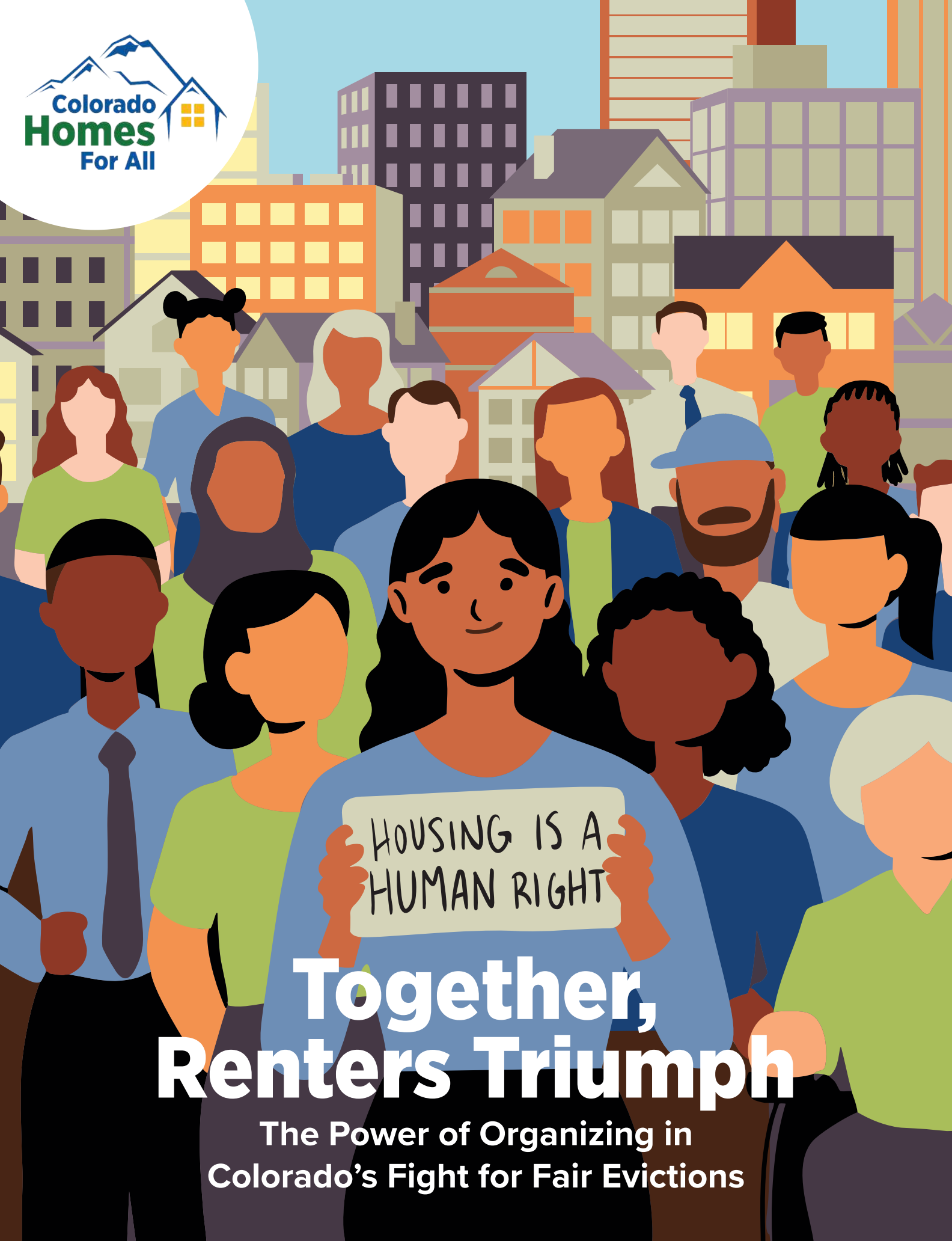
Colorado Homes For All



Together, Renters Triumph

The Power of Organizing in Colorado's Fight for Fair Evictions

Executive Summary

Colorado renters face significant challenges, exacerbated by rapid population growth and rising rental prices. Low-income renters are vulnerable, particularly to corporate landlords who use evictions to drive up rents. This unstable housing environment gave rise to Colorado Homes For All (COHFA), a statewide coalition focused on advancing progressive housing policies that prioritize renters' rights. COHFA believes that low-income renters are the key to transformative change. In an understanding that together they prevent displacement and discrimination, COHFA's policy priorities include repealing the rent stabilization ban, passing local rent stabilization policies, and ensuring just cause for evictions.

