

Tenant Organizing Manual



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Introduction

This manual is intended to help people who wish to organize a group of tenants in their building. In today's world, it is often difficult to find the time to do everything "by the book", so consider this a guide. You may find that some of our suggestions are beyond what you want to do and what you want to accomplish.

We have worked with hundreds of groups over the last several years. Some tenant groups that we've worked with have only organized around specific issues, like above guideline rent increases, or repairs and maintenance. Sometimes, these groups don't have the time to keep themselves going throughout the year. This is completely understandable.

Many of the groups we've worked with, however, have formed more permanent associations. They have succeeded in improving the lives of tenants, and have strengthened the voice of all tenants throughout the city. As this is being written, tenant associations across Toronto are leading the push to have a licensing system for all landlords.

A tenant association is the property of the tenants themselves. It is your decision as to how formal or informal the group will be, what issues you want to tackle, and how active you want to be.

Whether it is because of reduced rent increases, improved maintenance, better relations within the building, or a stronger social connection between neighbours, a tenant association makes your home a better place to live.

We hope you find this guide helpful.

TOGETHER WE ARE STRONG!

The Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations

The Federation of Metro Tenant's Associations (FMTA) is a non-profit Organization fighting for the rights of tenants. As one of the largest and longest running tenant organizations in Canada, the FMTA has been helping tenants since 1974.

Our **Tenant Hotline** provides legal information and referrals to tenants from 8:30 am to 6:00 pm, Monday through Friday.

Our **Outreaching and Organizing Team** is available to come to your building to provide legal information and to help answer your organizing questions.

If you would like help organizing a tenant association in your building, please call:

The Outreach & Organizing Team
416-413-9442

If you have a question about your rights, please call:

The Tenant Hotline
416-921-9494

The FMTA also produces several printed resources for tenants:

- ✓ A Guide to Tenant Rights
- ✓ A Step-by-Step Guide to challenging an AGI
- ✓ The Tenant Survival Manual
- ✓ A quarterly newsletter, *The Tenant*

You can find these publications (along with **tons** of other information) at:

www.torontotenants.org

All of the services that we provide are free

Becoming a Member

You do not need to be a member of the FMTA for us to help you, but there are some benefits which members do enjoy. By being a member, you are showing your support for tenants across Toronto. Members of the FMTA receive our newsletter, *The Tenant*, invitations to special FMTA events, like our Tenant Summits; and the right to send a voting delegate to our Annual General Meeting. Our members elect the Board of Directors, who direct the work of the FMTA.

What is a Tenant Association?

A tenant association is simply a group of tenants who have come together to improve their situation as tenants. It does not have to be large. It does not have to be incorporated or have a certain percentage of residents. It just needs to have tenants who are committed to making things better in their building.

Did you know?

You have the legal right to organize a group of tenants. **The Residential Tenancies Act** (the law that governs landlords and tenants) says that a landlord cannot interfere with any tenant who is organizing or joining a tenant association. (Sections 83 & 233 of the RTA)

How can a Tenant's Association help?

An association can offer legal information to its members, it can take on legal issues such as maintenance, security, unfair evictions, or rent increases. The current law, the **Residential Tenancies Act** (RTA), helps protect tenant rights. Our motto at the FMTA is *Together We Are Strong*. As tenants together, you are stronger.

A tenant association can also be a strong link to your community through activities such as programs for children, helping with childcare and setting up social events. A strong association **WORKS and PLAYS**. Your tenant community might enjoy social events such as barbecues, lawn sales or parties.

Did you know?

There is no charge for a tenant to file an application to the Landlord and Tenant Board if the property owner or manager has interfered with your right to organize a group of tenants in your building.

Getting Started

Chances are that if *you* are having problems with the property owner, whether it be security, harassment, maintenance issues, or something else – so are *other* tenants. It's time to find them. Talk to your friends in the building and talk to your neighbours. A lot of work can be done while you do your laundry or wait for an elevator. You can even start knocking on doors. Try to gather enough interested people to form a small group who can help organize a meeting.

Your First Meeting...

...does not have to be perfect or fancy. It just needs to be held in a place where people can gather and feel comfortable speaking with each other.

Here are some hints for your first meeting:

- ✓ Week nights usually work best
- ✓ Try to make the meeting earlier in the evening (7pm is usually a good time)
- ✓ Try to keep the meeting close by. (You have the right to meet in the common areas of the building, including the lobby.)
- ✓ Try to schedule the meeting for less than 90 minutes.

Remember: Management cannot stop you from holding a meeting in a common area in your building. They may claim that it is private property – but it is private property that you pay to use. You should just ensure that you are not blocking the entrance or exit of other people.

