

TENANT ORGANIZING HANDBOOK

A Guide to Creating a
Tenant Association

December 2025



Artwork by [Andrea Manica](#) • Content by Britt Simpson

About the Tenant Organizing Handbook

Purpose of the Handbook

The Tenant Organizing Handbook is a comprehensive resource created to support renters in Hamilton, Ontario and beyond.

This step by step guide empowers tenants to come together, organize, and take action against corrupt landlords and investors.

The handbook outlines practical strategies, tenants' rights, and the essential steps to building **tenant associations** and collective power. It's designed to foster solidarity, provide clarity, and equip both new and experienced tenants with the knowledge they need to advocate for safe, fair, and just housing.

A tenant association is a structure to organize tenants' concerns and issues in the place where they live. It's a group of tenants who have come together to improve their situation as tenants. It is protected under the law and can be incorporated, but it does not have to be. Residents of a building have the legal right to organize a group of tenants.

Sections 83, 94, and 233 of the Residential Tenancies Act, the law that governs landlords and tenants in Ontario, states that a landlord cannot interfere with any tenant who is organizing or joining a tenant association.

This handbook is a living document, updated as tenant laws and organizing strategies evolve. Staying familiar with its contents is an important part of helping you to organize a tenant association.

This book relied on the work of Seeds for Change and remains anti copyright.

What You'll Find in this Handbook

Steps to Building a Tenant Association

Beginner friendly guidelines on how to go from individuals to an empowered group

Collective Power and Coalition Building

How to move forward with growing connections to include other groups with shared interests

Landlord Tactics

Highlighting the common ways that landlords will attempt to break a lease, or get rid of a "problem" tenant

Direct Action

Examples of actions that can be taken by groups to disrupt the actions of landlords

Appendices - future edition of this handbook

Example of a group Terms of Reference, Example Demand Letter, LTB/RTA Explanations



Creating a Tenant Association

A tenant association starts with **people**. To create real change, you need people power. The more tenants that are involved, the stronger your association will be. This starts by talking to people in your building and forging strong relationships with them, planning a first meeting, doing some research to ensure you're prepared, hosting your first meeting, and creating a terms of reference.

Talk to People

- Start by going door to door in your building. Talk to your neighbours and ask them if they're interested in joining a tenant group. Ask them if they have any concerns about the building or if there are things they really like about it.
- Keep a list of who's interested and collect contact information.
- Write down the concerns people raise and the things they tell you are going well.
- If someone doesn't answer, leave a flyer inviting them to get in touch with you. The flyer should include -
 - Your contact information - you might want to set up a separate email for things related to your tenant association
 - Why you got in touch - to talk about issues in the building
 - That you'll be planning a first meeting and will share the details with everyone soon

Plan the First Meeting

It's important to choose a date and time that works for most people. Weeknights or weekends usually work best. Hold the meeting in a tenant's unit, the lobby, a common room, or even a nearby park if you're concerned about interference from the landlord or building staff.

Do Some Research

Before your first meeting, gather useful background information including -

- Who owns the building? What other properties do they own?
- What are your rights?
 - Look up the laws in Ontario that protect tenants
 - Find out if your city has bylaws to protect tenants and what bylaws there are related to building maintenance and property standards
- Ensure you have contact information for all of your local representatives - your City Councillor, Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) and Member of Parliament (MP)

Host the First Meeting

Your first meeting is a chance to come together, get organized, and establish your tenant association. You'll need a clear agenda to stay on track. Here's a sample of one you can use -

- **Introductions** - Start by telling everyone your first name and what floor you live on
- **Information sharing** - Share what you learned by going door to door speaking to tenants - what were the most common things you heard, good and bad

- **Group work** - Take notes either on paper, or on a poster board for everyone to see, of all the issues you heard from tenants and any other issues folks in the room want to raise

- **Talk about next steps** - How do you want to share these concerns with your landlord or property manager? What are your demands? What solutions do you want to see?