In 2023, COHFA introduced legislation for "For Cause Eviction" (FCE) to ensure tenants could only be evicted for legally justified reasons, protecting them from arbitrary or retaliatory eviction. Although that attempt to pass FCE legislation failed, **COHFA's strategic organizing laid the ground-work for a successful campaign in 2024.**

The 2024 FCE campaign faced opposition from powerful groups, which COHFA combatted with extensive grassroots mobilization, targeted lobbying, and narrative shifts to influence key lawmakers. Through thousands of messages, meetings, town halls, and media outreach, COHFA built a compelling case for eviction protections.

The bill's passage marked a significant milestone for renters' rights in Colorado. **This success was attributed to COHFA's grassroots power, strategic partnerships, and focus on narrative,** which reframed the debate around renters' rights and corporate landlord practices.

The campaign's success offers critical lessons for other grassroots movements. **It highlights the importance of building a strong, inclusive coalition; maintaining a long-term vision while pursuing short-term victories; and centering the experiences of directly impacted individuals.** COHFA's narrative strategy, which emphasized the human right to housing, was key in shifting public opinion and securing legislative support. The campaign demonstrated base-directed advocacy, when combined with effective grassroots organizing, can lead to transformative policy change.

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Colorado Homes for All Coalition Members

9to5 Colorado*
United For A New Economy*
Colorado Education Association*
Colorado Working Families Party*
Denver Democratic Socialists of America (Denver DSA)*
Denver Homeless Outloud
East Colfax Community Collective (EC3)*
SEIU Local 105*
Together Colorado*
Colorado AFL-CIO
Colorado Cross Disability Coalition
Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition
Colorado Jobs with Justice
Compañeros
Denver Artists for Rent Control
GES Coalition
Metro Caring
Mountain Dreamers
Movimiento Poder
New Era Colorado
Redress Movement
Western Colorado Alliance
Westwood Unidos

** Members that serve on the COHFA steering committee*

Interviewees

Many thanks to the following interviewees for their contributions:

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Representative Javier Mabrey, *Bill Sponsor*
Senator Julie Gonzales, *Bill Sponsor*
Senator Nick Hinrichsen, *Bill Sponsor*

Acknowledgments

This case study was developed in partnership with COHFA and HouseUS. It was written by Stephanie de Wolfe and designed by Lucy Chen.

Introduction

Renters in Colorado face mounting challenges. Between 2010 and 2020, Colorado's population exploded, growing at nearly twice the national rate. In many areas, housing demand far exceeds supply. In many others, rent costs are simply unreasonable and unfeasible for local communities. Across the state, rental prices have outpaced wage growth.

While state and local laws provide some protections, inconsistent enforcement and loopholes often leave low-income renters vulnerable to landlords who would evict them to increase the price of their units or avoid making necessary repairs. The growing dominance of corporate landlords — large companies managing multiple rental properties — has made it harder for renters to negotiate terms or resolve disputes. **Financial strain, housing scarcity, and systemic inequities have left many Colorado renters in precarious and unstable housing situations.**

This is the context that gave rise to **Colorado Homes For All (COHFA), a statewide coalition that builds power for the housing justice movement** by centering the leadership of directly impacted people in the fight to win bold housing policies that value renters. Its 23 grassroots member organizations are focused on advancing a wide range of local- and state-level progressive causes, including labor organizing; disability rights; immigrant protection; and gender, economic, and racial justice. Coalition members commit to **three key priorities: to repeal the ban on rent stabilization, to pass local rent stabilization policies, and to require a just cause for evictions.**

Landlords have long held the ability to evict during a lease on concrete grounds such as breaking lease rules, damaging property, and nonpayment of rent. But before for cause eviction (FCE) was in place, they did not need a reason to evict tenants at the end of a lease term. Across the state, tenants were forced to vacate their homes at the end of their leases for discriminatory, arbitrary, and retaliatory reasons. For cause eviction defines the fair reasons that a landlord can evict at the end of a lease and protects

[1] Throughout this document, the term "renter" and "tenant" may appear to be used interchangeably. Because few people self-identify as "tenants," COHFA typically reserves the term for policy and legal frameworks. Both refer to people who rent, changing according to the context in which they're referred to.

[2] Reasons include: the landlord moving into the unit, selling the property, or converting it for a new purpose.

renters with the ability to challenge landlords in court against illegal evictions.

