



Resident Council and Housing Authority Case Study

Fall River, MA

Joint Tenant
Council and
Statewide
Training



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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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Fall River, MA: Joint Tenant Council and Statewide Training

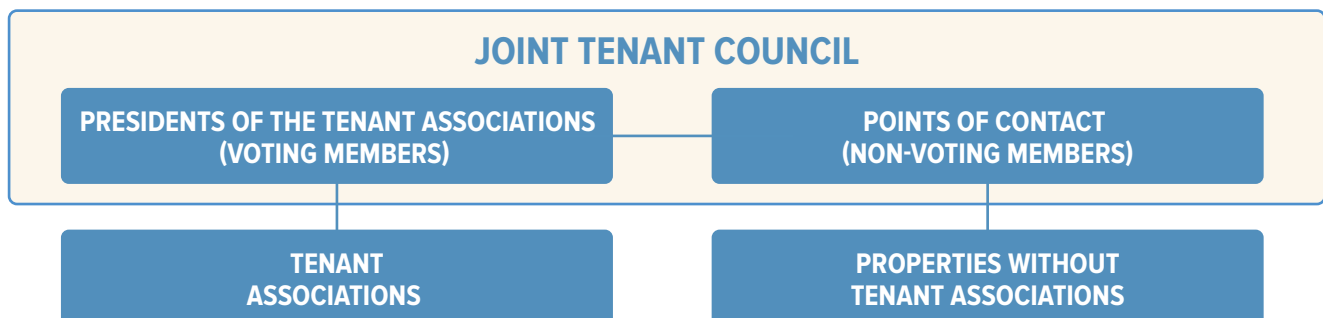
David Underhill serves as the tenant representative on the Fall River Housing Authority Board of Commissioners. He states that having resident participation on the Board of Commissioners is critical,

“When the other four commissioners want to table something, I say, ‘No, we are going to discuss it now because when this meeting is adjourned the four of you are going home to your nice homes but I’m going home to the building where the issue is. So, we’re talking about it.’ So, now they really listen to me. I don’t ask for unreasonable things. I just ask for basic things. I see what we need and what we want because I am living it. We are just looking for basic things to live a good quality of life.”



Resident Council Structure

The Fall River Housing Authority (FRHA) in Massachusetts has 23 public housing developments that provide 2,325 units of public housing. Approximately half of the properties have tenant presidents, including all of the senior developments. Of these, approximately five of the buildings have tenant associations with a full board. In Fall River, all the resident councils come together under one roof as the Joint Tenant Council (JTC). Tenant associations generally meet monthly while the JTC meets quarterly.





Jurisdiction-wide Resident Council

Jurisdiction-wide resident councils, like the Fall River Joint Tenant Council, represent the interests of all public housing residents under that housing authority's jurisdiction. The organization must be recognized by the housing authority as representing residents for input on housing authority policy. Jurisdiction-wide resident councils can be formed by the presidents of duly elected resident councils forming an organization, by resident councils electing a representative to the organization, or through jurisdiction-wide elections. Fall River residents have chosen to have the presidents form the organization.

David Underhill is the Chairman of the Joint Tenant Council and serves as the Resident Commissioner on the FRHA Board of Commissioners. Mr. Underhill explains that the JTC works to get residents at every property involved in their work, even at buildings that don't have tenant associations. He explains, "We want everyone to know [about the JTC and how to get involved]. We post flyers in all the developments. If there is a tenant association, they make sure everyone knows. It's hard, especially in the family developments, but we are getting there."

In order to ensure more participation, they are loosening the regulations so that if someone would like to represent their building but does not want to be the "president" they can be the "point of contact." He explains, "We don't want [residents] missing out on any of the good things that are going to happen." These residents are not voting members in the JTC but are to bring information back to their properties to get the word out for events like a tenant wide cookout or a job fair. Residents have been receptive to this idea.

Mr. Underhill reports that the council worked hard on the MOU over 3-4 years.

A primary goal of the Fall River Joint Tenant Council is to create employment and engagement opportunities for residents. The JTC created a program that puts residents to work helping the maintenance staff. Residents work 5-6 hours per week and receive a stipend which does not count against their rent. The tasks generally go to people who are looking to do something in their community. To date, 16 people have participated and more are interested. The JTC is working with the union representing the maintenance staff to formalize the program as an apprenticeship.



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—David Underhill



Tenant Participation Funds

The Joint Tenant Council submits an annual budget to the FRHA.

Mr. Underhill reports that the FRHA has never denied a budget request and often goes above and beyond the JTC requests. As an example, he explains that the JTC received an offer of frozen food for their food distribution program but did not have anywhere to store it. The next day, the FRHA provided a new freezer, the FRHA's Executive Director donated one from his home and the head of the Tenant Council also provided one. The JTC now has enough room to accept the donations.

The JTC uses an off-line apartment as their office. All of the related expenses are covered by the FRHA and Mr. Underhill reports they "have all the comforts of home." When there is a citywide meeting, the JTC submits the budget for taxi and bus fares for people across the city to attend.



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Resident Council Training

Resident leaders in Fall River public housing benefit from support, training, and guidance provided by the Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Tenants (Mass Union) and the Mel King Institute for Community Building (Mel King).

The Mass Union is a statewide resident-led organization with an elected, all-resident Board. The Mass Union works with Massachusetts public housing resident councils on policy, training, advocacy, and the initiation of legislation. The organization is in its 50th year and is affiliated with the National Alliance of Resident Services in Affordable and Assisted Housing (NAR-SAAH). NAR-SAAH provides technical assistance and training to public housing resident services staff, resident commissioners, and resident councils members.

