

Greater Syracuse Tenants Network

ORGANIZING AN EFFECTIVE TENANT ASSOCIATION

Nobody forms a tenant association without a reason. We might all prefer to spend our time in other ways, but for many, joining or forming a tenant association is a matter of survival.

A tenant association is formed because your building's tenants are experiencing a lack of maintenance, inadequate emergency services, invasion of privacy, harassment or poor communication with management. Coming together as a tenant association provides unity and numbers, which are essential elements in protecting your rights and fighting a problem landlord. Tenants who ignore problems or fight solely for solutions to their individual problems generally don't get very far. They also do nothing to advance the cause of other tenants and can in fact splinter the effort of an existing tenant association. Forming a tenant association allows you to share information and problems. It is an intelligent, common-sense way to work toward resolving problems and gaining the power needed to make basic and vital changes in your building and your lives.

When making decisions about how to proceed with your tenant association, choose strategies that involve the group, not only individuals. This will give members security, confidence and clout. It will also ensure involvement by everyone, not just a select few. Clearly, some tenants show more leadership qualities than others, but everyone has something to offer. Those who don't like to speak publicly might want to take minutes of meetings; others might translate materials or do building research. Some can do outreach to other tenants in the building and to local organizations.

Some tenant associations require a highly formalized structure with officers and due-paying members; others work fine with an elected or volunteer steering committee. Large buildings often have floor captains. Newsletters are also important tools, especially in larger buildings. The way in which a tenant association is structured depends on the numbers of tenants in the building and the type of problems tenants are having. There are, however, some very basic rules for maintaining a productive tenant association:

1. When a new tenant association forms, Allow everyone a chance to speak and a role in making decisions. Tenants problems are very frustrating and can be personally upsetting. Everyone needs to vent a little anger before moving on to the task of finding solutions.

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2. Make collective decisions and take collective action. You will make the strongest impression on your landlord if your actions are taken collectively and will also protect individuals from being dismissed as "troublemakers." Correspondence or negotiating sessions with the landlord should be carried out by a designated group of tenants carefully chosen by the association. (See our fact sheet, Negotiating.) Differences of opinion on procedure and strategy are fine and an inevitable part of the process, but if the group becomes splintered it becomes ineffective and the landlord will take quick advantage of the situation.

3. Keep good records. Court and administrative actions require strict documentation of building conditions, incidents of harassment, and monitoring of repairs and services. At least one member in a tenant association should be assigned the task of coordinating this documentation. It is important for all tenants to cooperate in this effort. Copies of correspondence to the landlord or to city and state agencies, dates and times of threatening statements made to tenants by their landlords can all be part of administrative or court proceedings. Keep logs of internal matters as well. Record attendance at meetings, dates that mail was sent and upcoming court dates. The financial condition and records of the association should be kept secret from the landlord, but not members.

4. Don't allow internal and external forces to divide the group. Personal differences between tenants must take a back seat to the immediate and important goals of the tenant association. If suspicions or mistrust develop, explain, discuss, and dispel them at a meeting of the membership. Don't allow them to fester. People must learn to become comfortable in working relationships which will eventually benefit them all. Also, don't let the landlord, his relations or employees attend your association's meetings, even if held in the lobby of your building. (New York tenants have a statutory right to meet in public areas.) The association should not expose its internal processes or its members to the scrutiny of the landlord.

5. Strive to have all tenants attend all meetings. It is important that everyone be included in the decision-making process of the tenant association. No segment of the building's tenant population should be excluded. After all, if you don't get involved, you are hurting not only yourself, but other tenants, and giving the landlord the opportunity to fragment the group. Tenants should be assigned to recruit other tenants who are more hesitant to get involved. You don't all have to be best friends, but you do have to learn to work together. If more than one language is spoken in the building, make sure that presentations are given in the languages spoken. If no one in the building can do the translation, go to a local community organization for help.

6. Set aside time in each meeting to learn new information on housing laws that pertain to your building. You need to know the regulations that affect the amount of rent you pay, your tenure, and your living conditions. An organizer from a local tenant or community group, a paralegal or staff attorney from a local legal services office can help you to get the information you need.

7. Stay informed. It is difficult in the best of circumstances for tenants to win and keep their right. Knowing the most current information possible helps your chances of winning victories. Research the agencies and organizations required by law to provide you with basic information about your landlord, your building and the law.

8. Don't be a caretaker. No matter what your impulses are, neither you, nor any other one person, should decide what must be done--or do all the work alone. In the long run this type of "help" is actually destructive and does not facilitate building a group in which everyone can participate and have a say.

9. Identify short- and long-term goals. Long term goals may not be immediately clear, but short-term goals almost always are. Stabilizing building conditions and forcing the landlord to make repairs or stop harassing tenants are vital short-term goals. Accumulating the knowledge, spirit and commitment needed to increase clout with your landlord and with other forces in your community is a solid long-term goal.

At first few meetings tenants should to do the following:

- * Introduce themselves, their apartment number, number of years in apartment and main concerns about the building. In large building pass an attendance sheet so the association can gather the information needed to contact tenants and aid the association's growth.

- * Identify physical conditions in various apartments and common area of the building. Let tenants speak out about their own experiences trying to get repairs.

- * Write your landlord by certified mail, return receipt requested, listing the needed repairs and your concern about the hazards those condition pose. Do this even if he has ignored previous letters or calls. You must get used to putting your complaints in writing, documenting them for future court or administrative actions.

- * Agree to form a tenant association to respond to building problems and to gain clout with your landlord and within your neighborhood. A formal structure does not have to be adopted right away, but attention should be paid to members who show leadership abilities.