FCE was established as a COHFA policy priority in 2021. Coalition leaders invested in a power analysis and strategic planning process and introduced for cause eviction legislation in 2023. But in that legislative session, COHFA suffered defeat in their two priority campaigns, local control of rents and FCE — with even progressive Democrats voting against their bills. Over the following year, COHFA centered organizing and utilized dynamic member-led strategy, narrative, and collaboration tactics to exert pressure to advance the FCE legislation. Ultimately, **"HB24-1098: Cause Required for Eviction of Residential Tenant" was signed into law in April 2024.** It was an extraordinary accomplishment.

"This is one of the biggest progressive victories in the history of Colorado politics," says Rep. Javier Mabrey, who co-sponsored the bill. "Other states that are seen as more blue weren't able to do this. But we were able to do this."

Signing HB24-1098: Cause Required for Eviction of Residential Tenant

Case Study: Winning Eviction Protections in Colorado

The campaign's objective was to **secure legislative protections for tenants by establishing a legal baseline for what constitutes a reason for an eviction at the end of a lease term.** This ambitious goal was set against influential opposition, including powerful lobbying entities such as the Colorado Realtors Association, the Colorado Apartment Association, the Colorado Landlord Legislative Coalition, and the legislators aligned with them, many of whom are landlords themselves. The campaign targeted key decision-makers, including Democratic representatives, senators, and Governor Jared Polis, whose influence upon state legislators and unclear stance on the bill made his buy-in essential.

Following the 2023 legislative session, COHFA conducted a series of debriefs with coalition members, subcommittees, and lobbyists to reflect on their achievements and identify lessons for the future. A turning point in the process to pass Colorado's landmark FCE legislation occurred in summer 2023, when House Majority Leader Monica Duran expressed interest in sponsoring the bill.

Ready to build on the groundwork laid in the 2023 legislative cycle with an even more coordinated effort, **COHFA partnered again with the Community Economic Defense Project (CEDP) — state legal experts on evictions** — to lead a stronger, revitalized campaign. Together, they formed the **Keep Coloradans Housed Coalition** (aka KCHC, pronounced "Catch"), developing systems, tools, and strategies to streamline their work and amplify their collective power. By the fall, weekly executive committee meetings were in full swing, legislative town halls and meetings had mobilized renter voices, and COHFA priorities within the policy were clearly defined.

Entering 2024, COHFA had equipped KCHC with a comprehensive campaign plan. They gathered feedback from members and opponents to refine the bill, created toolkits for social media and lobby visits, and launched a targeted narrative strategy. The FCE bill was officially introduced on January 24th, supported by a high-profile press conference led in partnership with the Colorado House Democrats featuring Majority Leader Duran, Speaker Julie McCluskie (who had voted against FCE in 2023), a tenant, a small landlord (members of coalition co-chair United for a New Economy), and COHFA Co-Chair Cesiah Guadarrama Trejo. This public show of support underscored the buy-in from legislators and progressive allies surrounding for cause eviction.

Press Conference

Throughout February, COHFA navigated intense negotiations, engaging legislators, opposition groups, and Governor Polis. These efforts were critical in moving the Colorado Apartment Association and Colorado Realtors Association from opposition to neutrality**. On February 14th, the bill passed its first major hurdle in the House Transportation, Housing, and Local Government Committee with a 7-4 vote.**

Carmen Medrano, Misha White, and Cesiah Guadarrama Trejo

Over the following weeks, COHFA's organizing power came to life. They coordinated email pressure to legislators leading up to the House Committee hearing where twenty-three coalition members testified. Their persistence paid off as the bill passed the House and moved on to the Senate. **The House vote was 38-19, with three Democratic representatives voting no.**

March brought new challenges, but also new victories. Despite Colorado's Democratic trifecta, passage of renter protections and Democratic support for the measure was not ensured and would require organizing and advocacy. Maintaining a targeted email effort, COHFA also mobilized over 12,700 texts and 210 phone calls to pressure senators. The Senate Local Government and Housing Committee approved the bill with a 4-3 vote along party lines, and strategic amendments helped address lingering opposition concerns. COHFA's relentless grass-roots organizing, paired with its legislative strategy, coaxed even reluctant legislators on board. **By the end of March, the coalition's efforts culminated in the Senate passing the bill with a 19-15 vote, with four Democratic senators voting no.**

In April, COHFA celebrated its monumental win when Governor Polis signed the FCE bill into law, marking a transformative moment for housing justice in Colorado. **The coalition's work was widely recognized, with over 50 media stories covering for cause eviction.**

The campaign not only secured vital eviction protections but also demonstrated the power of tenant-led coalitions to transform the political landscape. It underscored the importance of strong partnerships, clear priorities, and the central role of organizing in legislative victories. By staying true to their values and base, COHFA set a powerful precedent for tenant-centered advocacy and policy change.

