Defending Our Homes: Bay Area Tenant Groups Respond to the Social Crisis of COVID-19

Regional Tenant Organizing Network
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The Bay Area Regional Tenant Organization (RTO) unites and builds the regional movement for rent control, tenant rights, and renter power by increasing the capacity of local housing justice organizations and providing a vehicle for successful region-wide campaigns.

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Cover Image: Cancel Rent Day of Action  Photo credit: Nick DeRenzi
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For many people in the Bay Area, housing insecurity was a major issue even before the coronavirus hit. Profit-driven speculation, a lack of genuinely affordable housing, and few real protections for renters were fueling regional resegregation and putting tens of thousands of households at risk.

“People are seeing the housing crisis differently since COVID-19 has exposed so many systemic inequities. More people want to participate in organizing than before.”
(Jenny Morales, Monument Impact)

When COVID-19 arrived, it exacerbated the weaknesses of an already failing housing system. The displacement crisis has left already vulnerable households completely exposed to the social and economic shocks that the pandemic unleashed. Now, more than ever, we need stable housing to keep peoples safe and healthy.

This report attempts to capture what tenant organizing groups are seeing and doing on the ground in response to COVID-19. While this is indeed a moment of crisis, it is also an opportunity to create the foundation for a just recovery. All too often, those bearing the brunt of a crisis are left out of the solutions.

A just recovery, in contrast, focuses on the needs and voices of those on the frontlines. Our aim here is to identify resources that tenant organizers need in order to respond to the moment, lay the groundwork for a just recovery, and increase long-term powerbuilding efforts.

To this end, we have surveyed 30 organizations from across the Bay Area to assess the challenges they are facing, the resources they need to address the current demands, and the unique opportunities that are arising. Most of these are tenant organizations belonging to the Regional Tenant Organizing network (RTO), though we also interviewed allied organizations working on long-term solutions for community-controlled land and housing. Collectively, these organizations are working in a context of inadequate and piecemeal legislation, insufficient political will among decision-makers, and a predatory market looking to seize property during a possible recession.

Throughout our interviews, almost every single organization spoke of not having sufficient organizational capacity and staffing. The fatigue of being stretched thin by the pandemic is bleeding into their ability to support and organize tenants. Before COVID-19 hit, organizations had modest budgets with which to work. Now, faced with increasing workloads and substantially larger tenant bases in critical circumstances, many of them are struggling with budget and broader capacity shortfalls. These challenges exist across the region but also vary by geography. Suburban jurisdictions and communities in the outer parts of the region often face even more severe deficits in resources and organizing capacity relative to urban cores.

The most-needed resources reveal vulnerabilities within our communities related to race and socioeconomic inequality.

Many groups spoke of needing access to technology that could connect them to legal aid and educational workshops on eviction legislation. Access to devices (laptops, tablets, etc), WiFi, and data storage, for

“We depend mostly on volunteers to do our campaign work, and while we’d like to offer stipends, we just don’t have the budget. We need funding to compensate our volunteers.”
(Alicia Lawrence, The Hayward Collective)

example, are tremendous needs for low-income renters already struggling with the digital divide. Translation services are needed for the Bay Area’s diverse population of non-English-speaking immigrants. Legal aid, especially for undocumented residents, is in great demand as the number of unemployed tenants\(^2\) and those facing housing instability increases. Organizations also need the resources to provide emotional counseling, compensate volunteer workers, and effectively communicate with their base via social media and other forms of communication.

The tenant movement is also making substantial political and legislative advances that are transforming the outlook for future housing justice fights. Organizers across the region—and state—have broken new ground on eviction moratoriums, tenant protection legislation, and preservation efforts because of the crisis. This can serve as a foundation for future campaigns. And with so many tenants impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, more people than ever want to join these organizing efforts.

Finally, while organizations are working to support the specific needs and demands of their own communities, the pandemic has brought the plight of renters to the attention of the broader public, and this provides a critical opening for the broader housing justice movement. We are in the midst of one of the most extreme public health, economic, and housing crises this country will ever see; the time is now to fight for paradigm-shifting solutions that push us beyond cycles of the housing poverty status quo.

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I. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has exposed the failure of our for-profit housing system to provide any kind of stability for people when they need it most.