- **Create a terms of reference and vote to officially form a tenant association** - Collectively create a terms of reference (see next page); vote to officially create a tenant association (give your tenant association a name) and adopt the terms of reference

- **Agree on your preferred way to stay in touch** - Ask everyone in the group how they prefer staying in touch; one or more of the following options is usually best -
 - Email
 - Group chat - use a secure messaging platform
 - Phone
 - Door to door notices

- **Decide on a date for your next meeting** - This is an important thing to do before leaving the room; at your next meeting you'll vote on your Terms of Reference and decide on and schedule your first collective action; there are some important things to consider -
 - Are there people in the room who can bring new members to the next meeting? What are some other ways to connect with people in the building?

How to Create a Terms of Reference

For a group to work well and reach their goals, they need to figure out how to do things as a team. To do this, they should talk and ask one other important questions to understand what everyone wants and expects. One good way to do this is by creating a shared Terms of Reference. This is a simple set of rules and agreements that everyone helps create. Here are some suggestions of questions that might be important to your group. You can ask any or all of these or make up your own if there are specific things you're hoping to incorporate in your Terms of Reference.

Questions to Ask

**What is the group?
What do you want
to achieve?**

Discuss exactly what you want to achieve - be specific and talk about your goals, values, and experiences

**How will tasks be
completed? Who
will do the work
necessary to move
things forward?**

Every group has tasks to complete in order to achieve their goals; you will need to divide up the work and consider creating roles and forming smaller groups to take on specific tasks

**How will decisions
be made? How will
you vote?**

There are different options for voting to make decisions - by consensus, simple majority vote, or a super majority vote - see the next page

Different Ways to Make Decisions

Consensus

This method requires **everyone** in the group to agree before a decision is reached.

This may mean compromising to keep things moving.

Be cautious - if the same people are always backing down, that's not true consensus. This method ensures the strongest form of democratic control.

Simple Majority Vote

This method is often the fastest. Many groups use majority votes for small or time sensitive decisions.

It can also help when consensus can't be reached.

Be cautious - pushing ahead despite strong objections can create erode trust. This method is achieved by 50% + 1 agreeing to a decision.

Super Majority Vote

A super majority vote requires two thirds (67%) or three quarters (75%) of members to vote in favour for something to move forward.

This can be a good compromise between consensus and simple majority voting. Some groups use "consensus minus one," where one veto is allowed but two votes against something can stop something from moving forward.

Be mindful that no method of decision making is perfect. Each method of decision making comes with pros and cons.

Your group may want to use more than one method of decision making depending on the type of decision before you.

Some tenant associations use a mix of methods depending on the stakes, aiming for broader agreement and group cohesion.

Now that you've gone through these steps to create a Terms of Reference, someone should agree to put a document together outlining the decisions you've made.

You should vote on it at your next meeting to ensure all members have had time to read the document first before agreeing to how your tenant association will be run.





Building a Coalition

Many smaller movements will enjoy brief periods of activity and attention and then fizzle out, how can we avoid this? One option is a coalition with other groups.

Collective power - Can usually achieve more in combination than alone

Solidarity - Even if groups have different main issues - they can reinforce and support each other

Sustainable movements - Coalitions have more potential to continue if one group falls away, larger networks and public waves of attention for each of the groups means someone is always talking about the issues

Organizations to Partner with as a Tenant Association

A coalition does not need to be made up solely of other tenant associations, although that is a possibility. Look at the list below for types of groups you could look for based on the issues you are facing.

Local Legal Clinics

- Hamilton Community Legal Clinic

Other tenant support organizations in the area, neighbourhood, city or province

- Hamilton ACORN
- Hamilton Tenants in Unity

Advocacy organizations that focus on tenancy or renting in Ontario

- Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario
- Ontario Tenant Alliance
- Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations
- Ontario Renters for Fair Housing

Tenant associations should also consider partnering with neighbourhood associations, cleanup groups, and environmental organizations.