Advertising the First Meeting

Let as many people know about this meeting as possible. Mini posters on the bulletin board are an excellent way to tell people about the meeting! Flyers slipped under doors or inserted into people's mailboxes are all excellent ways to tell people that things are about to change for the better!

At the resources chapter at the back of this manual you will find a template for a flyer. You can also download this template from our website. Note that it has a time, date, place and reason for getting together. Be imaginative! Try to keep the flyer short and tell people why they should come. Remember the **Outreach and Organizing Team** can help you at any stage.

TIP: Knocking on doors may seem intimidating, but sometimes it is the best way to get people involved. Encourage your neighbours to come to the meeting!

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Organizing the First Meeting

It will be great if somebody will volunteer to chair the meeting. This simply means someone who will keep the meeting on the right track, try to stick to the issues and to steer the conversation back on track whenever it goes off topic.

A good chair will do their best to try to bring things back on track. The chair should begin the meeting by introducing himself or herself, and to briefly explain why the meeting was called and who helped to organize the meeting.

There should be 4 main goals of the first meeting:

1. To have tenants TALK about their concerns
2. To IDENTIFY the key concerns
3. To decide WHAT the tenants would like to accomplish
4. To decide HOW to get it done

TIP: Try to focus on issues common to everyone. There will be time for individual issues later. If there are people with individual concerns, encourage them to call the

Tenant Hotline
416-921-9494

Your Action Plan!

It is important to come up with a plan of action, even if it is not very complex. Identify your priorities, decide what you want to do next, make sure you know who is going to do it and do it!

Here are some hints to get started on your **Action Plan**:

1. **No more secrets!** Find out information about the building management, about the issues, and the time frames you have to work with.
2. **Resources!** Who do you know who can help you achieve your goals. Of course there is the **Tenant Hotline** and **The Outreach and Organizing team**, as well as Community Legal Clinics, local politicians, and government offices (like Municipal Licensing and Standards, Police, and Fire Departments). For more suggestions, see the resource list at the back of this manual.
3. **Set a date for your next meeting!** Find out what date works best for most people. In between your meetings, you should try to put some things into ACTION and be able to report the results at the next meeting.

TIP: It can be really helpful to have a **sign in sheet** at each meeting. You can download a sheet from our website, or photocopy one at the back of the manual. Remember tenants are your most valuable resource, so use the sign-in sheet to keep in touch with everyone!

Setting Up Your Tenant Association

Your Constitution (Optional)

What is a constitution? A constitution is basically is a list of guiding rules and principles, which help to run the association. It also serves to make clear who can join your Association and how, and what roles members will play.

Remember, try to keep things simple and in plain language.

Here are two suggestions about your constitution:

1. **Make It Inclusive**

Membership in the Association should be open to every tenant in the building who wishes to join, except for tenants who are employees of the landlord, as this could present a conflict of interest.

2. **Membership Dues & Bank Accounts**

Money is a necessary evil to running any organization. Often you will need money to send faxes, or photocopy flyers, and general expenses that may come up in order to help your members. The fee does not have to be high. Many associations are able to function on fees between \$5 – \$15 a year. Remember, it is an investment in your own community.

Bank Account

Setting up a bank account can be fairly easy. Just ask at your local branch for information about opening a new account.

Leadership

In general, the main people responsible for the decision-making and the direction of the association are usually called the **Executive**. The executive often includes 3 very important positions. The **Chair** or **President**; the **Secretary**; and the **Treasurer**. Below is a description of each position and the traditional role they play in each organization. But remember, each organization is different, so your executive can change as you need it to!

Chair/President

- leads members in a way that is fair and democratic
- makes sure the Association is meeting monthly or bi-monthly depending on circumstance
- chairs meetings of the Executive and general meetings of the Tenants' Association

Secretary

- make sure notes (minutes) at each meeting and that copies of the notes are given to each committee member at the next meeting

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- keep records of all meetings, letters sent or received and other documents as required.
- prepare (with the chairperson) and send notices of meetings, agendas and minutes.

Treasurer

- keep financial records of the Association, including any money received and spent, and bank account records.
- report the financial position of the committee as required
- supervise all payments made.

Other Roles

Committees

In addition to the Executive, your Association may want to create a number of committees to focus on specific issues. Having committees is an excellent way to get more people actively involved in the Association.