Years of gentrification, disinvestment, and profit-driven speculation have already displaced many people; every day, tens of thousands of households live at risk of losing their homes. We know this crisis disproportionately affects working-class communities, communities of color, immigrants, and women. We also know that too often, the response by our elected representatives falls far short of what is needed. The arrival of the pandemic earlier this year has shined a light on what housing justice organizers and advocates have been saying for years: This system does not work for us.

The pandemic has made the need for community-based organizing more apparent than ever. When our established systems fail, we see that the strength and integrity of our relationships with each other determine how well we weather the storm. This pushes us to recognize that the housing crisis and the public health crisis exist at the intersection of historic injustices rooted in white supremacy, patriarchy, class inequality, and an extractive economy focused on profit. Frontline communities bear the brunt of these injustices, but are also best positioned to create the foundation for a just recovery.

This report aims to provide some insight into what organizers around the Bay Area are seeing in their communities, how they are responding, and what resources they need to do this work and to lay a foundation for housing justice in the long term.

Earlier this year, as the severity of the pandemic became clear, the Regional Tenant Organizing network (RTO) decided that it would be important to survey tenant organizers and document their responses to these challenges. In addition to our members, we thought it also valuable to speak with organizations working to decommodify land and housing over the long term. Overall, we surveyed 30 organizations from across the Bay Area, and we present the findings below.

In the section that follows, we discuss the impacts that organizers are seeing in their communities as a result of the pandemic. In Section III, we present the challenges they have identified. In Section IV, we outline some of the opportunities the current moment presents, and in Section V, we discuss the resources organizers say they need to respond to the moment and build power over the long term. What becomes clear is that making critical investments in organizing now will not only stabilize communities in the short term, but will also strengthen the movement for housing justice in the long term.
II. HOW COVID-19 IS IMPACTING RENTERS IN THE BAY AREA

We began our survey by asking organizers how the pandemic is impacting their communities. There was widespread agreement that it is taking an enormous social and economic toll that will have long-term consequences. People have lost their jobs, or they have seen their hours reduced. Many are essential workers who continue to put themselves at risk every day in order to pay for rent and other household necessities. Increasing debt only adds to the material and emotional burden facing tens of thousands of families, and people are very worried about what will happen when the various eviction moratoriums expire.

“Many of [the] families run on a cash economy due to their immigration status. This leads to a Catch-22, when employers are paying people off the books to clean and watch their kids because now these workers need some sort of documentation to show the landlord that they’ve lost the source of income and the employers are hesitant to show these off-the-books transactions.” (Gabriel Hernandez, Somos Mayfair)

While recently passed policies such as AB3088 will provide some relief, in reality the response by lawmakers to date will do little to address the deep economic hole that many are falling into in order to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. There is a critical need for increased organizing to help more tenants discover their rights and learn how to defend them. The need for organizing exists across the region, but there is an imbalance in the ability to respond: Larger cities, which have more extensive organizing and advocacy infrastructure, find it easier than smaller cities and suburbs, where this infrastructure is often less developed and has less reach. This is an important factor in understanding conditions on the ground.

“EBASE organizers are hearing of people losing their jobs or having reduced work hours because of the pandemic, which affects their ability to pay rent.

We also know that landlords are harassing tenants and giving out illegal eviction notices (this was especially true at the beginning of the shelter in place).” (East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy)

Economic Impact

The total or partial loss of income is the most-discussed impact of the pandemic after personal health. Public health orders to close down or limit non-essential business activity and the shelter-in-place order have directly affected many tenants’ ability to pay their bills. In the absence of adequate support from the federal government, many households have been forced to make very difficult decisions about how to spend what income they do have. In general, this has meant spending on rent and cutting back on other necessities. Low-income communities and communities of color are being forced to pay for a crisis they had no hand in creating.

Even with these painful choices, we now know that tens of thousands of families face possible eviction when the state rent moratorium ends. Although AB 3088 converts rent debt to non-evictable consumer debt, many working class and low-income tenants will be forced to resume full rent payments and begin servicing enormous debts. Without rent and debt cancellation, or similar comprehensive policy interventions, this economic impact will weigh on families for years, with long-term impacts on children.