Landlord Actions and How to Oppose Them

Landlords have attempted to use certain tactics to circumvent the laws set forth in the Residential Tenancies Act in order to push tenants out, raise rents, or introduce Above Guideline Increases (AGIs).

In part, this was aided by Doug Ford eliminating rent control for any unit constructed in 2018 or after.

Because there are no laws specifying how much a landlord can charge a new tenant, landlords will often attempt to force out tenants to set a new price and get around the law. The following pages will outline some common landlord tactics and how tenants have fought against them.



Direct Action

Tenants can use their collective power to directly achieve their goals by physically preventing a landlord from acting, using civil disobedience such as a sit in, or participating in mutual aid to help each other.

Renoviction

Landlords can try to get rid of a longstanding tenant by issuing them an N13 or “renoviction” notice.

This is when a landlord states that they must do extensive repairs or construction in a unit and need the tenants to move out in order to complete the repairs.

Landlords do this because, if they’re successful, they can usually rent out the unit to a new tenant on the open market for a much higher price than the current tenant is paying.

Even if a landlord has a legitimate reason to temporarily evict you to carry out renovations, you have the “right of first refusal” in Ontario. This allows you to write a letter stating your intent to move back in at the same rent and the landlord must comply.

How to Fight Renoviction

It’s important to know, first and foremost, you do not need to leave your unit until there is an eviction order issued by the Landlord and Tenant Board (LTB). A hearing date, in order to consider the landlord’s request, will be provided to you by the LTB in advance.

Before the hearing date, you must organize and compile any facts that prove your landlord is doing this in bad faith including emails, text messages or records of conversations that show the landlord has not maintained the property or has stated they want tenants out to raise rents or get rid of “problem tenants”.

If you are not the only tenant in your building facing renovation, you can ask the LTB to combine several individual cases into one case (they must be related to the same building or landlord). This will help to show a pattern of behaviour by your landlord and may help your case.

There are success stories of tenants fighting back and winning in Hamilton, including at 103 Emerald Street in Ward 3, where tenants organized and won at the LTB against a landlord who was attempting to renovict them all.

In 2024, the City of Hamilton adopted a new **Renoviction Bylaw**, which helps to preserve the rights of tenants who are being wrongfully renovicted.

Landlord or their Family Moving In

Landlords can try to get rid of a longstanding tenant by issuing them an N12 or “personal use” notice.

This is when a landlord states that they, or a close family member, needs to move into the unit themselves for at least a year.

If you believe that your landlord is using this to get rid of you and they don’t actually plan on moving in, you can stay and wait for a hearing at the LTB.

At the hearing the landlord will have to prove -

- They have a genuine need to move into the unit themselves; or
- There is a genuine need for their spouse, child, parent or caregiver to do so

How to Fight the Landlord or their Family Moving In

This type of eviction can be harder to prove as “bad faith” compared to a renovation. If the landlord is a corporation or company, however, this kind of eviction is illegal and can be challenged.

If the landlord, or the person buying the property from the landlord, is an individual, you'll need to show evidence that the eviction is not in good faith.

This could include emails, texts, or notes from conversations where the landlord mentions wanting to raise the rent. In many cases, landlords may first try an illegal rent increase before issuing this type of notice.

Other useful evidence includes -

- Any mention by the landlord about owning other empty units or properties they could potentially move into or let their family move into
- The existence of another suitable unit in the same building that's owned by your landlord- you may be able to make an argument about why they're choosing your specific unit
- Listings that show your unit is being advertised for rent or sale - landlords will often try to “clear” a property of tenants before selling to a new buyer
- Any evidence that the landlord or their family member has another home they're unlikely to leave

Good Faith Evictions and Other Ways Landlords Push Tenants Out

There are often situations where your landlord may be acting in good faith when it comes to a renovation (N13) or a need to move in to your unit (N12).

If you don't have any evidence to suggest the eviction is in bad faith, you have a couple of options.

