

# Empowering Communities to Claim the Right to Housing

A Resource for Tenant Leaders



## **About us**

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The Canadian Centre for Housing Rights (CCHR) is Canada’s leading non-profit organization working to advance the right to housing. Founded in 1987, CCHR has worked tirelessly for 35 years at the intersection of human rights and housing. We advance the right to housing by serving renters to help them stay housed, providing education and training about housing rights, and advancing rights-based housing policy through research, policy development, advocacy and strategic litigation.

## **About this resource**

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This resource is designed to help tenant leaders develop inclusive and participatory strategies to claim their right to housing. It outlines the key principles for increased participation within tenant communities, building effective leadership, and mobilizing and organizing tenants. It also offers a guide on how to create strategic planning tools, such as community action plans, communication plans and advocacy plans.

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## SHARING INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE

Participation can be described as a process through which all stakeholders can ultimately influence and share control over housing-related decisions, programs, and resources. Participation is more than consultation, and empowering stakeholders is the result of a gradual process. This process is generally described as the **ladder of participation**.

- 1** **The information stage:** Decision-makers clearly communicate decisions and results to other stakeholders and knowledge is shared in a transparent manner.
- 2** **The consultation stage:** Decision-makers invite other stakeholders to share their experiences and incorporate their feedback into policy solutions.
- 3** **Shared decision-making:** Stakeholders have a seat at the table of negotiation and decision-makers provide ways to increase collaboration between all housing actors.
- 4** **State of empowerment:** Tenant communities are empowered when all stakeholders can share control over how housing strategies are implemented, and disadvantaged groups can contribute as equals in decisions related to the allocation of resources.

Information and knowledge sharing are the first productive steps on the ladder of participation and are also the rails of that ladder. The more information tenant leaders and their communities learn and share with other stakeholders, the more they are empowered to participate in housing decisions impacting their lives.

Information and knowledge sharing, or knowledge building, within tenant communities can serve two purposes. On one hand, well-informed and knowledgeable tenants are better equipped to know and claim their rights. On the other hand, communicating that information and knowledge to other stakeholders can serve to educate decision-makers on the housing needs and challenges tenant communities face. When this information is captured and shared, it allows governments to understand community priorities, especially those impacting historically disadvantaged people, and ideally build consensus with stakeholders on ways to meet these community priorities.

## FOSTERING MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

A lack of participation in the decision-making process is one of the factors that exacerbate systemic housing issues. Some of the barriers that prevent people from participating meaningfully are a lack of inclusion of historically disadvantaged groups and a lack of engagement tools that can be accessible to people with diverse needs and capacities.

Tenant leaders can play a key role in increasing meaningful participation. They can make participation more inclusive and broad-based by adapting their communication tools to tenants facing accessibility barriers in community and public engagement initiatives. Tenant leaders can work to make the information more accessible to all. They can do this by sharing resources on the right to adequate housing and information on relevant bylaws, policies and programs from their municipalities and housing organizations. This can be done using various communication tools – for example, by making announcements on their social media, website or newsletter, by organizing informational sessions in their neighbourhoods or by distributing informational flyers to tenants.

Tenant organizations and groups can also source information from tenant communities to complement census data and “top-down” housing assessments with data that is more difficult to capture from disadvantaged groups. This can be done by conducting community surveys, encouraging as many community members as possible to add their voices and experiences to public consultations or writing submissions and deputations to their City Council.

Finally, communities can leverage their collective power to advocate for priority issues with politicians and decision-makers by talking to the media to share their lived experiences, or by organizing advocacy campaigns in their city.

[Read our guide on engaging with local governments to learn more.](#)

## DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Tenants generally have less resources and funds than landlords or other institutions whose decisions impact their lives and may impede their right to adequate housing. What tenants have is collective power: for every one landlord there are dozens – or perhaps even hundreds or thousands – of tenants. For every elected official there are thousands or tens of thousands of residents. This is where tenants' collective power lies. Community leaders are the people who can effectively bring a wide group of individuals together, support their communities to realize their shared interests, and work together to push for improvements in their living conditions.

Community leaders do not necessarily have to be public speakers, or those who appear on TV often, or have a large social media following. Community leaders are people who have built the trust of their community by standing up for them and their needs. They are able to see beyond their own personal experiences and understand how different experiences overlap with the needs and experiences of people in their community. They help people feel less isolated and heard.

Collective action, such as forming a tenant association or community group, requires a group of people who are committed to working together to make change happen. Community leaders help others understand that they are strongest when they act together. They build confidence among the community, support those who are struggling and help them realize they are not alone. Community leaders are not 'lone wolves' or 'brands' – they are organizers, which are the backbones of a collective effort that is larger than any one person.