The Association can have committees for special issues. Some examples of committees are:

- membership
- newsletter or communications
- fundraising
- social

Floor Captains

Many Associations have a system of floor captains. This is how it works:

- Every floor of the building has one floor captain: a person who is the contact between the tenants on that particular floor and the rest of the Association.
- The floor captain is responsible for delivering flyers and communicating any important news or upcoming events from the Tenants' Association and answering any questions people on that floor may have.
- Floor Captains make delivering flyers and passing on information quick and easy.
- A list of floor captains, with unit numbers and phone numbers should be available to all members of the Association, so tenants know who they can talk to.

Funds and Fundraising

Your Association will need money for things like postage, photocopying, hall rentals, applications to the Landlord and Tenant Board, and possibly even lawyer's fees.

Most Tenants' Associations charge membership fees or dues (for example \$1 per month or \$10 per year). The cost of joining should not be so much that it prevents people from joining. Sometimes special rates are set out for people who are under employed, seniors, students, or others on social assistance. Some Associations let these people join for free.

Your Association can also collect donations and put on fundraising events. This may be especially necessary if you have lawyer's fees. Fundraising activities can include events such as yard sales, bake sales, raffles and auctions. These sorts of events not only raise money, but also build community and strengthen your Association.

Also, don't forget to look for other sources of assistance. Your city councillor may be able to provide flyers for your meetings. A local community centre may have space that you can use free of charge. The FMTA may also be able to help with photocopying or room bookings. Please feel free to call us. (416-413-9442)

Once you have started to collect some money, you will need to open a bank account in the Association's name. This account should have two signing authorities, usually the treasurer and the chairperson. These names can be changed at the bank when the people holding these positions change.

The treasurer is responsible for maintaining the Association's financial records. Once a year, at the Annual General Meeting, the treasurer should give a report to all of the members about how much money was raised, how much was spent, and on what.

Running a Tenant Association

Meetings

Running effective meetings is very important to your Association. You want your meetings to be well prepared and focused on PLANNING and ACTION. Usually one Annual General meeting is effective, and monthly or bi-monthly meetings, and more meetings if you are facing more pressing issues such as maintenance, evictions, or above guideline increase.

Agenda

The secret to a successful meeting is to **keep it simple**. Plan a short list of items to discuss and try to give it to people as they arrive. Knowing what the meeting will be about helps to keep focus.

Sample Agenda:

1. Meeting Begins
2. Reading and approving the agenda
3. Review of previous minutes
4. Approval of minutes
5. Business arising from minutes
6. Reports
7. Correspondence
8. Unfinished business
9. New business
10. Adjournment

You may want to consider ordering the decisions on the agenda as follows:

- Easy decisions – Dealing with the easy matters first gets the meeting off to the right start.
- Hard or Controversial Decisions – These require more time and energy, so you don't want to leave them to the end, when time is running out and people are tired.
- Moderate, non-controversial decisions – At the end, put decisions that are of moderate importance, but upon which most people will agree

Meeting Procedure

In order to run effective meetings, there need to be some rules or guidelines which everyone agrees to. The rules themselves are not as important as the fact that everyone understands and agrees to them. The following are some suggestions about how to run a meeting based on Robert's Rules of order, the rules commonly used for parliamentary proceedings. They may be used or modified by your group.

Speaking in Turn

Often a meeting where there are important issues being discussed, people sometimes try to speak all at once. When someone wants to speak she or he raises their hand. The chair keeps a list of people who want to speak, and allows them to do so in turn.

Making Motions

A motion is a proposal for the group to take a particular action, which is debated and then voted upon. Motions allow the group to make clear decisions which can be recorded in the minutes and avoid confusion later. Effective motions include what is to be done, who is to do it, when it is to be done, and how it will be followed up.

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Some Tips on Chairing a Meeting

Having a good chair is crucial to running a good meeting. Chairing is an important responsibility, but also something that gets easier with practice.

The chair is responsible for:

1. Making sure the agenda is covered;
2. Making sure everyone who wishes to speak has the opportunity to;
3. Keeping interest in the subject;
4. Making sure all sides to an issue are explored fully;
5. Making sure all persons feel comfortable, respected and free to speak;
6. Ensuring everyone is sure of the issues, what is being discussed and the possible consequences of the decision being made; and
7. Staying neutral.