3 Samantha Fields “U.S. looking at “a tsunami of evictions” as moratoriums expire” https://www.marketplace.org/2020/05/29/u-s-looking-at-a-tsunami-of-evictions-as-moratoriums-expire/
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The power imbalance between tenants and landlords has always been a concern and a source of abuse. COVID-19 and the attendant economic insecurity is exacerbating this imbalance. Many of the organizers interviewed reported that tenants faced landlord harassment and feared speaking out.

While the various pieces of legislation passed since the start of the pandemic have been useful to some tenants, these laws alone do not address this power imbalance or the fact that many tenants find it difficult to exercise their rights or access legal services. Even with some protections in place, organizers report that illegal evictions are occurring and landlords are using other means to try and force tenants to pay rent or move.

Landlord harassment

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Stress

Living with the threat of losing a home is a perpetual source of stress for many tenants, and the pandemic has only made this worse. Similarly, many tenants always live with a lack of power relative to their landlords.

The uncertainty and economic insecurity caused by the pandemic and the insufficient response by elected officials have made the situation worse across many communities, particularly in immigrant communities and communities of color. People are worried about staying housed, about getting sick, and about their children’s education and mental health. Looking to the future, many are also deeply worried about what happens when the short-term protections passed by the state expire.

Increasing demand for tenant organizations and tenant services

Community organizing is labor-intensive work even in the best of times. The COVID pandemic is adding additional strain to the chronic problem of organizing capacity. Organizers have had to quickly transition from in-person organizing to online and digital organizing. Some organizations were able to make this transition relatively smoothly, while others—particularly smaller and less-resourced organizations—have had a harder time.

In both cases, however, the turn away from in-person organizing is adding additional strain and creating new resource needs. Many residents, for example, do not have...
the necessary equipment or experience to participate fully in online meetings, and these barriers can also make it more difficult to bring in new members at a time when the need for support is skyrocketing.

“We have an opportunity to expand our base with the work organizing in this one complex and with the folks who have received financial assistance, but our capacity is stretched right now, so the process of growing our base with financial constraints is challenging.” (Jennifer Morales, Monument Impact)

The pandemic is also increasing demand for services, and organizers find they need to spend more time supporting access to these services, including rent relief programs and legal support. While many organizations have experience providing or supporting access to services, the increase in demand means capacity is stretched thinner.

As a result, some organizations are taking advantage of the increase in demand to expand their base, while others struggle to support service access and continue organizing efforts at the same time. This is an important aspect of assessing opportunities and challenges, as the pandemic exposes both geographic imbalances and gaps in movement infrastructure more generally.

“Our clinic has been an area to expand our base, [it] has been serving two to four times as many people as beforehand. The challenge with that is that we meet up with a lot of people who are right in the middle of a crisis, and we are trying to figure out how to both meet people’s needs and where they’re at, while also planting seeds that there is something bigger.”

(Housing Rights Committee-San Francisco)
Vulnerable Renter Groups in the Bay Area

Within frontline communities, some populations are more exposed than others. Organizers repeatedly identified undocumented residents, seniors, disabled folks, homeless people, and low-income renters as the most vulnerable groups within their base.

**Undocumented residents:**
Undocumented tenants are particularly at risk. Their immigration status often forces them into a cash economy, and employers have been unwilling to provide the documentation needed for proving inability to pay rent. When relief funds are available, they rarely last very long and often require prohibitively long application forms. Additionally, many legal services here in the Bay Area are federally funded, and thus limited in their ability to serve this population. Furthermore, if undocumented tenants lose their housing during the pandemic, they will not be able to provide proof of identity for credit checks moving forward. All of these issues are compounded by the reality that undocumented tenants can be reluctant to apply to services they are entitled to, for fear of deportation by ICE. Thus the existing conditions of anxiety around housing and immigration issues have exacerbated people’s fears of “dual deportation,” meaning they are afraid of being removed from both their housing and the country altogether.

**Seniors and disabled folks:**
Elders and those with disabilities are more at risk of contracting the virus, magnifying any other concerns they face regarding unstable housing. Digital literacy also tends to be lower for seniors, which makes them a particularly difficult demographic to reach during this time when door-to-door and in-person interactions are not feasible.

