighbors by knocking on their doors, introducing yourself, getting to know them, and asking them what problems or concerns they have. Share what is important to you and then ask what is important to them or what they would change if they could make any change they want. This is usually called doorknocking. The most important thing to keep in mind is to listen to people.

Compile a list of issues that come up and keep a list of names and numbers of who you talk to so you can get in touch later. This list can be used to contact your neighbors for organizing meetings, in case of emergencies, or just to get to know each other. As you go door to door, ask people to make a small commitment to the organizing efforts such as handing out flyers, coming to a meeting, or talking to a neighbor. Make a note of what people say they will do and follow up with them. This builds commitment to your organizing efforts.

[Read more on "How to Organize Your Tenant Council" »](#)

Joining the Larger Movement

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The purpose of organizing is to bring people together so that they will have more power. But there are many different levels on which people come together:

When you organize in your building, you are bringing people together at the most local level possible. This is the thread that keeps the fabric of the larger tenant and social justice movements together on the larger scale. But without being directly woven in with these movements, the tenant council is isolated from the bigger picture, which is where the larger, longer lasting changes take place.

There are many organizations that you could affiliate your tenant council with statewide, nationwide, or internationally to weave your organization's thread into the fabric of the movement.

[Read more on "Joining the Larger Movement" »](#)

Long-term Maintenance of Your Tenant Council

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Every tenant council runs into snags here and there. Sometimes individual personalities just rub each other the wrong way, while other times divisions appear between race, age, gender, ability or other lines. And sometimes the problem is the fact the old tenant leaders have moved on, while new ones were not developed.

These problems are often a product of a society which puts profit before people, difference before unity, and conflict before cooperation. Since most tenants were raised in this society, we are products of it – so there must be a common understanding and commitment to what we are fighting for, and how we intend to get there together.

[Read more on "Long-term Maintenance of Your Tenant Council" »](#)

Section 8 Tenants Rights

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This information applies to tenants living in project-based Section 8 buildings or HUD multifamily housing. If you are looking for information on Section 8 vouchers, see [Section 8 Voucher Organizing](#).

Section 8 tenants have rights, but in our society, having a right doesn't mean it is respected. Those who have the power (property-owners, business-owners, wealthy people, etc.) tend to know their rights very well. And when they don't, they usually have the money to hire an attorney to defend these rights in court.

Low-income people are in a much different situation. Affordable or free lawyers are often not readily available when we need them most. And the courts are filled with judges who are more likely to be landlords than tenants. The land-owners have control over a basic life need, and are by and large the same people who control our society on the larger scale.

The real truth, however, is that tenants are the ones with the power. There are many, many more of us than there are landlords. If we organize collectively, we can draw public attention to the needs of tenants and how to change tenants' situation. We can set an example by taking a stand against a system that is stacked against us, in favor of the rich and powerful. The more tenants are educated, mobilized, and organized, the greater our control over our own lives will become. Knowing about these rights will help you start to shift the center of power away from the landlord and towards the tenants who live in the building.

[Read more on "Section 8 Tenants Rights" »](#)