## MOBILIZING AND ORGANIZING TENANT COMMUNITIES

The power of collective action and successful community campaigns to claim the right to adequate housing are underpinned by effective organizing, strong leadership, and strategic use of the media and other communications tools to build the bargaining power needed to win community demands. Mobilizing and organizing tenant communities can be done through the creation of a tenant association.

Anyone can start a tenant association. There is no need for a formal vote to create one, and it does not need to have legal status to be recognized and protected. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects the freedom of association; in Ontario and Manitoba, the RTA protects the right to organize a tenant association. This means that your landlord can't demand proof of registration and you don't need their approval to form a tenant association, nor do you have to show them a list of members. To set up a strong tenant association, the checklist below gives an overview of the six steps you can take to lay the foundation of your associative work.

Forming an organization by and for tenants creates a structure that can grow in power, unlike one-off protests and events. Tenant organizations can act as a body to negotiate with decision-makers such as landlords or governments and shift the balance of power in a community. An organization can build lasting relationships of solidarity with other groups that support your goals. This type of relationship goes beyond personal relationships between individuals.



## SETTING UP A TENANT ASSOCIATION

**1**

### Invite neighbours to form a group

Call a meeting and reach out to your neighbours through flyers, email, phone or door-to-door. Include date, time, location and reason for the meeting.

**2**

### Hold a meeting

Meet with your neighbours to discuss issues tenants are facing and agree on a common goal or goals. Make sure that the meeting venue is easily accessible to all.

**3**

### Create a community action plan

Use a rights-based approach to assess housing issues and needs, claims and obligations. Create a list of activities to claim your rights and organize them according to their priority level.

**4**

### Discuss the first tasks

Focus on the priority activities of your action plan and decide on a timeline for completion.

**5**

### Form a Steering Committee

If members have time to dedicate to running the organization, you can elect administrators to help keep things organized and activities on track.

**6**

### Hold a follow-up meeting

Have members report on the priority actions they have completed. Ask for their feedback on the effectiveness of the actions implemented.

## BUILDING A COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN

A community action plan is a dynamic and versatile tool to assess and plan your projects. You can decide to create an action plan to guide the advocacy work of your organization. A template to create an advocacy plan is provided at the end of this document. Alternatively, your community action plan can be project-based and should outline key activities and solutions to a specific housing issue. It can be used to support a collective claim and priority activities could include organizing public actions, running an advocacy campaign or preparing a court case. A community action plan can also be used to inform your local government about housing issues in your communities and to provide them with recommendations on ways to address those issues.

Your community action plan can be structured in two sections: the first one should address the housing challenges your community is facing, and result in a clear objective to address these challenges. The second part of your plan should provide solutions or recommendations to achieve that objective, and the steps or activities that should be implemented and their order or priority.

1

### **What can you say about housing issues in your community?**

What is the root cause linking these housing issues?

Who are the community members most affected by these issues?

What makes them particularly vulnerable?

2

### **How can we address the root cause of housing issues to reduce vulnerabilities?**

What is the ultimate objective that can resolve the core housing issue identified?

3

**Looking at the ultimate objective, what are the activities that you can implement to achieve that objective?**

Who should do something about the issue you are facing?

What can your community and your allies do to help with implementing solutions?

Who has influence over decision-makers and what is their responsibility?

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## SUPPORTING POLICY ADVOCACY THROUGH A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

As a tenant organizer, you will have to produce a fair amount of communications. You will need to create outreach materials, content for campaigns, demand letters to landlords and government representatives, submissions to policy processes, press releases and other documents. As you develop these materials, you should consider how you want to deliver the message according to who will hear it, and what reaction you want from them.

There are a few key points to remember when creating your communications strategy:

### **Know your audience and the goal**

Every piece of communication – whether it is an outreach pamphlet or a press release – should have a specific goal in addition to contributing to your association’s long-term aims. If you are reaching out to fellow tenants to recruit them to a meeting or a public action, it might be effective to have short, jargon-free communications (phone calls, emails, leaflets) that highlight the connection between their experiences and the meeting or public action. If you are speaking to a reporter, think about the actual audience – the reader or viewer of their story. Tailor your comments to ensure these four points are covered:

- 1.** What is the issue or problem you are organizing around.
- 2.** Who is affected.
- 3.** What is the solution you are calling for.
- 4.** Who is responsible for addressing the issue.

## **Keep it simple and concise**

Decide on which objectives you would like to achieve and identify opportunities and obstacles to each objective that you will need to plan for.