**Unhoused people:**
While the sense of urgency around homelessness is at its peak right now, the topic has been put on the back burner by council members who do not perceive unhoused people as a priority population. Only a few cities have done much to help. Some cities have designated spaces for unhoused people to live in their vehicles or placed moratoriums on the California Vehicle Code 22651(k), which requires parked vehicles to move every 72 hours. Others have rented space in hotels for those who are unhoused.

**Those living with mental illness:**
According to a study run by the National Center for Health Statistics and the Census Bureau, as of July 21, 36.9% of the U.S. population reported frequently experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression. That number goes up to 46.6% for 18-29 year-olds. A lack of mental health resources was often cited as a reason why teens and young adults are particularly vulnerable during the pandemic. Some kids have been completely unable to continue schooling due to a lack of technology. Others have become the sole providers for their households, and some children are forced to interface with predatory landlords.
III. CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Though COVID-19 has left tenant organizations reeling, the pressure is on and the luxury of time has disappeared. Groups on the ground have met the urgency of the pandemic with intentional organizing efforts and tactics to keep the membership groups engaged and informed. They are engaging in:

- Getting eviction moratoriums passed (before state legislation passed)
- Organizing for additional renter protections, including just cause for evictions (before state legislation passed)
- Information dissemination through KYRs, street outreach, and website creation
- Know Your Rights (KYR) workshops and webinars
- Phone banking to engage membership in one-on-ones
- Legal clinics
- Organizing drive-by’s to continue holding elected officials accountable
- Organizing virtual comments for council meetings, board of supervisor meetings, and more
- Gathering data on moratoriums and evictions
- Tenant trainings on rent strikes, Organizing 101, civic engagement, and more
- Voter engagement
- Raising funding for direct services, including food pantries, rental assistance, legal fees, and more
- Working to establish community land trusts

Here we discuss the many challenges facing organizers as they do this work, as well as opportunities for long term power building.

Challenges in Organizing Tenants during COVID-19

In observing what’s happening on the ground, organizers identify both challenges and opportunities when it comes to building their base and building long-term power. Below, we discuss the primary challenges to organizing and campaign work that we heard from interviewees.

Developing more organizing capacity

COVID-19 has put a strain on budgets and organizational resources, limiting what groups on the ground are able to do for tenants in the region at a time when demand is soaring. The need to help people stay housed is so acute that organizations have had to place other campaigns on hold.

Organizations need unrestricted funding for general operation support so they can print mailers, door hangers and educational materials for tenant unions and offer stipends to community leaders and volunteers. They need to be able to pay their staff living wages, hire additional organizers for the ever-increasing demands of their tenant bases, and provide mental health benefits to employees (and tenants, if possible).

“It's a fantastic time to organize in the suburbs because people are home more—we have time to build relationships with people.”
(Lorena Melgarejo, Faith in Action Bay Area)
Online outreach and inaccessible technology

This is particularly pertinent for elders, low-income families, and non-English speakers. Seniors tend to have low digital literacy, which makes them a difficult demographic to reach. Some working-class families are sharing one device between the entire family and must decide whether to allow their children to attend school or use the device themselves for work. Others have neither a smart device nor Internet access.

Families who do have WiFi access frequently share it with two or three additional families, placing a strain on the bandwidth and going over data capacity. The lack of technology also makes it difficult for residents to adequately communicate with their landlords and participate in local organizing efforts.

Landlord harassment

Increased landlord harassment is both a consequence of the crisis, as discussed earlier, and a challenge to organizers attempting to help and organize tenants. Landlords across the Bay Area are threatening tenants, intimidating them and forcing them out through illegal eviction notices—even when tenants are providing their notice of unemployment or non-payment. These acts are reinforcing tenants’ reluctance to assert their rights for fear of retaliation.

Even in cities that allow tenants to submit self-certified documents of inability to pay rent, many landlords also require bank statements or refuse to accept the reasons offered by the tenants. In some families, children are providing language support while also dealing directly with harassing landlords, which illustrates the emotional burden carried by families.

Lack of legal assistance and services

Pre-COVID, it was already challenging to secure an appointment at a legal clinic, because community lawyers have their hands full and are working around strict regulations. Tenants also face regional inequalities in access to legal support, with many tenants living in areas where there are few if any public interest tenant attorneys. This has become an even greater challenge now, as there are very few virtual clinics available.

