



Guide 2: Engaging Residents and Representing Resident Interests



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This document is part of the **Public Housing Resident Organizing and Participation Toolkit**. The full toolkit includes topical guides, customizable resident council documents and forms, tools related to tenant participation funds, and case studies of resident organizations around the country. To see the full toolkit go to: <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/public-housing/resident-toolkit/>

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ENGAGING RESIDENTS AND REPRESENTING RESIDENT INTERESTS

Engaging residents in a resident council and ensuring that the council represents everyone's interests is an ongoing task. It's important to recognize that people's interest and ability to participate will change over time. It's worth keeping people engaged (by inviting them to events, sending out a newsletter, catching them in the hallway, and having one-on-one conversations) even if they do not participate by coming to meetings or volunteering. Engaging residents is also important to build future leaders in your organization. A healthy resident council will have new and rotating leadership over time.

If you need support with engaging residents there may be a local tenant organizing group that can support you. Try an internet search for "tenant organizing" and your state or city. You could also reach to housing counseling organizations, which may have a program focused on renters. To find these you can do an internet search or use the HUD website to search by your state: https://www.hud.gov/topics/rental_assistance/local. Leaders from other resident councils, locally or nationally, can share their best practices and tips. Make sure that anyone you invite shares the goal of strengthening your resident council.

Outreach

Letting residents know about meetings and talking to residents one-on-one is key to getting people involved. Many people do not have experience with resident councils so you will need to invite them to participate. The most effective form of outreach is to directly invite people:

- Let them know why you want them, personally, to participate.
- Find out their interests and concerns and let them know how the resident council can support them.
- Be sure they know how they can participate and that their involvement will be useful. As residents, they are experts on their needs and how to improve their community.



In this document the term "resident councils" refers to those that have a duly elected board and follow HUD guidelines. A resident council may also be called a tenant council, tenant association, resident association, or tenant/resident organization or another name. For more information see [Guide 1: Organizing and Running Resident Councils](#).

Getting—and Keeping—People Involved

People will want to get involved and stay involved if they know that the resident council is working for their interests and that their involvement can make a difference.

- **Make it easy for people to participate:** choose an accessible location, a time that works for most people, and provide support like interpretation (as needed) and childcare, and snacks (if you use Tenant Participation Funds, there are some restrictions on spending for food).
- **Create plans and goals together** that respond to peoples' needs and interests
- **Be sure that everyone has a role and that their abilities are being put to use.** Engage people through tasks, activities, and committees.
- **Respect everyone's ideas:** members should be actively engaged in decision-making.
- **Make meetings welcoming and fun.** Think of ways to engage residents in different ways (like having a speaker or 5 minutes for resident shoutouts for participation going above and beyond). Rotate "icebreaker" activities to get to know your neighbors.
- **Invite speakers from the housing authority and community organizations,** and share resources during meetings.
- **Make an impact:** Focus on areas where the council has the ability to make a change.
- **Show impact and progress:** have a newsletter or post an update and celebrate when the resident council accomplishes a goal. Newsletters and updates can be done through social media and email but be sure to also post a print version in common areas.



For more information see [Guide 9: Tenant Participation Funds](#).

Use Communication Tools

When doing outreach for the resident council, or at a meeting, find out how people like to communicate.

Explore using technology to supplement flyers and other written communication (*keep in mind that not everyone will use social media or other technology so you'll still need to use written and person-to-person communication!*). Ideas to consider include:

- **Newsletters or flyers with updates:** post or deliver important updates from meetings, successes, and announcements. Free programs exist to send newsletters by email (i.e., MailChimp, Sender, or MailerLite).
- **Text messages:** For quick updates and meeting reminders.
- **Group messaging apps:** For quick communications or raising issues (i.e., WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram)
- **Resident Council Facebook page:** Members can share news, ideas, and updates.
- **Email listserv:** for any kind of resident council communication. (With a newsletter format, organizers like the Board can send messages to members. With a listserv, any member can reply to the entire group, but organizers can moderate the discussion.)
- **Form a communications committee:** this group can engage members with technology experience (including young people) and can figure out what methods work best, create new communications tools (such as a website), and even train members to use technology for keeping in touch.

Targeted Outreach

Some resident councils find themselves with strong participation from a core group of members, but lacking in new leaders. Other resident councils have participation of certain groups (such as retirees, or English-language speakers). This can be for many reasons:

- Existing leaders have strong relationships with each other, but not other members
- Some residents (for example, with small children or full-time jobs) have less time to participate
- Members do not see that their participation is needed and rely on existing leaders
- Younger residents may not feel that they have the experience required to help make decisions
- Outreach is not fully accessible (for example, English-only in communities with speakers of other languages)

In other cases, you may notice that participation in the resident council does not reflect the makeup of the community you represent in some way. Sometimes this is because of unintentional barriers. Consider ways to ask what may be preventing a group from fully participating. You may want to engage in *targeted outreach* to specific residents or groups. You may even want to create a committee for this purpose.

