



Guide 4: Partnering and Advocacy with the Housing Authority



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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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PARTNERING AND ADVOCACY WITH THE HOUSING AUTHORITY

Many residents are drawn to work with a resident council because they have immediate concerns about, or ideas to improve, their living situation. Public housing residents often want more attentive maintenance, improved safety, clearer communication with property owners, and more responsive programs. Getting involved in a resident council is the best way to partner and advocate with the housing authority for the things you care about as a resident.

Advocacy from the resident council to the housing authority can sometimes feel contentious or tense. However, both residents and housing authorities share many goals: safe, decent, affordable housing, opportunities for residents, and community safety. Sometimes, having a resident council can be the key step to developing a more collaborative relationship.

“Things get done when residents are organized and come with legitimate requests”

— *Lynette Johnson, Resident Services Coordinator,
Los Angeles County Development Authority*

Needs assessment

The first thing the resident council should do before advocating with the housing authority is understand the needs of residents.

To do this you can conduct surveys, hold meetings, and have one-on-one conversations.

Some questions to ask might include:

- Do you have maintenance issues in your apartment? What are they?
 - » Have you made maintenance requests? How soon do you get an answer?
- Are there housing authority policies that you think should change?
- Are there programs or services you would like to see in your community?
Or programs that could be improved?
- Have you been able to get your questions answered by the housing authority?
If not, what do you need to know?

Look at the answers you get. Often, many residents will have the same concerns or ideas. In those cases, advocacy by the resident council is an appropriate way to get a response. When the resident council presents issues and concerns in an organized way, this can be a benefit to everyone. Residents are supported in getting their issues resolved and the housing authority has a streamlined process for receiving and



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.***

addressing common concerns. This is particularly true when there are property-wide issues. The resident council can raise the concern on behalf of everyone (rather than numerous individuals submitting the same complaint) and the housing authority can provide any feedback or follow-up at a resident council meeting (rather than having to respond to numerous individuals about the same issue). This saves both residents and the housing authority time.

“HUD promotes resident participation and the active involvement of residents in all aspects of a [housing authority’s] overall mission and operation.” (24 CFR part 964.11)



See [Guide 2: Engaging Residents and Representing Resident Interests](#) for more ideas.

Working together

In many cases, residents and housing authorities can work together productively. By meeting regularly, discussing ideas and issues, problem solving, and making decisions together, housing authority staff and resident leaders will build trust and cooperation. Key components to build the relationship are:

- **Get to know each other:** Find out why people are involved, what they like to do outside of work / resident council. This is a key part of building trust.
- **Consistent participation:** Having the same people participate regularly means that the group can build trust and make progress. It’s important that the housing authority and resident council have specific point people to maintain participation.
- **Meet regularly:** Having a standing, regular meeting (*for example the 1st Monday of each month at a certain time*) will ensure that meetings are consistent and prioritized. If there is nothing to discuss one month, you can always cancel the meeting or do a team-building activity.
- **Get things done:** Accomplishing goals and having an impact will keep people interested and excited about the group. Work together to create big goals but break those down into shorter-term goals. When the group accomplishes something together, take time to acknowledge it and celebrate.

When the housing authority and resident council work together, they can:

- **Improve Communication:** The resident council can provide a venue for the housing authority to get input, communicate new policies, and resolve issues. Improve management, housing conditions, and community safety by having a clear line of communication and ensuring both parties understand their responsibilities.



Federal rules for public housing:

You can find public housing regulations in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR).

Most rules related to tenant participation are in Title 24, Housing and Urban Development, Part 964, Tenant Participation and Tenant Opportunities in Public Housing.

24 CFR 964.100

links to the Role of the Resident Council subsection. Click the link to read the regulations in detail.



In Baltimore County, MD, plans to stop the spread of COVID were initially being made separately by the management of each of the senior buildings. In some buildings, residents thought the policies prohibiting visitors went too far. The jurisdiction-wide resident council, the Resident Advisory Board (RAB), brought all the resident councils together to provide input and push the housing authority to come up with a uniform plan of action that included distributing masks and food at senior buildings. The RAB was able to provide a space for everyone to come together to discuss the issues and come up with policies including safe ways to allow for some visitors.

- **Conduct joint problem solving:** By bringing residents together, the resident council can determine issues that are affecting the most people, develop priorities, and directly communicate with the housing authority to come up with a course of action.



In Charleston-Kanawha, WV resident councils have two monthly meetings, one is just residents and the other meeting is with the management. In the meetings with management the resident council will bring up issues that they have identified and work with property management to come up with solutions. For example, to address security concerns, they have decided on where to improve lighting at the property or add a security camera. If the resident council feels an issue has not been properly addressed, a Board member can bring it to the quarterly meeting with the Chief Executive Officer of the Housing Authority. Because residents and management talk out the issue and potential solutions, the result better meets the residents needs.