The following are some guidelines for effectively chairing a meeting:

- ✓ *Start the Meeting promptly:* For a large meeting, plan to start ten to fifteen minutes after the official meeting time, for a smaller meeting, start right on time.
- ✓ *Welcome Everyone and Introduce People:* Begin the meeting by welcoming people and thanking them for coming. Introduce yourself, and other key people in the Association (for example, the Executive members).
- ✓ *Explain the Meeting Rules:* You may want to have a written summary of rules for new members. If people do not understand the rules, they will not be able to participate.
- ✓ *Stick to the Agenda:* If the discussion wanders from the original agenda item, point this out and try to bring the discussion back on topic. If something important has been brought up which needs further discussion, it can be added later on the agenda, under new business.
- ✓ *Bring Closure to Discussions:* When a discussion is dragging on, summarize the main points, and if a decision needs to be made, ask for someone to make a motion.
- ✓ *Summarize the Meeting Results and Follow-Up:* Before closing the meeting, summarize the main results, and what follow-up will occur. This leaves people feeling like the meeting has accomplished something, and reminds people of what commitments they have made.
- ✓ *Thank People:* Thank the people who prepared things for the meeting, set up the room, brought refreshments etc. Also thank people for coming out and making the meeting a success.

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Dealing With Conflict

Good debate can be healthy for an organization, because it shows that people are passionate about the issues, and that both sides of an issue are being fully explored. However, some issues can get out of hand. The following tips will help you chair a heated or animated discussion:

- **Make Rules**

Explain them to the whole group at the start. Some options for rules could be:

- ✓ keep a speakers list;
- ✓ a person can only speak once until everyone who wants to speak gets a chance;
- ✓ a person can only speak a second time to add NEW information

- **Take Time to Summarize Issues**

A good chair will listen, and from time to time step in to summarize so that everyone has a chance to pause and hopefully think about the issues, before continuing the debate.

- **Don't Get Personal**

We're all human and we're all different. Try to keep the debate focused on the ISSUES rather than the person who is speaking. At the end of the day, if tenants can't work together, it's the landlord who wins.

Record Keeping

Record keeping is important because you always want to know what was said, what was promised. And to keep track of your successes as well! Once again KIS works. There are three kinds of simple records that are needed most by organizations:

1. *Record your activities:*

Who decided what, when, and who was to do it. Letters or reports that you send or receive. Newsletters. The results of surveys or petitions. Work orders that the association letters you has sent.

The notes taken at meetings are called minutes. They should be short and to the point. Minutes usually contain:

- ✓ the name of the Association
- ✓ the date and location of the meeting,
- ✓ the attendance
- ✓ a record and brief description of the topics discussed or any decisions made
- ✓ a notice of the next meeting, date and location

2. *Financial Records:*

How much money is given to the Association, where it came from, and how it is spent. The amount of money that comes in, minus the amount that has been spent, should equal the amount you have at any time.

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Bookkeeping doesn't usually have to be more than a simple balance sheet, showing income and expenses, arranged by date. You can easily make up summaries from this for whatever you need. The bank will send you statements of your accounts which you can use to check your records. Check off each item on the bank statement and on your account sheet to ensure you haven't forgotten anything. You should keep receipts for all of your expenses, and have given sheets for all of your income.

3. *Membership Records:*

Membership records are simply a list of people who have joined the association and who has paid their dues. You can also keep the phone and apartment numbers of members on file to make it easier to keep in touch. Some associations also issue membership cards. (You never have to reveal your membership list to anyone outside the association)

Communications

Communication is the single most important aspect of any association. Personal contact is the best way to keep tenants informed about the activities of the association. Once again 'Floor captains' play a very important role by helping an association stay in touch with the tenants and allowing tenants to communicate with the association.

TIP: Feel free to use the existing bulletin board; after all, it is a common area.

There are, however, several other things your association might find useful for keeping in touch with the tenants:

- Ask the landlord to let you have some space in an area of the building to put up a bulletin board (for example in the laundry room). You can then post information about meetings and events.
- Establish a suggestion box. Ask the landlord for some space for this or use someone's mailbox (with their permission of course).
- Make a list of floor captains, with unit numbers and phone numbers so tenants know who they can contact.
- Publish a regular one page newsletter which contains information on what the association is doing, and information on other issues of interest to tenants.
- Many groups use email, list serves and websites to keep in touch with their members.

Annual General Meetings

Every year, your association should schedule a year end meeting for all of the members of the association. This meeting, called an Annual General Meeting, or AGM, is a chance to report the year's activities to the members and to elect new leaders for the upcoming year.

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Reports are usually read out or distributed to the members at the AGM. The chair will give a report on the activities of the association; the treasurer will give a financial report; and any other committees (such as membership or communications) will give their reports. Keep the reports brief and to the point—nobody likes long meetings. You should schedule some time for association members to make any comments or suggestions, and to vote on any important matters. Afterwards, you can elect the new leaders of the association.

You may want to invite local politicians or someone from the FMTA to speak at your AGM. You may also consider serving refreshments. Remember, an AGM is not all business – it is your chance to celebrate everything your association has accomplished in the past year!

Thank You for Working Together to Improve Our Lives

TOGETHER WE ARE STRONG!