Tactics and Milestones

COHFA members shared **28 compelling testimonies** during the legislative process, underscoring the real-world impact of eviction policies.

A press conference drew **over 100 attendees**, representating the **50+ supporting organizations**, 17 of which were COHFA.

In one year, coalition members facilitated

57 meetings

27 town halls

5 lobby days

to engage directly with policymakers and the public.

Grassroots power was amplified through **more than 13,000 emails, 265,000 text messages, and 200 calls** directed at legislative decision-makers.

The campaign achieved **53 media hits**, including **29 pieces that leaned in favor of the bill,** and **10 pieces that elevated renter-centered narratives.** COHFA also contributed an op-ed and two letters to the editor to drive public support.

KEY LESSON #1

COHFA's Structure Was Integral to Its Success

What is now known as Colorado Homes for All (COHFA) emerged from grassroots organizing around the National Renter's Day of Action in 2016. Since its inception, COHFA has put organizing at its center, insisting that renters should have the biggest influence in how relevant legislation is shaped.

COHFA's success in passing for cause eviction legislation is directly tied to its structure, which ensures that shared values of inclusive organizing are reflected in the coalition's decision-making processes. The structure supports the coalition's strategy, which is driven by a fundamental question: **how can directly impacted people's power be best built upon in our choices and actions?**

INSIGHT: The coalition's design ensured it stayed accountable to its base.

In 2021, following a legislative strategic planning process, COHFA updated and formalized its structure and commitments through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for steering committee and general membership. Informed by the combined experience of legislative fights within the coalition, these detailed, precise, and clear frameworks establish the coalition's purpose; mission, vision, and values; priorities; leadership structure; member and steering committee participation requirements; decision-making parameters; and communications commitments.

> "The COHFA Steering Committee believes that women of color, grassroots voices, and diversity in coalition members, resources, and messengers make us stronger and that the manner in which legislation is passed is just as important as the policy win itself."
>
> **— COHFA's MOU**

Coalition members commit to three key driving and long-term priorities: **to repeal the ban on rent stabilization, to pass local rent stabilization policies, and to require a cause for evictions.** By establishing values and process alignment before a new member organization joins, COHFA positions itself to remain agile and effective as it grows.

Based on their years of legislative campaign and organizing experience, COHFA's co-chairs, United for a New Economy (UNE) Executive Director Carmen Medrano and 9to5 Colorado's Executive State Director Cesiah Guadarrama Trejo, decided to structure the coalition as **a steering committee, three subcommittees, and general membership** in 2021. Since then, COHFA Steering Committee is comprised of eight member organizations and makes decisions on policy using a two-thirds majority, aiming for consensus whenever possible.

Each of COHFA's subcommittees **— Organizing and Training, Policy and Research, and Communications and Narrative —** is also led by two co-chairs, who make recommendations to the steering committee.

While COHFA partners with direct service, legal aid and policy organizations, only base-building organizations — organizations that are accountable to and composed of a member base directly impacted by the issues each focuses upon — are eligible to join the coalition; this applies to the subcommittees and steering committee leadership, too.

INSIGHT: Decision-making improves when people share the work and invest resources.

One of the reasons representative decision-making works for COHFA is because its steering committee and subcommittee leaders actively do the work of organizing. "You don't lead in COHFA by just stating your opinion; that's looked down upon," says COHFA Co-Chair Carmen Medrano. "You lead by showing up, doing work, turning people out, and making sure your members are participating."

Steering committee members agree to a one-time financial contribution as a demonstrated commitment to its shared agreements. General membership organizations are encouraged to participate in at least one of the subcommittees; they are also required to attend monthly meetings and support COHFA's organizing actions. For instance, general member organizations work with their respective memberships to email district legislators, recruit for direct action, circulate information on their social media and email channels, and identify people to offer legislative testimony.

INSIGHT: Feedback loops to your base increase both your impact and input.

