



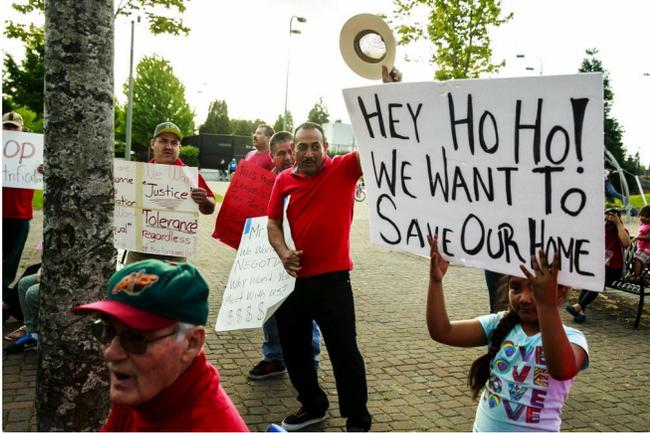
Tenants Union of Washington State

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2018 Group Health Report



Cruz Medina, president of the Firs Homeowners Association, waves his hat at a demonstration in SeaTac. Cruz is an organizer of his group of neighbors, with the help of the Tenants Union of Washington State and the Association of Manufactured Home Owners, to fight the destruction of their mobile-home park for a new hotel development. (Erika Schultz/Seattle Times)



The Seattle City Council passed an ordinance that almost completely prohibits landlords from screening prospective tenants based on their criminal histories. The Tenants Union and other groups led a campaign called FARE — Fair Access to Renting for Everyone. (Rick Bowmer/ASSOCIATED PRESS)

The Tenants Union (TU) works for housing justice — stable, healthy, affordable housing for all — through empowerment-based tenant education, organizing, leadership development, and advocacy. Founded in 1977, the TU carries on a proud legacy of work to create concrete improvements in tenants' living conditions and challenge and transform unjust housing policies and practices. Complex problems like gentrification and displacement, lack of affordable housing, and unsafe or unhealthy housing conditions need creative, multi-layered solutions that are grounded in the communities most impacted by them. As a membership organization grounded in the strong conviction that tenants must be the leaders of efforts to transform housing conditions and communities, the TU brings low income renters to the forefront of these struggles by developing their leadership, celebrating the strength of their diversity, and amplifying their voices. The TU supports the development of tenant leadership bodies who work together to address the housing issues most impacting them, including:

- Anti-gentrification organizing to fight rent increases, address policies that enable or even encourage displacement, and create tenant ownership opportunities;
- Healthy housing organizing to win concrete improvements in tenants living conditions and ensure that every tenant has a safe home;
- Housing access and affordability work to preserve existing affordable housing stock, increase the number of affordable units.
- Improve tenant protections by working to win Just Cause eviction protection and rent control.

How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your community/communities?



Low income renters face significant challenges that threaten their ability to find and keep stable, healthy housing. First and foremost, housing is unaffordable for many vulnerable populations; almost half of Seattle residents rent their homes, and many of those are considered rent burdened (pay more than 30% of their income toward rent). The Seattle area has had the highest increase in housing prices nationally for two years running. With their resources squeezed, low income renters are often forced to live in substandard or overcrowded housing, increasingly further and

further from the additional legal protections won by tenants within Seattle city limits (rental housing inspection, just cause eviction protection, and many others). Many are on waiting lists for subsidized housing and are struggling to stay afloat in unaffordable private market housing while they wait, frequently for many years, for assistance. Many renters are not readily able to move out of substandard conditions to better housing because the cost of moving is prohibitive. Immigration status, poor or no credit, criminal records, or previous evictions limit housing choices to places run by irresponsible landlords who do not provide security or properly maintain the housing. Many low income renters live one paycheck or one health emergency away from the kind of financial crisis that leads to homelessness.

In addition, laws do little to protect renters, especially vulnerable populations. There are no governmental agencies tenants can call to get their rights enforced. Landlord-tenant laws are considered “self-help.” From addressing repair concerns, to requesting a deposit back, to responding to complicated eviction notices, tenants are on their own. Without information about the laws, or an agency to enforce them, low income renters are vulnerable to eviction and other crises that cause housing loss. Tenants can feel powerless to respond to eviction notices, discrimination, and unaddressed repair needs. Tenants need information about their rights and how to use them, stronger legal protections, and meaningful ways to enforce the laws that do exist. The TU works to prevent homelessness and the loss of low income housing subsidies through individualized education on tenants' legal rights and community organizing. The TU works for the long-term preservation of low-income housing opportunities, advocates for the removal of barriers to decent, affordable housing for communities experiencing discrimination, and works for safe and healthy housing conditions for all renters.