Some things to consider if you want to bring in more diverse membership:

- **Are meetings at a time and place that is accessible to all members?** For time, consider residents' work schedules. For place, consider transportation barriers and physical accessibility like ramps.
- **Are we providing support for people who want to come?** For example, childcare, transportation if meetings are off-site, technical support for remote meetings.
- **Are we communicating in the ways our residents do?** Consider providing notice by social media and/or email in addition to paper notices.
- **Are we providing interpretation that our community requires?**
- **Do we have opportunities for members to grow into leadership positions?** Some members may not feel comfortable joining the Board immediately, but might accept responsibility in a committee or working group.
- **Are we responding to the needs of that community?** For example, if maintenance is a concern, members may come to a meeting with management but may not come to a social event.

One-on-one meetings

A key technique for building leadership and engagement, particularly with harder-to-reach groups, is for leaders to meet individually with members. You may want to plan a meeting over coffee to hear someone's concerns, explain the resident council more thoroughly, or offer ways to get more deeply engaged. Or, you may be able to have a quick catch-up conversation in the hallway.

A one-on-one meeting is an opportunity to find out a person's interests and how they might contribute to the organization. If their schedule or commitments do not currently allow them to participate, they may engage more deeply when they have the opportunity if they feel updated and included in the resident council. If they don't know what's going on, they may never participate.

As a leader, it's important for you to share why you are involved and if there are challenges that you had to overcome to be a leader in the organization. Talk to them about why it's important for them to get more involved.

- Share your motivations, interests, goals: how and why did you get involved?
- What do they like about their community?
- How do they think the community could be better?
- What are their interests?
- What is important to them? What are their values?
- Why are they involved?
- How would they like to contribute? What do they like doing in their spare time?
- Keep them up to date and engaged, even if they cannot personally participate.

Meetings

Meetings are the most important way that the resident council and the Board engages its membership.

Sometimes, meetings can feel boring or not engaging, and that can discourage members from participating. However, a well-planned and well-run meeting can do the opposite: members leave feeling that their presence was important and will make a difference.

Meetings can also provide opportunities for leadership development. For example, someone considering running for a Board position might be delegated responsibilities (like presiding over a meeting) or be a “shadow” or supporting Board member for the meeting.

Outreach before meetings is also an important way to engage residents. Your bylaws will require that the meetings be “noticed,” usually by posting paper flyers around the building. You can build engagement into this process.

- Don't just slip flyers under doors, knock and have a conversation to individually invite people. Even if they can't come, ask them what's important to them, and make sure they know their presence is always welcome! Ask what would help them be able to attend.
- Catch people in the hallway as you are posting flyers
- 30 minutes before the meeting, knock on every door in the building and remind people “it's meeting time!” If your building is large, floor captains may take responsibility for this task. Having floor or building captains also builds leadership!



For more ideas on running engaging meetings, see [Guide 3: Holding Effective Resident Council Meetings in this Toolkit](#).

Build Group Identity



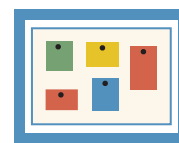
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Who we are & why we're here



TIMELINE

Note milestones & accomplishments



VISIONING

Create a vision board together

Strong organizations have a group identity that members connect with and are proud of.

Some ways to do this:

- **Create a mission statement for the organization:** include it on your flyers, write it up on a bulletin board, and say it at the beginning of meetings. The statement should convey why the group comes together.
- **Have a chant for the organization that says who you are and why you come together.** This is something that everyone can say at the end of meetings.
- **Put up a timeline that shows the organization's accomplishments and future goals.** At meetings, mark progress on the timeline.
- **Create a group vision.** This works well as a small group activity where the groups draw or use pictures cut from magazines to show what the organization will create together. Hang these in a prominent place or bring them out during meetings.

Leadership Ladder

To have a strong organization you need to continually engage people and build leadership. Bringing in new leaders is important to prevent burnout and so that new members feel needed and included.

A leadership ladder is a way to think about and track how to increase member engagement. Engagement level is noted on a scale of 1 to 5.