- You can leave the unit by the date on the N12 or N13 notice
- You can wait for your LTB hearing - the results of these hearings can be unpredictable and the outcome might leave you in a better position than if you didn't attend at all

If you do not wish to wait for the hearing, you can also attempt to negotiate with the landlord.

This may be beneficial to both you and the landlord as waiting for the hearing might cause an undue hardship for either or both parties.

The landlord may be willing to provide you a "cash for keys" offer to leave before your hearing.

This may ensure you have enough money to find new housing or pay for the costs of moving, especially if you know the eviction is in good faith and you'll have to move anyways.

Some landlords may not issue a legal notice to end your tenancy. They may choose, instead, to go through a less formal route which could either intentionally or unintentionally make things much worse for you, your neighbours, or your entire building.

This might look like -

- Refusing to conduct routine or urgent repairs or maintenance in your unit or in common areas
- Refusing to treat pests in your unit or in adjacent units
- Harassment - this may include excessive noise from construction, unreasonably frequent inspections, construction during hours when you need to sleep, or emergency repairs without sufficient notice
- Ignoring you, requests you make, or correspondence you send

These tactics often leave tenants feeling as though they need to leave their unit just so they can live in peace.

Many tenants aren't aware of their rights or are pressured by their landlords to leave before a hearing date or to steer clear of filing their own claims with the LTB.

The LTB can, itself, be something that forces tenants to move on rather than stick it out. According to the LTB's 2024-25 Annual Report, wait times went from being an average of 3 to 7 weeks (2018) to what is now an average of 3 to 7 months (2024). Tenants often feel alone facing these types of landlords, and that is where a tenant association can help!

Other Ways of Fighting Back

Rent Strikes

As an individual, refusing to pay rent comes with high risks. The LTB can issue an eviction for non payment, which could lead to your eviction.

It's safer to keep paying rent while filing a complaint with the LTB to address your concerns.

As a group, tenants have more power. If many people in a building are having the same issues, they can combine their cases at the LTB and organize a rent strike together.

This lowers the risk of everyone being evicted but does not limit the risk entirely.

To start a rent strike -

- Send a written notice to your landlord announcing your intent to engage in a rent strike
- Clearly list your group's demands and indicate to your landlord what must change for the strike to end
- Consider informing local media of your actions and holding press conferences to share your concerns, victories, and any aggressive actions from your landlord or their representatives and lawyers
- Keep all unpaid rent in a separate bank account and save proof, in case it's needed at a hearing

Co-operative Housing

A different way of fighting back against corporate landlords, is to band together to form a co-op. This isn't easy to do, requires cooperation from many funders and organizations, but we've seen some hopeful local examples that demonstrate this can work.

In Hamilton, we saw this work successfully at 272 Caroline Street South. When their building was listed for sale, tenants banded together and, with the help of community involvement and donations, were able to purchase their building and reorganize it as an affordable co-operative housing project.

What this looks like -

- Ensuring all tenants were on the same page and had the same goal in mind
- Talking to media to share their story
- Calling investment companies and creating a pitch presentation to catch their attention
- Speaking with other co-ops in the city to ask questions and learn more about the process
- Applying to any grants or loans being offered by Federal, Provincial or Municipal governments



Eviction Blockades

If the LTB issues an eviction order and the Sheriff is coming to enforce it, a blockade might help. This means gathering a group of friends, neighbours, and supporters to peacefully block the sheriff from entering.



It's not a long-term fix, but it can buy you a day or two to pack or push for a better outcome. In Ontario, blockades have worked sometimes, but not always. When people show up together, again and again, it can make a difference.

Protest

It might seem simple, but one of the most powerful ways to make change is to speak up where others can see and hear you. This could mean dropping a large banner over an overpass, making signs, or gathering with others outside a local politician's office.

Larger protests take more time to plan. If you're using public space, like a park or city street, you might want to let the city know ahead of time. Check your local bylaws to see what's allowed and what rules apply to public demonstrations.