Most organizations do not have a consistent place to which to refer tenants, and this scarcity directly impacts organizers (many of whom are volunteers) by limiting their ability to provide much-needed aid. This is a
problem when landlords refuse to accept documents certifying inability to pay rent. As was mentioned above, some tenants who submit the required documents to their city find these claims are rejected by landlords or they are told to submit additional information. Organizers on the ground help tenants become more self-sufficient in the legal system, but in cases of harassment or flouting of the law, legal assistance is very useful.

Tenant rights groups are not just addressing renters’ immediate questions but are also using these interactions to get previously uninterested renters involved in local organizing efforts to protect all renters in the long run. The escalation of the housing crisis has served as an activator for tenants and so “more people want to participate in organizing than before.” (Jennifer Morales, Monument Impact)

**Fear of losing homes**

“[S]o it’s a struggle of now being a time to preserve affordable housing to prevent the housing crash like in 2008, but also it being the most difficult time to do so.” (Miranda Strominger, Bay Area Community Land Trust)

There is a massive wealth divide between local communities and real estate developers. As the crisis worsens, there is mounting fear of another housing market crash—and the drop in land values that would follow. Community groups are looking for ways to stave off the major loss in affordable housing that they feel sure is coming as a result of the pandemic. While city budgets are down, organizations will be unable to move as fast as speculators who have cash on hand.

“And Black families will be the most impacted by foreclosures and evictions. Meanwhile hedge fund billionaires who haven’t been impacted by COVID and won’t be affected by the recessions will pop up with investments.” (Ojan Mobedshahi, East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative)

**Sense of urgency for tenant protections**

When social distancing orders started, tenant rights groups across the Bay Area immediately began mobilizing renters to pass local and county-wide eviction moratoriums to protect those whose livelihoods were affected by COVID-19. The concentrated effort, combined with the urgency of the pandemic, allowed tenant groups to pass moratoriums across cities and counties in the Bay Area, even in city chambers that have a demonstrated history of pro-landlord decisions.

The political landscape has shifted, with more people than ever affected by the housing crisis, and more politicians are embracing tenant protections. Local politicians’ increased attention to tenant rights will “give organizers the ability to demand protections that should already exist.” (Kristi Laughlin, EBASE)

**Cross-sector and cross-organizational collaboration**

Members of the Regional Tenant Organizing (RTO) network have always brought a relational lens to their work, and the pandemic has only further developed that framework. They have reported a renewed sense of support and mutual aid not just among community members but also among community-based organizations. The pandemic has helped strengthen alignment across previously siloed organizations and has illuminated linkages between the work needed to advance the interests of different marginalized communities.

**Opportunities in Organizing Tenants during COVID-19**

**Base expansion**

Tenant rights organizations across the board are seeing new interest in the work they do. More renters from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds are reaching out to tenant rights organizations, seeking support to navigate tenant protections and combat landlord harassment.
In Vallejo, the Vallejo Housing Justice Coalition became a part of the Vallejo homeless roundtable with whom they now have weekly meetings, sharing information on how to feed unhoused people and how to organize in the tenant rights movement. Filipino Advocates for Justice successfully built a cross-ethnic base with the Jakara Movement, a grassroots community organization based in and inspired by Sikh principles, and has built trust with their base of South Asian tenants. Another RTO group, Tenant Sanctuary, which offers legal clinics, has been working with Meals on Wheels to aid in food distribution.

**Transformational housing justice demands enter the mainstream**

All groups surveyed have found their membership has more energy and passion to make demands that go beyond incremental policy change to benefit renters. This change is “coming from shared fragility and interdependence brought by COVID-19. Your health depends on my health. Doesn’t matter whether you are rich or poor.” (Maria Marroquin, Mountain View Renters Coalition)

Tenant rights organizations are recognizing that this is a prime moment to be bold with their visions and demands to win big changes. They are forming more creative coalitions that break past polarizations because “more strategic thinking is happening.” (Brad Hirn, Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco) COVID-19 has exposed so many systemic inequities that tenant rights organizations are fundamentally changing the way they frame and select campaigns.