The TU's model balances direct services in the form of tenant education to those most in need of support to resolve housing problems with systems change work (organizing and advocacy) led by those most impacted by housing injustice. The backbone of TU work is the Education Program, which provides tenants with the knowledge and skills they need to keep themselves and their families safely

housed and keeps us connected to the housing issues most impacting low income communities. We hear directly from thousands of tenants across the state every year, an intentional organizational commitment that keeps our ear to the ground for the housing issues, practices, and trends that most impact the health and wellbeing of low income tenants. The vast majority of tenants served at the TU are very low income (below 50% area median income or less) and are people of color and/or immigrant and refugee communities (African American, Latino, and East African). We also serve many women, single parents with small children, disabled people, and elders. In 2017 we served 5,875 people on our Education Program, 752 at tenant meetings, 358 members, and supported 33 core tenant leaders.

Building on a tested model that creates dynamic, engaged tenant leadership, the TU routes tenants through a tiered leadership development ladder. TU Community Organizers provide individualized tenant counseling in multiple languages to low income renters with concerns that jeopardize their housing stability, from repair needs, to discrimination from landlords, to illegal rent increases. There is a tremendously high demand for these services, especially within immigrant and refugee communities. Tenants first become self-advocates as they learn their rights and use their skills to solve housing problems. Armed with community support, renters develop skills and power by building on these first successes, sharing newfound knowledge and advocacy skills with neighbors facing similar challenges, and joining with other renters to form tenant councils or resident associations in their buildings or neighborhoods. Organized tenant groups are well-positioned to advocate for the preservation of their homes as affordable and for the improvement of living conditions. From there, tenant groups may become members of the Tenants Union and work in coalition with neighboring tenant councils and other community groups, collectively building power and leveraging their voices to advocate with elected officials and policymakers for improved housing policies.

Our long-term goal in this work is to build a strong base of low income tenant leaders across the state. We use data from our Education Program and our community partners to do outreach to tenants in targeted buildings and neighborhoods. TU staff coordinates regular community meetings in targeted neighborhoods and buildings designed to listen to tenants concerns, provide education on the issues and approaches in other regions, and engage them in meaningful leadership roles. Tenants assist with campaign research and outreach to both their neighbors and community organizations to form a broad coalition of partners who are mobilized to take action.

How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your community/communities?

All TU work is supported by a tenant leadership core of heavily involved tenants who guide the direction of the work, assess their personal investment, and evaluate the success of the campaigns. Relationship building is at the core of our organizing model, and tenants in leadership provide constant direction and feedback on the direction of the campaign, tactics, and outcomes. The heart and strength of the TU lies in our membership. There are over 300 members across the State who lead the work for housing justice. They support the organization with an annual, sliding scale donation based on what they can afford (\$5 on up). Some members join by donating time and energy to TU campaigns. Hundreds of powerful tenant leaders have emerged from TU organizing campaigns through the years, and they often describe involvement with the TU as personally and politically transformative. Many tenants go on to have positions of leadership within the organization for a time, including staff, Board of Directors, and tenant leadership bodies.

A multi-year assessment process has led the TU to focus on housing policy issues impacting immigrant and refugee renters in South Seattle and King County. As housing costs skyrocket and the tide of gentrification sweeps through the City of Seattle, low income residents of color have been pushed south into areas with fewer tenant protections, fewer services, more substandard housing, and more discrimination from landlords. Over half the area residents are renters and vacancy rates are at an all-time low. Rent burdened because of unaffordable housing costs, many renters are one paycheck or emergency away from becoming homeless. With affordable rental housing increasingly hard to find, renters face an even greater power imbalance when advocating with their landlord for repairs or other improvements to housing conditions.

The TU is working to build a strong base of tenant leaders who are mobilized to work together for housing justice in their community, including tenant education and organizing to address housing discrimination, win concrete improvements in tenants living conditions, fight community-displacing rent increases, and create tenant ownership opportunities. It is a long-term goal to win **Just Cause Eviction Protection** at the municipal-government level cities across King County, and ultimately statewide. Just Cause requires landlords to give a just cause for terminating tenancy. Without just cause, tenants can legally be asked to vacate their units with only 20 days' notice, regardless of their circumstances. No-cause terminations are often used as a loophole to hide discriminatory action by landlords against members of vulnerable populations and protected classes. Changing this policy will better support our vision of housing justice by creating the conditions for all people to not only access safe, healthy, and affordable housing but to *remain* in it.

How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) as part of your community engagement work?



The TU's racial and economic justice values inform every aspect of our work and we have longstanding commitment to multiracial and multilingual organizing work. Our tenant leadership core is extremely diverse, with often low income women of color and people with disabilities at the fore. Native Spanish speaking staff provide tenant education and organizing work to the Latinx community. TU organizing centers leadership development as a way to activate tenants' personal and collective power, cultivate personal connection to the larger movement for racial and housing justice, and develop appropriate roles so tenants' natural skills can be put to best possible use in service of improving their communities.