The Mel King Institute supports resident councils from across Massachusetts in organizing, running tenant meetings, engaging in annual plans, serving as a resident commissioner, and more. Every month, the organization provides 1-2 webinars that are open to residents. They also provide resident leader training which takes place over 10 virtual sessions or 2 full days in person. Massachusetts has a large amount of state, as well as federal, public housing. The Mass Union and the Mel King Institute serve residents from both types of public housing. Both organizations receive funds from the state of Massachusetts and housing authorities around the state. In addition to a full-time person who works with resident councils, Mel King employs about a dozen resident leaders who receive stipends for engaging in training and facilitation.

Mr. Underhill serves as a Board member of the Mass Union. This position has offered him incredible opportunities. As a Board member for the past 4 plus years he has been able to travel all over the country. He relates that the first time he attended a convention with other public housing residents he realized how much people living in public housing across the country have in common. He began talking about the

elevators in his building breaking down and other residents immediately spoke up about similar issues and what they had done to address them. He explains that because of the Mass Union he knows who to call for any issue or opportunity. Fall River sends 15-20 residents to the annual meeting of the Mass Union. The FRHA pays for the training including 2 nights in a hotel, and the bus up and back.



Resident Advisory Board and the Annual Plan

A Resident Advisory Board (RAB) is a group, or multiple groups, of residents that advises and assists the housing authority in creating Annual and 5-Year Plans, often referred to together as “the Plan.”

The Plan is a comprehensive guide to the agency’s policies, rules, programs, operations, and strategies to meet its goals. Resident involvement in developing the Plan is critical since it outlines policies and programs directly impacting residents. The PHA must consider the recommendations of the RAB(s) and revise the Plan where appropriate. When there is a duly recognized jurisdiction-wide resident council that group serves as the RAB.

At the annual meeting of the Joint Tenant Council, they elect members to the Resident Advisory Board. Additionally, Presidents of each development are automatically on the RAB. The RAB holds meetings on its own, without the housing authority, to discuss their positions as residents. Members of the RAB receive training from the Mass Union and Mel King Institute related to the Plan and how it impacts residents. Once the RAB has their questions, comments, and policy recommendations they join with the housing authority to discuss and provide input for the Annual Plan.

Jack Cooper, of Mass Union counsels that “If residents are not part of a Plan, they are not invested in it. And, are unlikely to offer comments on a Plan that has already been created.” He encourages resident leaders to hold ongoing meetings throughout the year related to the PHA Plan and explains that the most active groups meet quarterly with the PHA.

The Fall River RAB has a history of resident engagement and has influenced the PHA Plan. Mr. Underhill reports that some years ago a grievance panel was started out of a RAB recommendation. Grievances must be heard before a hearing officer. However, under HUD regulations, this may be an individual or a panel of more than one person. Residents felt it was important to have a panel of multiple impartial people. A current recommendation of the group is to have a resident accompany inspectors for property-wide inspections. Residents are concerned that only management and maintenance staff currently accompany the inspectors. They are recommending that residents also be involved since they know the property best.



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—Jack Cooper



Community Partnerships

In order to better serve their communities, the JTC joined the Greater Fall River Partners for a Healthier Community, a coalition of local organizations working on issues of physical and mental health, fitness, and wellbeing. Through the coalition the JTC connected with community partners including FEMA and the United Way to address the issue of lack of access to healthy and affordable food near Fall River's public housing properties. The coalition, which meets regularly, provided the connection to food suppliers. Through these relationships, the JTC began food distribution to residents who do not have the ability to get to a local food pantry. They now also have a farmer's market at one of the developments. Residents can use their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or food stamps) benefits along with additional funds from the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), which provides an additional \$40/ month on their SNAP card, for fresh fruits and vegetables. Mr. Underhill reports that the partnership has worked well for everyone. The farmers are very informative, offering tips and recipes for using produce that may be new to the residents.

During the COVID-19 crisis the JTC worked with the Executive Director of the housing authority, Ed Gagnon, and the city to support public housing residents in getting vaccinated, starting with the seniors. They were able to set up vaccination sites at the larger buildings, where social distancing could be maintained, and then bus residents from other buildings. After two months, they were able to get anyone in Fall River public housing who wanted, including adults at the family sites, vaccinated. As the vaccine became eligible to younger people, they ensured that youth were able to get vaccinated as well.



Mr. Underhill states, "As the JTC we were proud of [our work to get residents vaccinated]. We got both the buses and time donated. We got a lot of accolades."



Resources

Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) relating to jurisdiction-wide councils can be found at [24 CFR part 964.135](#). Title 24, Housing and Urban Development, Part 964, Tenant Participation and Tenant Opportunities in Public Housing, Role of the jurisdiction-wide resident council.

Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) relating to Resident Advisory Boards are found in [24 CFR § 903.13](#). Title 24, Housing and Urban Development, Part 964, Tenant Participation and Tenant Opportunities in Public Housing, What is a Resident Advisory Board and what is its role in development of the Annual Plan?

Fall River Housing Authority: <https://fallriverha.org/>

Greater Fall River Partners for a Healthier Community: <https://000ip39.wcomhost.com/wordpress1/>

Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Residents: <https://massunion.org/>

Mel King Institute for Community Building: <https://www.melkinginstitute.org/>

National Alliance of Resident Services in Affordable and Assisted Housing (NAR-SAAH):
<https://www.narsaah.today/>

Interviewees

David Underhill, Joint Tenant Council and Fall River Housing Authority Board of Commissioners

Jack Cooper, Executive Director, Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Residents

Sarah Byrnes, Director of the Public Housing Training Program, Mel King Institute for Community Building