



TCSD Organizing Guide

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This guide is for any tenant looking to understand how to organize. You may have found Tenant Councils of San Diego looking for help with an issue with your landlord. You may have heard of the word “organizing,” and may not know what it means. It may surprise you to hear, but because you are currently reading this guide, **YOU** are the person best positioned to organize a tenant council with your neighbors.

Why?

Organizing is all about *relationships* and *trust*. When you ask a neighbor to take a small risk, like signing a collective letter, or a large risk, such as engaging in a rent strike, they need to know that you are in it with them. Additionally, the power of your tenant council comes from the fact that you and your neighbors decide what you will do with it — not anybody else. Even if you don’t know your neighbors very well, there is a baseline level of trust and relationship that comes from living right next to someone. If organizers from TCSD were to come to your complex and start “organizing” you and your neighbors, we would not be very successful, because we lack those relationships, and it would undermine the flexibility and autonomous nature of the tenant council. Therefore, we believe that it is imperative that tenants organize themselves! However, that doesn’t mean you’re alone.

Step 0: Join TCSD

Organizing isn’t easy! Just because you are the person best positioned to organize doesn’t mean you should have to do it alone without the advice, resources, and support from other members of the union. TCSD works to create trainings and resources (such as this one) in order to help you be successful. As a member, you have a direct connection to ask for advice and material support from the rest of the union, who are tenants just like yourself. Need help knocking on doors? We can be there. Want to get your story on the TCSD website and shared with the media? We got you! Protesting at your landlord’s home and need the numbers? Ask the union!



Step 1: Create a building chat

Creating a building chat is a great first step because it solves two common problems faced by unorganized tenants:

- 1) Most people don't know their neighbors.
- 2) Most neighbors don't have a space to talk about collective issues

This will involve:

- Knocking on doors
- Talking to neighbors about their issues and the idea of the group chat
- Creating a spreadsheet to record people's information
- Using a messaging app such as WhatsApp

Before knocking on doors, decide if you want to invite your neighbors to a meeting in addition to asking them to join a building chat. If you have an immediately pressing issue that you know affects everyone, it may make sense to bring up that issue with the neighbors you talk to and invite them to a specific meeting date. This may look something like this:

You: "I've been really upset with the lack of response from management to the flooding issue! How do you feel about it?"

Neighbor: "I'm frustrated that they've been ignoring me!"

You: "That's what I've been hearing from everybody. I was thinking of holding a meeting this Thursday in the common area to discuss it as a group. Would you be able to come?"

Neighbor: "Sure!"

You: "Great! Let me get your contact info so I can add you to the group chat"

If you don't have an immediately pressing issue, forming a building chat is still incredibly useful for the following reasons:

1. While talking to your neighbors, you may discover issues that you previously didn't know about.
2. Things change! While there may not be any pressing issues at the moment, there may be some in a month from now. Having the building chat makes responding to sudden



changes in the future much easier.

Regardless of your approach, remember that you can always ask for help with door knocking from TCSD, whether that be with training beforehand, or on the ground support.

Step 2: Identify common issues

As you're talking to your neighbors, take note of common issues. You may already have an idea beforehand of what issues might be common, but you may be surprised by issues that your neighbors bring up that you weren't aware of. When talking to neighbors, it's generally best to ask open-ended questions and listen more than you speak!

NOTE:

Watch out for issues that seem directed at other tenants rather than the landlord. Some common examples include: "My neighbor is too loud!" "The tenant across the hall never leashes their dog" "Someone is always parked in my parking spot!"

Unless you are dealing with a truly hostile neighbor, most cases of inter-tenant conflict can and should be solved by talking as a tenant council and coming to a common understanding. While it may seem appropriate to approach the landlord with these issues and have them deal with it, this can cause distrust and further conflict between tenants, especially if the landlord uses the complaints as an excuse to evict someone. Ultimately, you and your neighbors share collective interests that don't align with the interests of your landlord, and you all are stronger united than divided. For now, focus on the shared issues, rather than issues that divide people.