One of the TU's longest standing organizing projects is the Benson East Apartments in Kent, a model we continually seek opportunities to replicate as an alternative to gentrification and affordable housing loss across the region. When threatened with the loss of the housing subsidy on their homes in 2000, a diverse group of low income tenants organized to purchase

the complex and created the Northwest's first tenant-controlled very low income housing complex. Tenant leaders continue to be heavily involved in the project as members of an ownership body that makes collective decisions about the management of the property. Tenants in this collective speak Vietnamese, Russian, Romanian, Spanish, or English, and the TU has continued to provide technical assistance and support for the project, working with 5-10 experienced and dedicated interpreters.

It's an organizational commitment to maintain a large amount for interpretation and translation costs so our work is accessible as possible to as many ethnic and racial communities as possible in the region. We provide interpreters on the tenant hotline and simultaneous interpretation at community events.

What about your organization's way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships? Include examples of how your staff and your board (if relevant) contributed to the culture and values that enabled your success.

Tenants Union Organizers go into communities taking the lead from tenants and appear primarily as listeners. Our fundamental role as an organization and the primary goal of our work is to create the structure and provide the resources necessary for tenants to collectively and successfully address the housing barriers. Building trust requires authentic relationships that ensure we have each others' backs in the face of challenges; together, tenants have far more power than we do alone. We have a small but diverse staff who as much as possible come from the communities we work with. Our current Co-Directors are women of color who brought their skills and experience to work in service of their community at the TU. Our tenant-majority Board of Directors supports the organization's direction and ensures our long-term stability.

The TU cultivates a radically caring community where we holistically support tenant leaders to build connection across difference. We model community care over self-care, meaning that we actively check on each other and encourage rejuvenation rather than cultivating a space where individuals are solely responsible for advocating for their well-being. This begins with staff and absolutely extends to community partners and tenant leaders, many of whom first work with us while in the midst of an acute housing crisis. We believe directly talking about our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health and allowing for the natural ebbs and flows of energy in all areas is a crucial component of sustaining ourselves for long-term movement work.

What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, and missteps? We know that we can learn as much from setbacks as we can from successes, so please don't hold back!

The TU is in constant learning and have 40+ years of lessons to draw upon. As an organization we strive to find a balance between focusing externally on our work and the internal systems that keep our work sustainable over the long run. Like most small grassroots organizations, as a team we are deeply passionate about and committed to social justice as not just work but a way of life; also like most small organizations we struggle to stay grounded, avoid burnout, and keep the resources adequately flowing to make our jobs sustainable. With so much resource competition, at the helm of such critical work, it's difficult to stay out of a 'scarcity mindset' that keeps us focused on what we lack.

We've had frequent staff turnover in our 41 years and the institutional knowledge drain this has repeatedly created has been damaging. Most of our current team members have been together for 3-5 years now and we are working to transform this pattern by cross-training and better sharing knowledge. We believe in interdependence over independence and we're working to infuse that into our systems in order to protect the organization and our future members.

Because organizing work is so much trial and error, we learn over time to redefine victory and celebrate the small wins even in the midst of large losses. The failed campaign may still develop the confidence of a tenant leader who goes on to be instrumental in a later victory. Relationships are the heart of all of our victories, and keep us motivated and committed even in the face of challenge.

What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?

Everyday we are inspired by the growth and risk-taking of tenant leaders; everyday we see more evidence that organizing *works* to activate personal and collective power in service of the kind of world we want to see. We've had some tremendous organizing victories in the past year, including the passage of Source of Income discrimination as well as Fair Chance Housing protections for renters with criminal records. Victories like these and their subsequent impact on renters in the state are years in the making, and honor the sacrifices of so many tenant leaders who have been impacted by these policies. We've seen more people become engaged and politicized in response to the crisis of the current political moment, stepping out to stand up for their own rights and the rights of their neighbors.

The TU is the only tenant organization in the state and the only organization doing community-led tenant service, education, and organizing work, and we cultivate strong collaborations with many local organizations because we know the strength of our work depends on the support of the community around us. We work side-by-side with many community partners, including social services, cross-issue grassroots organizing, and legal aid partners. Community alliances like these are essential to support the leadership of tenants seeking to make change in their communities. These vibrant relationships are based fundamentally on mutual learning and shared leadership. Since housing justice is just one facet of work for social justice, the TU both responds to and draws intentional connections between the myriad interlocking issues faced by our membership. Shared vision and struggle fuel the energy of campaign momentum and help us see victory in even the most challenging aspects of our work.

We're excited and reinvigorated by the amazing network of community organizations that surround us and their campaigns. We share successes, resources, and stand strong for each other at every opportunity. Right now we're feeling particularly inspired by the Real Rent Duwamish campaign and other campaigns that create the change the organizers want in this world without waiting to win policy change from more formal systems. Real Rent Duwamish directly redistributes resources by collecting voluntary monthly reparations payments from non-Native Seattle dwellers in recognition of their occupation of Duwamish territory. The federal government currently refuses to recognize Duwamish tribal members so community members have created a direct path to financially contribute to the tribe. Our fight for housing justice would be hollow if we did not recognize that it isn't possible on stolen land; deeper transformation has to happen for us to truly move toward a more equitable future.