- **5s:** Are aware of the organization but do not participate. Everyone at the property should at least be a 5.
- **4s:** Are interested in the organization but generally do not participate. Invite them personally and find out what their barriers are to attending.
- **3s:** Participate but are not consistently engaged. Find out what they would like to do in the organization—can you invite them to join a committee, be a floor captain, or have a role at the meetings?

LEADERSHIP LADDER



- **2s:** Are committed to the organization, they come to nearly every meeting and event, but are not in a leadership role. Invite them to take on more leadership—chairing a committee, organizing an event, or conducting outreach. Find out their interests and if there is training they need. They are likely the next Board members.
- **1s:** Are board members or other leaders. 1s should be regularly working to move others up on the leadership ladder.

Committees and Tasks

To engage the most people, work to create tasks and roles where people can participate and gain experience and skills.

- **Committees:** Residents can gain leadership skills by taking responsibility for a committee or actively participating. Some common committees include:
 - » Management—Resident Relations
 - » Security
 - » Senior issues
 - » Children and youth activities
 - » Fundraising
 - » Social events
 - » Leadership development and recruitment
- **Working Groups:** These are time-limited groups for specific projects.
 - » Gardening
 - » Event-planning
 - » Voter registration
- **Activities:** Volunteers could take on planning an event.
 - » National Night Out (against crime)
 - » Coat give-away
- **Tasks:** Members can take on tasks in meetings (time-keeper, signing people in) or a task for the organization (finding a speaker for the next meeting).

Interactive Planning and Decision-Making

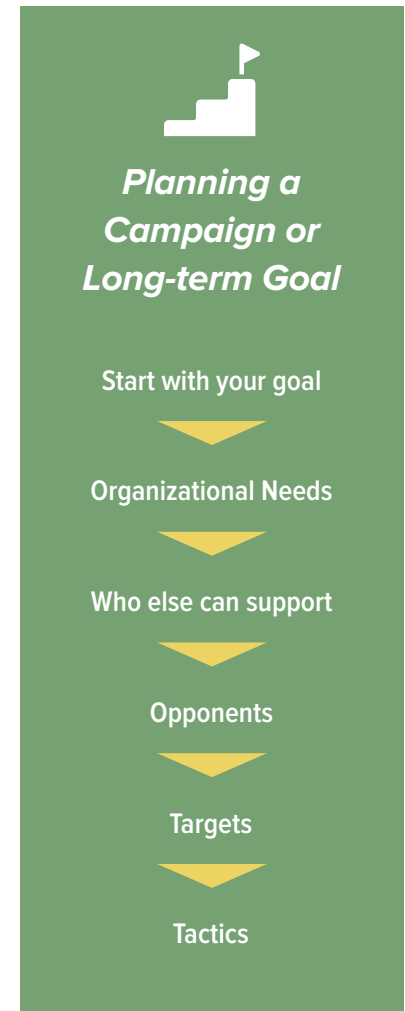
Residents will be most engaged when they are part of deciding the organization's goals and strategies.

They will want to participate if they believe that what the group is working for is important and that they can make a difference. To keep people engaged you will likely want to have big, long-term goals, as well as shorter-term, smaller goals. This way, people will see progress and know that the organization can have an impact.

Planning a Campaign or Long-term Goal

- **Start with your goal:** What would it mean to win (that's your goal!)? How will you win improvements in people's lives? What are short-term or interim wins on the path to the bigger win?
- **Organizational Needs:** What does the organization need to win (people, money, information)? Who do you need to bring in? Is there training or support you need? What do you already have?
- **Who else can support:** What other organizations care about the issue? Who else would benefit if you win?
- **Opponents:** Who are your opponents? What will your victory cost them? How might they try to oppose you?
- **Targets:** Who has the power to say yes to what you want (that's your target—the person you are trying to influence)? Secondary target: who could convince your target to say yes? (The target is a person with a name—the housing authority is not the target but the Director of the housing authority could be a target.)
- **Tactics:** What can you do to get the target to say yes? This might include calls, emails, meetings, media, a public action, hearings, negotiations, etc.

Figuring out the answers to these questions should be a group process. It may take multiple meetings to figure this out. You may need to consult others or do research between meetings. This process comes from the Midwest Academy. See the [link](#) to their strategy chart below.



Conflict Resolution

In any organization, some conflict is normal. It's important though to deal with conflict in constructive ways, to allow people to be heard, and to come to solutions. Some tips for dealing with conflict include:

- **Deal with conflict sooner than later.** If the conflict is heated though, you should wait until people are not as angry.
- **Attempt to address conflicts in person when possible (not by email!).** Stay positive and keep the focus on specific issues and solutions.

