

Vancouver Tenants Union - September 21, 2019 General Meeting

Notes from Breakout Groups:

Facilitators: David, Jen/Sara, Syd, Rocco, Bryan

1) Rocco's Breakout Group

First question - how should use money at VTU

- language services for diversity
- increasing volunteers capacity and assignments
- growing member base and capacity
- more using it for visioning — where in 5 years?
- organizing large city rent strikes. build internal capacity for that - how can we do
- training mid level volunteers organizers
- what happened to the co op movement? this was a strong movement. giving info on this. allocate resources towards a solution and owning not necessarily the solution. what's the bigger solution
- concerned about co option. serious concern. but don't refuse money. ie term limits for staff. spreading the jobs into part time jobs for instance.
- research - in burnaby looked into the scale of demovictions for example. getting numbers.
- education- many people don't know their rights. how to find the info and training. aging demographic - think about that group.
- building membership capacity and having solid neighborhood chapters to have a solid organization so we can respond to what we need to respond to
- money is power, you can do a lot of good - maybe have an office as a home for renters. that could be really important
- legal advice
- people are struggling, the money could really help.
- potential for funding that we cant access. if we can empower more networks of buildings and neighbors build our capacity for fundraising from our own base. ideally minority from grants and majority from our base. so stretched that we can't do that either.
- more direct action - legal fund

question 2. - how can we implement a system that keeps us serving people and good use of resources? Check and Balance etc.

- skills to deal with the city. people acting respectful. openness, dignity, non-
- strategic problem and constraints are a problem. technical - better to apply for 3 years. decisions uninfluenced as possible by the money. be aware about it being taken away
- term limits, spread out the employment, change when you are dependent on the money, structural issue

- shouldn't moderate ourselves

nominate people to be involved in that pr
 separate committee tasked with watching over these funds with regards to vtu's goals more broadly

compensated staff vs. membership on steering committee
 sort of like unions and their divisions between staff and elected reps
 how do we make sure we're just as fierce, combative and for the ppl
 the committee should make sure the funds are used democratically

2) Sara/Jen's Breakout Group

- we shouldn't get bogged down with legal advocacy. Training organizer and growing membership is preventative for renovations

Securing a strong foundation for the union:

- Growing our membership
- Passing on the core knowledge from people who have been involved for a long time
- Advertise what it is that you can do -- what it is that you need assistance with?
- To have staff or a system that allows responding to requests more effectively + streamline of activities
- Providing peer support for tenants across the city.
- maybe we can partner up with other nonprofits; partnering up with other similar organization.
- Something like CLAS & TRAC: direct channel to the RTB, report back to the RTB. Building capacity so we can provide feedback to the RTB.
- Providing education programs
- Working groups to separate the roles: comms for education, OAT for pursue their rights
- Identifying leadership in the building, train them to sign up everyone in their building to sign up. In trade unions, they (unite here) spend the vast majority of their organizer time is going into hotels and organize their workplace. When leaders in the building are formal about asking people to join the union and get them organized, it's most effective. As part of the training we can make this process formal and build better structure.
- Component of organizing members to be proactive in signing up new members (if buying coffee to someone to get signed up it is worth it)
- Food budget for events (advertise free food or free drinks to bring more attention and interest into our meetings)
- Diversify funding to stay independent
- Transparency with budget allocation
- Decision making procedures - committee vs all members
- Alex Doran will represent this group to express our ideas
- Increase organized /vocal voice of union and members (protests)

Key opportunities for funding largely classified under option 1: educating tenants about their right

Secure a strong foundation for the union - pass on core knowledge of what union is, grow membership, enhance effectiveness of what union offers

Empowering/enhancing the capacity and tools for union reps, building reps, services offered, and residents themselves

Implementation and maintenance of services offered

This may also include what is being offered at union meetings such as a food and bev budget to bring people in

Increase our presence more vocally... organized protests etc. that highlight the new and ongoing issues happening throughout the city

Enhance networking opportunities/partner with other organizations who share similar values

3) Bryan's Breakout Group

What projects should we be applying for the grant to fund:

- Wheat Pasting and Advertising
- Visibility to Vancouver Residents
- Balancing creating more need/demand with creating more capacity/volunteers
- Organizer Training – building a training plan and curriculum
- Most groups 'organizer' means paid staff
- UNITE HERE strike was accomplished with paid organizers in hotels
- Tail will wag the dog – organizers should be paid
- Finite projects with clearly defined goals and mandate
- Legal advocacy is a gap, but we don't want to be a service for union
- A gap is that we don't have chapters in every neighbourhood
 - An Organizer could be mandated to seed chapters in every neighbourhood
- Cultivate relationships with other organizations doing similar work to prevent siloing and duplication of efforts
- Education workshops – build curriculum
- Paid fundraisers to build sustainer donors and wean us off grant to prepare for 3yr sunset
- Set out clear criteria and expectations
- Steering gains authority to keep any hire or project and report progress to membership at GM
- Any project must not be dictated by city, no expectation of renewal (Job is temporary contract with clear mandate and end when project is completed)

4) David's Group

What are the Needs/Gaps in the following areas?

