

How to Form a Tenant Association

A Fact Sheet for Tenants

What is a Tenant Association For? A tenant association is a union of all or most of the tenants in a building. When tenants work together, they can apply more pressure to make a landlord provide services, make repairs, and stop harassment—and get the best possible home for the rent they’re paying. A strong tenant association can force a landlord to listen; as a group, the tenants can have more leverage to negotiate, file complaints with the city and state agencies that oversee housing, get help from elected officials, go to court, or—if push comes to shove—call a rent strike.

But besides working together to make the conditions in your building better, there are other good reasons for forming a tenant association. It’s a wonderful way to get to know your neighbors, make new friends, and build a healthier community. Tenant associations make the neighborhood a better place for everyone! Tenant associations also strengthen the citywide tenants’ movement, which works to protect and expand tenants’ rights and increase the amount of affordable housing available for all of us.

There are no set rules for starting a tenant association. However, based on the experience of thousands of associations that have already been organized, you can have a good idea of what to do and what to expect.

First Steps If you think that your building really needs a tenant association, it’s probably because you have problems that you can’t get corrected by yourself no matter how hard you try.

It is almost certain that other tenants in the building feel the same way—and some of them will be more than willing to start working together with you. The first step in forming a tenant association is to find out who those tenants are, and the best way to do that is to call a meeting and see who comes. Housing law guarantees your right to meet in a public space in your building, so feel free to use the lobby or any other public space for your meetings. You can advertise the meeting by putting notes under people’s doors, posting flyers in the hallways, and talking directly to the people you already know. If more than one language is spoken in your building and you’re not bilingual, get some help in translating your written messages and make sure that there’s someone at every meeting who can provide interpretation—it’s important to make sure that the “language barrier” doesn’t keep tenants apart.

At that first meeting, expect a lot of shouting! Unless your building is generally well maintained, almost everyone will have a horror story to tell about the conditions in their apartment. If the landlord has been really negligent and abusive, a lot of people will be very angry, and there’ll be a lot of “venting.” This is where you start finding out just how urgent the problems in your building are, and what steps you need to take next.

It’s a good idea to try to arrive at some kind of agreement among the tenants about who will represent the association while it’s starting out, and decide on one or more people to be your contacts. These could be the people who called the meeting and/or other building residents who have the respect of the tenants. You can also ask people to volunteer to be “floor captains,” so that work and responsibilities can be shared. The floor captains can distribute meeting notices, coordinate building surveys, and act as contacts for the tenants on their floors. As your tenant association becomes more formalized, the floor captains can serve as members of the steering committee. Now, you’re well on your way to building a tenant association!

For more detailed information about your rights, or for assistance in organizing a tenant association:

METROPOLITAN COUNCIL ON HOUSING

339 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012 • www.metcouncil.net

Tenant Hotline: 212-979-0611 (Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays 1:30-5:00 p.m.)

Free Tenant Clinic: Tuesdays 6:30 p.m., Cooper Square 61 E. 4th Street (between Bowery & 2nd Ave.)

Getting More People Involved

Door-knocking Going from door to door and talking to your fellow tenants directly—and listening to what they have to say—helps create a sense of connection around your shared problems, and build support for the association. This is also a perfect opportunity to conduct a building survey—to make a record of all the problems in the individual apartments and public areas of the building. You can either make your own list, or use preprinted building-survey forms (use our Inspection Check List). You can also take this opportunity to provide everyone with information such as the phone numbers for key agencies, especially the Central Complaint number for heat and hot water: 311. Going around the building knocking on doors is easier and more fun if at least two people do it together. It's especially important to make sure that the door-knocking team includes people who represent the different ethnic and language groups in your building, especially in the beginning, when people may not know one another very well. This way, everyone gets the message: the tenant association is for everyone!

Using Notes, Flyers, and Newsletters A note under the door is the easiest way to reach everyone in the building, especially if you want to alert people to an event—like an upcoming tenant association meeting. Keep your notes short, sweet, and to the point. You can also post flyers around the building announcing tenant association activities. Include the names and home phone numbers of the representatives of the association. A newsletter is optional, depending on your resources. You can use it to let tenants know about the accomplishments of the tenant association, including negotiations with the landlord, court cases, and community support for your struggle. You can also announce the social events of residents in the building, such as births, weddings, and graduations.

Let the Good Times Roll! Getting to know your neighbors is one of the best things about organizing a tenant association. Make time for socializing! If you can serve refreshments at meetings, and leave some time for people to “visit” before and/or after them, they'll be more eager to attend. But you don't have to stop there. Potluck suppers, birthday

parties, and celebrations—especially when you've won a battle—can all be part of the good times.

How to Get the Most Out of Meetings

Effective tenant associations are highly democratic—they involve as many people as possible in making decisions, especially important ones. This means that meetings are important. Here are some tips for running a meeting well:

Begin and end on time. Don't make the people who are prompt wait too long for the latecomers. Do end at a set time, so that people can plan their other activities around the meeting.

Have an agenda. It's good to have a clear, written agenda, which can be prepared before the meeting by members of the steering committee. An agenda can include the following:

1) Introductions: Make sure everyone at the meeting introduces themselves. Then you can give updates on recent developments—and credit where credit is due. This is the time to thank the people who have made something happen!

