

# Organizing a Tenant Group

## Tenants' Rights in Massachusetts

A **tenant association** is a group of tenants who work to fix their housing problems. Tenant associations have had success because they organize together.

Tenants have the right to organize! It is **illegal for your landlord to retaliate** against you for being part of a tenant group. The landlord cannot evict you, raise your rent, or change your lease because you joined a tenant association.

### Identify Problems

**Know your rights.** The best way to protect yourself is to know your legal rights as a tenant. Learn more at: [www.MassLegalHelp.org](http://www.MassLegalHelp.org)

**Get Help.** Your community has lots of resources. Don't be shy – ask for help! You may want to contact:

- A lawyer for legal help
- A trained organizer to help you plan
- Local community organizations
- Local universities and law schools with students to help you do research

### Protect Yourself Stay United

Watch out! Landlords sometimes try to divide tenant groups by intimidating tenants or pretending to be a victim. Stay united.

**Talk with other tenants.** Tenants may be afraid to speak up. Ask your neighbors about housing problems and listen carefully! Let them know that tenants have a right to organize.

**Bring tenants together.** After you talk to tenants and identify common problems, schedule a meeting so that all tenants can come together to make a plan.

### Make a Plan

Once you bring tenants together, make a plan! To do this, clearly define the problems. Write them down. Identify the group's goals and the things you want to change. Think about these questions as you make a plan:

- What is the problem?
- What will solve the problem?
- Did your landlord break a law?
- Who has power to fix the problem?
- Where can you get help?

### Choose Your Tactics

Next, decide which tactics or methods your group will use to fix your problems. Plans and tactics must fit your situation and may have to change over time.

Here are a few tactics to consider:

- Write a letter to your landlord to document your group's concerns.
- Have tenants sign a petition to show your landlord that a lot of people are affected.



- Get Board of Health inspections to order a landlord to make repairs.
- Have a rally, picket, or demonstration.
- Make window signs and banners.
- Get media attention
- Take your landlord to court. Ask a lawyer to review your case first.

## Negotiate

Try to meet and negotiate with your landlord. Negotiating means working to agree with your landlord about solutions. Before you negotiate, get ready!

- Have a list of your demands.
- Have proof of the problems.
- Know your rights.
- Put your agreement in writing.

## Start a Tenant Group

**Choose leaders.** You can have one leader or a group of leaders who rotate responsibilities to run meetings and keep a group going. A good leader listens, is patient, and inclusive.

**Keep tenants informed and included.** Have regular meetings and use social media, fliers, phone trees, and events to keep all tenants updated.

**Translate.** Translate information and have interpreters for meetings for people who do not speak English.

**Set ground rules.** Good meeting ground rules are the best ways to prevent conflict. Examples: one person talks at a time, no interrupting, no put-downs, a time limit for each person who talks.

**Make committees.** A committee is a team of people that works on a task. Common

committees are: Negotiation, Outreach, and Fundraising.

**Keep records.** Have someone take notes during meetings. Document your communications with your landlord.

**Work with a lawyer and organizer.** A lawyer can tell you about your rights. An organizer has knowledge about organizing tactics. Remember, decisions are up to the group not your advisors.

**Evaluate your work.** Be willing to change your plans and tactics as you go.

**Get more tenants involved.** It takes time and patience to get more people involved. Most people need to be asked directly.

## Get Support

**From the media:** newspapers, TV, radio, and the internet are powerful tools for tenants. Positive media attention can help pressure your landlord to negotiate.

**From politicians:** local, state and national politicians can help by writing a letter to your landlord or by facilitating a conversation between you and the landlord. Make sure people in your building are registered voters if eligible to vote.

**From community leaders and groups:** local leaders and groups, such as clubs, churches, and labor unions, can help by writing support letters, attending rallies, or giving you resources or meeting space.

[MassLegalHelp.org/Organizing](http://MassLegalHelp.org/Organizing)  
**Legal Tactics: Tenants Rights in Massachusetts**

May 2017