“The present public health situation has created conditions where it’s possible to make arguments for things that were hard to convince in the past. There’s a need to create permanent affordability, so that there’s infrastructure for when the next crisis happens so that the most vulnerable aren’t easily displaced.” (Nestor Castillo, Eden Renters Union)

**Centering racial justice in the tenant rights movement**

COVID-19 has not just magnified the plight of renters navigating the housing crisis, it has also served as the backdrop for explosive organizing, direct actions, and mass protests all across the country as communities rise up for Black Lives Matter. This has brought racism into the forefront, and tenant rights groups are taking advantage of this growing awareness to have deeper conversations with neighbors and members about how racism shows up in housing.

Tenant rights groups are prioritizing standing in solidarity with Black Lives Matter by deepening their racial equity analysis as well as highlighting how housing justice is impossible without racial justice.
IV. RESOURCES NEEDED

After hearing organizers outline challenges and opportunities, we asked them to talk about specific resources that would enable them to meet these challenges and take advantage of the opportunities. In this final section, we discuss the six most frequent responses. The full list can be viewed in Chart 2 below, which shows each resource and the percentage of respondents who identified it as a need.

Online organizing
The need to move community organizing and base building online quickly is perhaps the greatest challenge posed by the pandemic. It impacts everything from training leaders and bringing in new members to the pressure a campaign can exert on city council or another target. Tenants’ and organizers’ lack of access to technology and training threatens to deepen the digital divide, creating challenges to organizing work that could outlast the pandemic. Many organizers and tenants need these services and hardware, but will also need training to utilize them effectively in a grassroots organizing context.

Organizers need access to Zoom accounts that accommodate large gatherings, data management platforms that have huge amounts of storage, and texting and robocall systems that will aid them in spreading campaign messages quickly and efficiently. Organizations need technical assessments to help them figure out the best platforms for their specific needs. In terms of hardware, there is a vital need for tablets, laptops, and smartphones. Now more than ever, we need to close the digital divide.

All Identified Resource Needs by Percentage of Responses

(Total 30 Responses)
Communications
An essential component of building power is communications—with a base, with the broader public, with media, and with decision-makers. Movements need organizers who can more easily disseminate information to their existing base and reach unorganized tenants. Without door knocking, for example, many groups are relying on social media to get pertinent information into the community. Some groups need help with effective social media messaging, while others need funding to design and print *Know Your Rights* mailers and door hangers to continue educating tenants.

Postage, along with envelopes and additional supplies, are essential for mass mailing campaigns, as is access to graphic design and printing services. Platforms like Constant Contact and Mailchimp are also pertinent to staying in touch with their members. Stipends for volunteers to run mailing campaigns are vital to reaching and keeping in touch with tenant bases.

Translation
This need comes as no surprise when we consider the 14 different languages that organizers work with. Many tenants are immigrants and are monolingual Spanish speakers. Translation is needed for written materials like *Know Your Rights* mailers and door hangers. Translators are needed for Zoom meetings and workshops where organizers are educating tenants about their rights. They are needed for legal clinics where tenants in crisis cannot get effective help without professional bilingual support.

Interpretation services and/or translators are also particularly needed for the land trust movement, which has not historically been led by or inclusive of BIPOC.

Compensation for volunteers in a time of severe economic crisis
Grassroots organizing depends heavily on volunteer labor. Stipends and gift cards were and still are an effective way to honor tenants’ and volunteers’ time and efforts. Today especially, tenants need every source of income available to them to make ends meet while they work toward creating systemic change in their communities. Over half the organizations interviewed were primarily volunteer-run, and the rest still rely heavily on a strong volunteer base.

Organizations are at capacity, and this vitally necessary work needs to be compensated. While stipends and gift cards are not a replacement for living wages and a just economy, they help to provide peace of mind for low-income families and diversified income for vulnerable communities.

Legal referral
Adequately funded and staffed legal services that can work within an organizing approach are highly in demand, especially for undocumented residents. Legal clinics often happen on a volunteer basis, and many organizations, particularly in the suburbs, do not have a permanent place of referral. This requires community organizers to do case management around legal issues, and the inefficient division of labor is detracting from the advocacy and outreach work that organizers would otherwise focus on.