2) General discussion of problems in the building: This may include individual problems, but now is the time to strategize and agree on what your next steps are going to be, such as negotiating with the landlord as a united group, which is much more effective than making individual requests; suing the landlord for repairs in housing court; hiring an attorney; or filing complaints with the Division of Housing and Community Renewal.

3) Deciding on a rent strike: Since changes in the rent regulation laws in 1997 and the common practice of “blacklisting”, rent strikes are much riskier than they used to be. If you decide that the conditions in your building are so bad that a rent strike is in order, consider retaining an attorney, either privately or through a public legal service provider.

4) Figuring out who's going to do what: Once you've decided on a plan of action, sign up the volunteers to follow through on it. Delegating responsibility and sharing tasks helps keep everyone involved—and the leadership from “burning out.” Make ground rules if you need to. You don't have to try to apply Roberts' Rules of Order, but you can remind people to be courteous, let everyone speak their piece, and be patient during translations.

Formalizing the Organization Once your tenant association is up and running, you may or may not want to have a formal structure with elected officers, committees, and by-laws. Many associations get along perfectly well with nothing more than a steering committee and floor captains. If your building is very large or there's a lot of work for the tenant association, the tenants can decide whether they want more structure. It's a good idea to hold off on this process until people have had a chance to work together for a while, so that they can get to know each other well enough to see who has good leadership skills.

Officers of the Tenant Association If your steering committee is working well, you have a natural pool of talent from which to elect officers for the tenant association. The officers may be a president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer, plus floor captains for each floor (who may or may not be on the steering committee).

These are usually the officers' roles:

President: Calls meetings of the steering committee, chairs steering committee meetings and performs whatever other tasks are given to him or her at the meetings.

Vice-president: Assists and substitutes for the president.

Secretary: Takes minutes at steering committee and general meetings, keeps the association's files, and is responsible for correspondence. This is an important role, since the association will almost certainly correspond with the landlord to make the tenants' demands; in very large buildings, "corresponding secretary" is sometimes a separate position.

Treasurer: Collects dues, coordinates fund-raising activities, takes responsibility for the financial affairs of the association in general, and issues financial reports to the members.

Floor captains: Work on their floors distributing flyers, talking to tenants, and knocking on doors.

Elections

Always give prior written notice of an election to all the tenants. Every tenant in the building should have the right to participate in the elections. You can nominate slates or elect people to each position one at a time. Again, it's a good idea to have a fair representation of different groups of people in the building when you're electing officers.

Committees

Committees really help to keep your tenant association running smoothly, by dividing up the responsibility of the work of the organization. Committees can work on things like drafting by-laws, forming a tenant patrol, putting out a newsletter, planning social events, and helping to bring about conflict resolution among tenants.

By-Laws

By-laws help to avoid confusion about the purpose of your group and how it goes about carrying out its plans, by putting down in writing the purpose of the association and the responsibilities of members and leaders, as well as formalizing the decision-making process. Keep them as simple as possible. The by-laws may be drafted by the steering committee or by a special by-laws committee. Sample by-laws are available from your local community board and from community-based organizations. (Met Council can also provide sample by-laws.)

"EYES ON THE PRIZE"

Always remember that your goal is a better place to live—decent, affordable housing and a healthy neighborhood. If your whole tenant association is just a handful of people organized in a way that's never been done by anyone else, but you're able to keep the heat and hot water on, get repairs made, and keep your building and block safe and sound, you're a success—and that's what matters!

Sample By-Laws for Tenant Associations

Name: The name of the Organization shall be the "Our Building' Tenants Association."

Purpose: The purpose of the Organization shall be to promote a clean, well maintained, safe building through group action.

Membership: Any person residing in "Our Building" is eligible for membership.

Dues: Dues shall be \$10.00 per household per year.

Officers: The officers shall be a President (or Chair), Vice President (or Chair), Secretary, Treasurer, and Floor Captains, who shall be elected, by members 18 years of age or older, at the General Meeting in (date). The term of office shall be one year.

President: It shall be the duty of the President to preside at meetings of the Organization and of the Steering Committee. The President shall delegate specific areas of responsibility to the Vice President.

Vice President: It shall be the duty of the Vice President to assist and substitute for the President.

Secretary: It shall be the duty of the Secretary to keep a record of the proceedings of the meetings, of the membership, and of the Steering Committee, and to assist the President and Vice President with such correspondence as the Organization deems necessary.

Treasurer: It shall be the duty of the Treasurer to collect and record all money due to the Organization, and to be custodian of all its funds. The Treasurer shall co-sign checks with the President or other officer so designated.

Floor Captains: It shall be the duty of Floor Captains to distribute literature and keep residents on their floors informed of the Organization's activities.

Committees: The membership may establish necessary committees at any meeting. The Steering Committee (or President) may also establish such committees. Committee Chairpersons shall be designated by each committee.

Steering Committee: The Officers, Floor Captains, and Committee Chairpersons shall constitute the Steering Committee and may act for the Organization between meetings.

Meetings: There shall be at least 12 General Meetings a year held on the first Tuesday of each month. The Steering Committee may call other meetings as required, provided members have at least one week's notice.

Quorum: At least half of the voting members must be present to conduct official business at General Meetings.

Amendments: The By-Laws may be amended at any General Meeting. Members must be notified at least one week in advance of the proposed amendment and 2/3 of those present and voting must approve the change.