- **Better address resident needs,** including bringing improved services to the community. Residents are the experts on their community's strengths and needs. At the same time, the housing authority may have more community connections and capacity. By including residents in planning, any services and programs that the housing authority brings to the community are likely to be more responsive to community needs and desires.



In St Paul, MN computer labs were set up through a ROSS grant. When the ROSS grant ended they needed to figure out how to maintain functioning computer labs. The resident councils and the housing authority came up with the idea of hiring residents, who receive a stipend, as computer peers. When a resident puts in a ticket for a technical issue that comes up in the lab, the housing authority assigns a computer peer who uses their skills to fix the problem or refer it to IT.

- **Develop Long-Term Plans:** There are numerous areas in which the housing authority and resident council can work together around policies and long-term plans. Most notably, this can be done through the housing authority Plan process. It can also happen on the property-level, particularly if there are plans for redevelopment or modernization (likely, these changes would be part of the housing authority Plan). Having a strong working relationship and a foundation that is built on trust and shared goals will allow the group to work together to tackle more complex issues.



In Chicago the resident councils and citywide advisory board meet regularly with the housing authority. During the modernization process, the residents and housing authority were able to build on their existing structures and relationships. Resident councils were very active in the redevelopment process through working groups with developers and service providers, and ensuring a strong policy on residents right to return. Resident councils even helped track residents through the redevelopment process.

- **Work to Resolve Conflicts:** Conflicts or disagreements between the housing authority and residents should be dealt with proactively. This means, as possible, working to resolve disagreements before they become a major issue. It may be helpful to have an in-person meeting to address a specific disagreement and work towards solutions. If needed, bring in a neutral facilitator who can support the groups in discussing the issue and working towards a solution. This could be someone from a community organization or local government. Tenant participation funds may be used to pay for a facilitator or mediator.



In St Paul, Minnesota, the resident councils receive training from the Minnesota Dispute Resolution Center.

Resident Council—Housing Authority Partnerships

HUD encourages residents to “be involved and participate in the overall policy development and direction of Public Housing operations.” HUD regulations suggest specific ways the housing authority and resident council can collaborate, including through:



Training



The housing authority Plan



Tenant participation funds



Resident management corporations (RMCs)



MOUs (written agreement) between the resident council and the housing authority



Service coordination programs

Training

HUD encourages housing authorities to provide training for residents, so they can make better use of HUD programs and other opportunities. In the regulations, HUD provides some suggestions for trainings:

- Community organization and leadership;
- Organizational development training for resident management corporations and resident councils;
- Public housing policies, programs, rights and responsibilities; and
- Business entrepreneurial training, planning, and job skills.

However, training can be arranged for other relevant topics. HUD suggests using local resources for training, including: resident organizations, community colleges, vocational schools, HUD, federal and local agencies, and community organizations.



In St Paul, Minnesota, housing authority staff supports the resident councils by providing training to board members on their roles and responsibilities, running meetings, and how to track expenses and file taxes. Individualized training is provided to resident council treasurers and secretaries around their specific duties. The housing authority contracts with the Minnesota Dispute Resolution Center to provide training on conflict resolution and communication to the resident councils to support them in having productive meetings and resolving differences constructively.

The Housing Authority Plan

Housing authorities must prepare a “Plan” that is updated regularly. Some housing authorities do an annual component and a five-year component. The Plan sets the housing authorities policies like:

- How residents are selected
- Rent determination
- Grievance procedures
- Pet policies
- Types of housing offered (such as elderly / disabled housing)
- Housing authority programs (such as ROSS and FSS programs)
- Changes to public housing, like RAD conversion

All of these things affect residents! Residents can participate through a Resident Advisory Board. If there is no jurisdiction-wide resident council, but there are resident councils in individual buildings, make sure the housing authority knows you want to participate. Even if you are not part of a resident council, you can request the draft Plan and submit comments for the Public Hearing.



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

Tenant Participation Funds

The housing authority must provide funds that it receives from HUD for tenant participation to duly elected resident councils. When Congress approves enough funding, the amount must be \$25 per occupied unit per year, with \$15 designated for the resident council’s (and / or jurisdiction-wide resident council) and \$10 per unit per year which can be used by the housing authority for costs related to tenant participation activities **24 CFR 964.150**. If Congress approves less funding, HUD may provide less funding.