Step 3: Have a meeting

By now, you should have a building chat with many of your neighbors, as well as a solid understanding of what the common issues are! Now, it's time to get everyone together for a meeting. Suggest a date, time, and location, and be sure to explain the purpose of the meeting!

In terms of meeting space: don't overthink it! If you can fit everyone into an apartment, that may be the most comfortable option, but you may also choose to meet in a common space or out in the parking lot. Typically, meeting at the complex is preferred to meeting offsite, simply because it is easier for most people. If the landlord or property manager lives onsite, be sure to choose a discreet option: while you and your neighbors are completely protected from



retaliation for organizing, it is best to keep the landlord/manager in the dark until you are ready to make your tenant council known.

On the day of the meeting, send out a reminder over the group chat, and, if possible, knock on a few doors 10-15 minutes before the meeting to get people out.

Create a sign in sheet with name and contact info, and ask people to fill it out as they join the meeting. You likely will have a few folks who aren't yet in the group chat, so this is useful!

Finally, whether you've joined or not, feel free to ask a TCSD organizer to be there! We can help answer questions, offer suggestions, or assist you in facilitating.

Here is a sample agenda:

- Introductions (Name, unit, pronouns*)
- Optional icebreaker: what's one thing you enjoy about the apartment complex and what's the number one thing that you hate.
- Discuss the common issues
- Come up with a plan
 - Suggestion: start with a collective grievance letter
 - Ask for volunteers: who is writing the letter? Who can print? Who can help collect signatures
 - What is the timeline?
- Agree on a recurring meeting time
- Identify 1 or more building captains
 - A building captain is someone who can commit to joining TCSD and being the point of contact between the union and the tenant council and should try to make the monthly general meetings. They may take on tasks such as reminding neighbors in their building of the recurring meetings initially, but they should try to delegate that out to other members of the tenant council as it grows. Depending on the size of your complex, you may need more than one!
- Encourage anyone interested to join TCSD
- Before leaving, double check that everyone who is able to is in the group chat.
- Ask someone to send out a summary of the meeting if some were unable to make it.

*Pronouns are a part of the way people identify, and help us know how we should address one another. Some common examples are "he/him", "she/her", or "they/them". You may be unfamiliar with the practice of asking for someone's pronouns, or you may feel uncomfortable asking your neighbors this question. Consider, however, how asking everyone to share their



pronouns at the start of the meeting might make marginalized neighbors feel safe and in a trusting space. Remember: organizing is about trust!

Step 4: Put your plan into action and continue to hold recurring meetings

Now's the time to do whatever you and your neighbors decided on in your meeting! Depending on what you decided to do and how often you agreed to meet, you may meet a few times before you've completed your first action, or you may be taking your action soon after your next meeting.

Here are a few tips:

- Don't be afraid to ask the group chat for updates on specific tasks ("How's the letter coming along?"), but be sure to give people the time and space they need to get stuff done.
- If you see people struggling to complete a task, don't judge, but offer help, or ask the group if anyone has time to assist.
- Stick to the meeting schedule! Regular meetings help maintain a sense of momentum and progress, and a meeting that gets skipped can lead to people being confused or out of the loop. A quick meeting to "check in" and keep everyone updated is better than no meeting at all, but if you **MUST** reschedule, don't wait a few days to settle on a time. Suggest meeting the next day at the same time, and if at least a few people can do that, go with it.



Step 5: Lean on TCSD for support and further escalation

One of the most common landlord responses to a preliminary action by a new tenant council is to ignore it or brush it aside. This is expected! Explain to your neighbors that the first action you all take is designed to get the landlord's attention, and to signal to them that you all are united and willing to make demands. The next step is to **escalate**.

In your meetings, you should discuss as a group what actions people would be willing to take next until the landlord gives into your demands. It's often best to start small!

Here are a few basic ideas for escalation, but these are by no means exhaustive. Get creative!

- Ask TCSD to send a community solidarity letter
- Filing complaints with the city
- Phone Zap the Landlord with other TCSD members
- Protest the landlord at their office or home
- Go to the press and social media
- Repair and deduct for habitability issues
- Threaten to withhold rent / rent strike