Some tenant associations choose to protest without asking for permission, especially when they want to send a strong message or take urgent action.

That can be okay too, but make sure everyone who joins understands the risks. These could include fines, tickets, or even charges by police if the protest blocks traffic or disrupts businesses.

Being informed helps people make the choice that's right for them.

Tips for Taking Your First Action as a Tenant Association

The first action your tenant association takes is a powerful, hopeful, and exciting moment. It shows you're serious and ready to stand together.

The most effective tenant associations act with confidence and purpose. To plan a strong first action, you need three key things -

TARGET

Who are you putting pressure on?

DEMANDS

What are you asking for?

PEOPLE

Who is coming to support?

Plan the Details

Date - Choose a date about a week after your last tenant association meeting to keep the momentum going.

Location - Hold the action where the landlord will feel it. If they don't live nearby or their company is far away, hold your action at your building. As part of your action, consider going to the management office to drop off a letter containing your demands.

Time - If you want reliable and consistent media coverage, it's best to choose a weekday. If you want more people to show up, it's best to choose an evening or weekend.

Get the Word Out

It's important to let people know what you're planning to do so people know where to be and when. Here are some things to consider to get the word out -

- Make a flyer and post it around your building and any other buildings the landlord owns - be prepared to do this multiple times if your landlord takes down your signs
- Create posters or window signs to put up in nearby coffee shops and other places where you want to encourage people to attend
- Let people know this is organized by the tenant association

Prepare for the Action

Make signs, write chants, and prepare short speeches. Build an agenda that includes as many tenants as possible so they can share their stories. Invite local politicians to speak and media to attend to cover the event.

At the Action

Arrive early, set up, and welcome people. Keep the energy positive and focused. Here's an agenda you can use to keep things organized -

- Welcome - Introduction of speakers and guests
- Why We're Here - Explain the issues and how tenants are organizing
- Tenant Speeches
- March to the Rental Office – Deliver your letters including your demands
- Speak to Media - this might happen at the event in person or afterwards (via phone or on Zoom)

After the Action

When the action is over, it's important to take a few minutes to debrief with everyone. Your debrief should include -

- A celebration of all of your accomplishments - meetings, poster creation sessions, phone calls, and whatever else comes to mind
- Ask each person who contributed what they enjoyed, what they learned, and what they're looking forward to doing next
- Keep the momentum going - follow your action up with plans to meet again with everyone from your tenant association

Indirect Action

While direct action often garners more public attention than indirect action, it's important to consider all of your options.

Indirect action involves asking someone else to take action on your behalf.



This often includes asking elected officials to take action to help you and your fellow tenants. This might include asking politicians to enact policy to hold your landlord accountable or to vote for a policy measure to improve things. This looks like arranging meetings with, writing letters to, and calling your City Councillor, MPP, MP, or local and regional news.

Some of the issues that our representatives can vote on to create better environments for renters include -



- Tenancy protections
- Rent control
- Vacant Unit Taxes
- Higher fines or legal ramifications for landlords that break the law



Tenants Have Rights

- Safe, secure, and well maintained housing
- Living free from harassment, discrimination, and intimidation
- Not being evicted without just cause and due process
- Challenging unfair rent increases
- Accessing affordable housing
- Forming or joining tenant associations without fear
- Being treated with dignity and respect
- Accessing heat, water, and other essential services
- Knowing who owns and manages their building
- Receiving proper notice for entry, rent increases, or eviction
- Standing together and fighting back, collectively



A heartfelt thank you to the Ward 2 Team in Hamilton and Councillor Cameron Kroetsch for your ongoing support and dedication to tenant organizing. - ward2hamilton.ca

Deep thanks to Seeds for Change for their clear and empowering guides, and to Hamilton ACORN for sharing their wisdom and tools for building strong tenant associations. - seedsforchange.org.uk and acorncanada.org

And a very special thank you to Andrea Manica for the beautiful artwork, and for your patience, creativity, and care throughout the design process. - andreamanica.com