## **Tailor your message**

What is an appropriate tone, length, and method of delivery for your audience? For example, when sending a call to action to community members, make sure it is clear what you are asking them to volunteer for and the level of commitment expected. If you are asking a City official to vote yes (or no) on a particular policy, you'll likely want to be more formal, use logical and moral arguments, and indicate the level of support your position has among their constituency.

## **Pick your tools**

Knowing what your message is and who it is directed to, what will be the most effective way to relay your message? Will it be paper-based, online or in-person? Will it be a report, a press release, or a deputation? The number and type of communication tools you use will depend on how broad-based they are and the size of your audience.

## **Ask for support**

Communication work can be time-consuming. If you know community members who have skills in communications and engagement, and are available to volunteer, this will help you boost the quality of your communication strategy and use tools more effectively.

## **Ask for feedback**

Ask members to provide their input on what is and what is not working with the communications plan.

## ADVOCACY PLAN WORKSHEET

The right to adequate housing can be advanced through advocacy and collective action, and the chance of success increases when future plans are developed. To develop a strategy to tackle housing issues in your community through advocacy, it can be helpful to answer the questions in the worksheet provided below. Think of your advocacy plan as a fine-tuned version of your community action plan: most of the background questions of your advocacy plan can be found in your action plan. If you don't have time to create both, prioritize your advocacy plan. By working through this worksheet together, you can develop consensus on what issues to prioritize, who you will need to influence, and how to reach your goals.

[Access a printable version of the worksheet below.](#)

## HOUSING ADVOCACY PLAN WORKSHEET - FOR TENANT LEADERS

### 1. Identify the urgent and pressing housing issues facing your community.

#### Brainstorm a list of issues:



After identifying a list of important issues, discuss each of them and ask:

- Is this a problem that a lot of people face?
- Is this a big problem or a smaller one? If it could be solved, how would it change people's lives?

Choose a shortlist of three or four priority issues that affect a lot of people and/or are 'big' problems that really need to be fixed.

1. Issue:

2. Issue:

3. Issue:

4. Issue:

2. Each issue could have one, two, or many solutions. Identify them below.

	Solution A	Solution B	Solution C
Issue 1:			
Issue 2:			
Issue 3:			



### 3. Choose a SMART goal.

From your list of solutions, decide on one issue and one solution to work on. It can help to identify a SMART goal as a way to choose your priority:

**Specific:** Avoid vague objectives. Your goal should leave little room for interpretation and state what you plan to achieve and for whom.

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**Measurable:** You will know exactly when you've achieved it, or if the decision-maker is only meeting you halfway.

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**Attainable:** It should be achievable – someone needs to be able to make it happen. If your goals start to sound like a vision – like “end poverty” – it's time to scale back to something like “government increases assistance by 100%.”

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**Relevant:** The goal is clearly linked to the issue – by achieving it you will solve the problem.

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**Timely:** Decide on when you want to reach your goal and if the timeline is adequate.

**Write down your SMART goal:**

#### 4. Identify the target or focus of your advocacy strategy.

The target or decision-maker is the person who can turn your goal into reality. They have the power to implement the specific change you are fighting for. For instance, if you want to stop a rent hike, your target is the landlord; if you want a raise in social assistance rates, your target is the provincial minister in charge of social services. Secondary targets are those people or groups who have influence over your primary target. In the rent example, secondary targets might be business partners of the landlord or their investors.

**SMART goal:**

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**Primary target /  
decision-maker:**

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**Secondary targets:**

## 5. Build your alliance.

You can increase your power and influence by mobilizing a strong and active group of supporters. List as many individuals, communities, and organizations that you can think of who share a common interest or values with your tenant group. For each, answer (a) how you will engage them and motivate them to support you, and (b) what you are specifically asking of them (e.g., share your materials with their members, come to an event, etc.).

List your allies	How will you engage them?	What do you want them to do?
Ally 1:		
Ally 2:		
Ally 3:		
Ally 4:		

## 6. The five 'E's of effective actions.

From holding an information session for tenants to lobbying a city councillor, you will need to engage in a variety of actions to achieve your goal. Actions are effective when they accomplish at least two, but preferably all five of these outcomes:

- Educate people about the issue and who is responsible for fixing the problem.
  - Empower your members.
  - Energize your members and allies.
  - Escalate pressure on your decision-maker.
  - Evaluate how your event or activity went, and use what you have learned for the next time.
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### **Building a winning strategy**

Achieving a SMART goal is the result of a strong campaign that builds community consensus on a solution to an issue, mobilizes people to take collective action in support of that solution, and by doing so, increases the pressure on decision-makers to implement your solution. There are many resources and people with experience in community development who are available to support you in creating a winning strategy - online and in your own community. Seek them out.

You are not alone - and you are stronger together.

Good luck!



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