Tenant participation funds may be used to assist residents in establishing and operating a resident council, including elections, support the resident council in carrying out their duties, and capacity building for resident councils.



To learn more see [Guide 9: Tenant Participation Funds and the Tenant Participation Funds section of the Toolkit.](#)

Resident Management Corporations

Resident Management Corporations (RMCs) are organizations that manage public housing and are run by the residents of the property. RMCs may fulfill all or some of the responsibilities for the property management. If your resident council wants to take more responsibility for your housing, creating an RMC may be a good option.



To learn more see [Guide 8: Resident Management Corporations.](#)

Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)

Housing authorities and resident councils can work together to define their relationship through the process of creating or updating a memorandum of understanding (MOU). This is a legal agreement between the two groups that spells out their relationship, including what support the housing authority will provide to the resident council. The MOU ensures that the housing authority is aware of its responsibilities to involve tenants in shaping its policies and residents can define how they will participate in making decisions around housing authority plans. HUD requires housing authorities with 250 units or more to have a MOU with the resident council(s), which is updated at least every 3 years. Smaller housing authorities are encouraged to have MOUs, but are not required to.



To learn more see the [Sample Resident Council and Housing Authority Memorandum of Understanding](#).

Service Coordination Programs

HUD offers programs that can provide funding to place program or service coordinators that support public housing residents. The coordinator might be on the staff of the housing authority, or occasionally, be employed by a resident-led organization like the jurisdiction-wide resident council.

The Resident Opportunity and Self-Sufficiency Grant Program (ROSS), Family Self Sufficiency (FSS), and Jobs Plus programs all offer opportunities for residents and the housing authority to work together to plan community services and programs.



To learn more see [Guide 7: Resident Training and Self-Sufficiency Programs](#).

Tactics for advocacy

Often, residents have tried individually to get answers or results. If not, encourage members to be self-advocates, too!

Maintenance issues

Be sure that residents have the correct contact information for maintenance requests, encourage them to document their attempts to get repairs, and have them follow-up. They should also document the issue by taking photos.

Housing authority policies

What is the policy or rule that is concerning to residents? Is it a written policy? Is it evenly enforced?

When many residents have the same issues and/ or there are property-wide problems that are not getting resolved, the resident council can try an “escalating” series of tactics to obtain results. In escalating, the resident council will start with the first, and most direct, action. If that does not get results, the resident council moves to the next step, generally focusing on a person or group that has influence over the previous person.

Examples of escalating tactics:

- Write a joint letter on behalf of the resident council to the housing authority. Include survey results of what issues residents have. (Make sure you have permission from residents to share any information that was given to the resident council)
- Request that a representative from the housing authority attend a resident council meeting. Be prepared with specific questions and concerns
- Create a report to present to the housing authority, using a detailed survey of what issues need be addressed in every unit
- Raise concerns to the board of the housing authority at their meeting
- Involve housing inspectors or other local government officials
- Reach out to the constituent services staff of your elected Representative and Senators in Congress
- Contact officials at HUD. Start with your local Field Office (HUD has a helpful map on [its website](#)).

Remember that the goal is to work cooperatively with the housing authority, and tactics shouldn't be chosen merely to "shame" or "win." However, if the resident council makes efforts that are not successful, it may be time to try other tactics.

You can also be creative in your approach to advocacy! There are many ways to involve residents, conduct advocacy, and build community. You can involve youth, make art, hold social events, and even do plays or other media.



Resources

United States Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) relating to resident involvement in housing authority operations can be found at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2011-title24-vol4/CFR-2011-title24-vol4-sec964-135>. Title 24, Housing and Urban Development, Part 964, Tenant Participation and Tenant Opportunities in Public Housing, Resident involvement in HA management operations.

United States Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) relating to resident training can be found at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2002-title24-vol4/CFR-2002-title24-vol4-sec964-140>. Title 24, Housing and Urban Development, Part 964, Tenant Participation and Tenant Opportunities in Public Housing, Resident training.

The HUD website provides resources by state, including links to legal aid offices and housing counseling organizations: <https://www.hud.gov/states>

HUD Guidance on the Use of Tenant Participation Funds. PIH 2021-16(May, 2021): <https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/PIH2021-16.pdf>

HUD Exchange Training: Running ROSS Step-by-Step: <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/ross/guide/collaboration-and-partnerships/what-is-a-ross-pcc/who-should-join/>

Report from the Urban Institute: Building Public Housing Authority Capacity for Better Resident Services. By Sarah Gillespie and Susan J. Popkin (August 2015): <http://kresge.org/sites/default/files/Building-Public-Housing-Authority-Capacity-for-Better-Resident-Services-1.pdf>