- **Ensure that there is time for people to be heard in meetings.** Often conflict comes from people feeling that they are not being listened to or that their input doesn't matter.
- **Create meeting guidelines.** For example, no personal attacks and one speaker at a time. Have members help come up with the guidelines and post them during each meeting. Posting the guidelines will help members to maintain and enforce them.
- **Promote teambuilding and bonding.** When members know each other, they will have more trust and understanding. Members may also feel more comfortable addressing differences in positive ways.
- **Look for organizational solutions and be willing to compromise.** A conflict often sounds personal, for example, "You don't like me and don't want to hear what I have to say." But there may be an issue related to the organization, like "The meetings are not at a time I can attend." Focus on finding solutions that benefit the group.
- **Ask for help in resolving conflicts.** It's often helpful to engage a neutral third party. This could be someone from a community organization, the housing authority, or from another resident council.
- **Organize conflict resolution training for board members, committee leads and others who may benefit.** Some local governments or community organizations have conflict and dispute resolution centers that can offer free or low-cost training. Tenant participation funds can be used to support this type of training.



In St Paul, Minnesota, the resident councils receive training from the Minnesota Dispute Resolution Center. Receiving training before there is a problem is a great way to minimize and resolve conflicts!

Getting Engaged on a Broader Level

You may want to get your resident council involved in activities beyond your housing development.

HUD promotes resident participation and the active involvement in all aspects of the housing authority's mission and operation. You should not feel limited to the ways your resident council can get things done!

Jurisdiction-wide Resident Council

A jurisdiction-wide resident council represents the interests of all public housing residents in the area.

It can be formed by resident councils under the same housing authority coming together, by electing a representative from each resident council to the group, or through jurisdiction-wide elections. When made up of duly-elected resident councils this group has a specific role to weigh in on housing authority policies.

Resident Advisory Board

When the housing authority updates the PHA Plan (usually annually and every five years), the Resident Advisory Board (RAB) has a formal role in voicing residents' concerns and priorities.



For more information, see [Guide 5: Resident Advisory Boards and the Housing Authority Plan Process](#).

Policy-Making

Resident councils can be active in advocacy at the local, state, and national level. Public housing sometimes receives funding from local or state budgets. But you can also get involved in community issues, for example, how the police operate in your neighborhood, schools, or any other area that affects your residents. Many resident councils partner with larger, national organizations to do advocacy at the federal level. Many states or regions also have coalitions of organizations that you may want to join or partner with.

National Trainings and Organizations

By participating in national training events and organizations, you can meet resident leaders from across the country to learn best practices and build new skills. You may be able to fund travel to events with the resident council budget or with grants. Travelling to be part of larger efforts can be an exciting opportunity for new resident leaders—they can see what is happening in other cities, get inspired, and be challenged to take on more responsibility.

Some nation-wide organizations that have conferences, trainings, or events that may be of interest to public housing resident councils include:

- [National Alliance of Resident Services in Affordable and Assisted Housing \(NAR-SAAH\)](#)
- [NeighborWorks America](#)
- [National Low Income Housing Coalition \(NLIHC\)](#)
- [National Alliance of HUD Tenants \(NAHT\)](#)



See the [Sample Forms for Resident Council Meetings](#) for customizable flyers and agendas,



See the [Sample Forms for Resident Council Elections](#) for customizable flyers and forms.



Resources

Midwest Academy Strategy Chart for creating a plan to reach organizing goals: <https://mn.gov/mnddc/pipm/curriculumchangechart.html>

Training for Change has free resources on providing engaging trainings, facilitation, games and ice-breakers, and decision-making: <https://www.trainingforchange.org/> The Balance Careers offers a list of fun ice-breaker questions and ideas for creating your own: <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/fun-ice-breaker-questions-1918413>

Sample Script for Inviting People to a Meeting

Hi, my name is _____ and I live in apartment _____ (or the community).

I'm here to invite you to attend a resident council meeting

(OR: talk about starting a resident council in our building).

Ask the person questions to engage them and learn about what they are interested in:

- How long have you lived here?
- Have you ever attended a Resident Council meeting before?
- Is there anything that you would like to see improved here at the property?
- Are you interested in being more involved here?

Tell them about why the Resident Council is forming or what you are currently working on:

- We are joining together to work to improve our quality of life here
- I am interested in _____

Directly invite them to attend a meeting

- Would you be interested in coming to the next Resident Council meeting?
- We will be meeting on _____ (date) at _____ (time) in the _____ (location).
- Can I take down your name and your phone number to follow up with you for the meeting?

If they are very interested, you can ask them to support in additional ways

- Do you want to help us plan this first meeting?
- Would you be able to help with outreach in your building or community?