Education Tenants about their rights

- Need to brag more about what we have been able to do
- We were able to get Jean Swanson, real advocate for housing, on the city council

- Difficult to get an answer from service organizations, different answer from each person, VTU tries to figure out what the real problem is first and this is helpful
- Need more proactive organizing for non-precarious situations, increased capacity should be towards more prevention
- Could be more education/prevention
- Potential to be able to diversify the funding, can be less reliant on the grant, getting allies
- Lack of advertising in mass media, how can we use the money that is given to have the ability to draw more people together for one event, wants to bring more people
- We are already on the map for media exposure/promotion of organization

Ideas

- Publish rights in the newspaper/ need to advertise more about the VTU
- Reach out to other community/social organizations about renters rights - need connections
- Could actually get publicity for rejecting money if that was the decision made
- People need to know there is a resource first, that there are people that can help if they get an eviction notice
- Need to do more outreach

Helping Tenant Pursue their rights

- Should hold more rallies after people get eviction notices, every complaint should lead to a rally or a demonstration, roving demonstrations to different landlord offices
- Big developers (like Reliance) did not like having their names in the media
- Should develop a template for people for when they are dealing with when an eviction notice
- Reality is that sometimes tenants do have to go to RTB, anything that can help facilitate that or walk you through it is helpful
- Hold people together through the dispute process as a group or as individuals

Help Tenants Secure their housing

- Next Door app? - people in your neighborhood helping each other out, organize people to reinvigorate their own neighborhoods - an app might be able to help with this so that people reach out when they have problems
- Neighborhood pride to be able to help out each other out
- Building Associations can help create mutual-support within a building, as
- People are scared when we do door-knocking, you need to be able to explain things thoroughly
- Alert system would work well - if we had a system to be able to alert them before-hand about buildings coming up for sale etc.
- Ways of mediation agreemewith Landlords, would be good to not just be antagonistic

Checks and Balances

- Committee created to make sure that the money is being used in the mandate of the organization
- Cap on salaries? Clarified that we would likely only do the “Vancouver Living Wage” of \$21.50/hr

Notes From Sydney’s Group

i) Elevate and Enhance:

- (1) What are the barriers for tenants to knowing their rights --
Provide suggestions with examples of how VTU can better educate tenants about their rights. Is this education better done at building level, neighbourhood level or citywide level?
 - (a) We need more volunteers, more administrative support to take phone calls, respond to tenants, update the website
 - (b) We need to reach out to other communities, in particular immigrant communities; this is an issue of language access and capacity
 - (i) Often tenants rent from landlords who are part of their own community;
 - (c) Would be beneficial to have a storefront or some kind of physical space with staff and resources especially for people who don’t have computer access or skills
 - (d) Expand our communications
 - (e) Recruiting and compensating more legal advocates
 - (f) The government and other powerful groups invest a lot of money and resources into misinforming the public about the root causes and viable solutions to the housing crisis; where’s the talk about public ownership?
 - (i) There’s been almost no talk about housing in this election cycle; we need to be able to keep this on the table
 - (ii) We need data.
- (2) What are the barriers for tenants to pursue their rights? --
Provide suggestions with examples of how VTU can better help tenants pursue their rights. This is currently mostly done through organizing buildings of tenants and challenging evictions through legal and political routes.
 - (a) A Youtube channel on tenant rights, educate people in situations other than when in crisis
 - (b) The City isn’t accountable in maintaining adequate living standards for its residents; the systems in place don’t function properly; we need to pressure the Maintenance Department and other City departments to

do their job, enforce the laws that actually protect tenants. Perhaps doing an audit of current processes

- (3) What are the barriers for tenants to keep their housing? -- Provide suggestions with examples of how VTU can best help tenants secure their housing. Again, right now, this is only done under situations of emergency and fighting evictions at building level. There are many other situations that are not covered by VTU's work currently.

- ii) **Checks and Balances:** [if applying for the grant:] What checks and balances should VTU put in place if entering a financial relationship with the City? What principles and red lines should we strive to adhere to throughout this process to ensure our integrity in our dealing with the City?

- (1) Although we are not a service-first organization, since the beginning, we have been providing service to tenants; but we need to teach people to fish, so to speak, and not become a service-based group like TRAC