We need comprehensive legal services that serve multiple languages and can provide proper defense for undocumented residents on not only immigration issues but on housing issues as well. While legal services are definitely needed, we must attach an organizing component to ensure that tenants can advocate for themselves in court or elsewhere. While we are still under the threat of COVID-19, we have to find alternative ways to connect tenants to lawyers. Virtual legal clinics provide an avenue that allows tenants to drop in virtually at a dedicated space and time (preferably on a weekly basis) and share their concerns with a lawyer or legal counselor.
Emotional counseling/mental health support.

Health officials and organizations have deemed this housing crisis a public health crisis. A just recovery demands that we address the mental health component of this housing crisis. Anxieties about unstable housing and evictions can take an incredible toll, leading to stress, depression, and other health issues. This can have severe consequences for tenants as they seek employment and try to maintain jobs, stay on top of bills, and get a grasp on how to help their children with distance learning and family relationships.

Organizations need funding and resources to connect tenants and their own organizers to much-needed mental health services, counseling, and therapy. Whether distanced or virtual, we need to ensure the holistic well-being of those in our most vulnerable communities.

RTO Steering Committee Meeting During COVID-19

V. CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has fundamentally shifted the terrain for tenants, creating numerous interlocking barriers to organizers building tenant power in the Bay Area. In spite of these challenges, organizers are taking advantage of unique opportunities. The multi-generational history of state violence against Black bodies, for example, only serves to further exacerbate market-induced housing failures.

The challenges posed by high rents, lost income, and COVID-related gentrification (Disaster Gentrification)\(^5\) are worsened by the constant policing of tenants of color.\(^6\) These intersections only underscore the need for campaigns and policy interventions that cut across movements, like reallocating police budgets to community services like affordable housing.

*During this crisis, we are seeing multiple social justice movements find common ground. From Black Lives Matter to Cancel Rent, these distinct movements are finding ways to connect and build with each other.*

Listening to the narratives and experiences of tenant organizers on the ground has made one thing abundantly clear: The only solution to the housing crisis, which disproportionately impacts poor and working-class communities in California, is a broadly inclusive tenant rights movement that transforms how we all relate to the places we call home.

While this document names some of the key obstacles facing Bay Area tenant organizing efforts, which have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, it also captures the unprecedented action and organizing that is already happening in local communities to defend homes and push for housing justice.

From the North Bay to Santa Cruz, suburban cities to urban neighborhoods, single family residences to large apartment buildings, tenants are finding one another, getting together, and fighting back. Renters are forming tenant associations, picking up calls, providing mutual aid, flyering, phone banking, and reaching out their hands to some of the most vulnerable members of the community.

This is what housing justice looks like. There is no more time for tenants to wait for a change in the market, federal law, or corporate policy. Communities are rising up for housing justice across the Bay Area.

The conflagration of the emergent crisis of COVID-19 and the ever-present housing crisis has presented all of us with a critical choice: Stand together with tenants or watch the heightened displacement of poor and working-class communities across the region. The choice is yours.

> “The process (systemic racism) has been going on for hundreds of years, so to undo that is really difficult, but you just have to be able to put the issue in its historical context and then look for current solutions to reestablish people’s relationship to the land.

> What we can do and the opportunities we do have, is to come together and figure out how to raise families communally against this typical lifeline.... To be able to have these solutions would change the dynamic of the housing crisis.”

*(Gabriel Hernandez, Somos Mayfair)*

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RTO Organizations

- Affordable Housing Network of Santa Clara
- Alameda Renters Coalition
- Causa Justa Just Cause
- Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto
- East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy
- Faith in Action Bay Area
- Filipino Advocates for Justice
- Hayward Collective
- Housing for All Burlingame
- Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco
- Monument Impact Concord
- Mountain View Renters Coalition
- North Bay Organizing Project
- One Redwood City
- One San Mateo
- Pacífica Housing 4 All
- RISE Fremont

People’s Land and Housing Alliance groups

- Bay Area Community Land Trust
- East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative
- Eden Community Land Trust
- Richmond LAND

Allied Bay Area tenant advocacy groups

- Eden Renters Union
- Somos Mayfair
- Glad Tidings International Church

Causa Justa Just Cause members. Photo credit: Mike Dennis
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