Unlike traditional coalitions where organizational leads often represent organizational interests, COHFA ensures its representatives are housing organizers deeply connected to their renter bases. **This ground-up approach prioritizes experiential knowledge and the lived realities of renters, integrating directly impacted voices into all policy strategies and decision-making processes.**

For example, one coalition member might represent her organization's 30-person housing committee. She brings coalition updates and questions back and forth to that housing committee. Those committee members each represent 30 different congregations, and they take the coalition updates and questions back to their congregation committees — who know intimately what challenges renters within their congregation communities are facing as they organize with them. Multiply this chain of relationships by 23 COHFA coalition members, and the pooled knowledge and strategy that funnel into the coalition represent a deep and broad landscape of Colorado renters and organizers.

INSIGHT: Building relationships and base ownership improves decision-making by fostering trust.

COHFA embodies a cultural legacy of non-competition within the movement and a commitment to moving as a unified block to improve conditions for its base. The co-chairs, two women of color who have been in political relationship for over 12 years, invested countless hours in building, maintaining, and repairing relationships, both within political and organizational settings and at the personal level. **Conflict is bound to happen in political spaces, but they don't shy away from hard conversations.**

"You won't always agree on strategy, and you have to distinguish between disagreements and actions that cause a lack of trust," Medrano explains. COHFA's leaders extend this same sensitivity and care to their relationships with the most values-aligned leaders in the housing justice landscape and adjacent movements. Doing so is good practice and it establishes a foundation for ongoing collaboration. "I don't see how we achieve longer-term goals without robust alignment and trust that goes beyond campaigns and coalitions," says Guadarrama Trejo.

Medrano and Guadarramo Trejo work hard to model that inside of COHFA — and in their work with one another, scheduling time outside of meetings to focus on their interpersonal communication. "Many times, trust is not organizational," Medrano says. "It's individual."

The coalition is designed to hold and generate an ongoing cycle of information and representative priorities **— a feedback loop to and from member bases and decision-makers.** This equips COHFA leaders to represent renters' interests, even when they're not in the room.

COHFA's coalition **culture of equity** creates an environment where impacted renters can build power out of vulnerability by working to shift the housing landscape on their own terms. Even seemingly small details, like providing water and snacks for renters engaging in campaign actions at the Capitol and one-to-one outreach, are aimed at members who are often made to feel unwelcome in places like committee hearings and function as critical connective tissue for the coalition community.

Language justice is essential so that all members can participate meaningfully in decision-making. This extends beyond Spanish and English, to translating materials that can reach immigrant and refugee renters with higher language barriers when needed, and moving beyond language translation to power analysis and political education, ensuring a real comprehension for renters of policies that impact them.

Some of the preconditions of the coalition's effective regrouping between the 2023 and 2024 legislative cycle were laid earlier on. COHFA had built relationships, ownership and equitable processes within the coalition and with allies by 2024, including a well-functioning decision-making structure that drew on their respective and collective organizing strengths.

> "For me, especially as a younger ED and a woman of color, I don't want to do this work by myself. This work is really hard, and systems like the Capitol are not made for people like me. I'll survive it by strengthening relationships and trust with other women of color and people who genuinely care about me and my organization."
>
> **— Cessiah Guadarrama Trejo, COHFA Co-Chair**

KEY LESSON #2

Self-Reflection and Strategic Partnerships Led to a Legislative Win

In 2023, COHFA failed to pass both of their priority bills: local rent stabilization and eviction protections. From an organizing lens, the loss offered the coalition valuable insights that it used to adapt and enhance its strategies for the following legislative cycle.

Given the makeup of the Colorado legislature, an outside observer might assume that Democratic legislators would make passing progressive housing policy a breeze. Even with a Democratic trifecta, many legislators had to be convinced of the value of eviction protections — and COHFA would need to mobilize all sides of the political apparatus to sway them. In addition to maintaining and building their own coalition's organizing power, COHFA needed to join forces with strategic partners to build collective power. The loss reinforced the importance of leveraging relationships with lobbyists and legislators who understood under-the-dome dynamics, and surfaced potential changes to the bill that needed to be agreed upon in the coalition.

Critical analysis of its previous campaign also helped COHFA leadership identify their opposition's and the public's core narratives on renter's eviction rights, informing which narrative shifts to advance in the subsequent campaign.

The loss set a new departure point for evolving strategy to pass FCE, helping COHFA determine where to conserve, maintain, and build power strategically to amplify pressure. **Coalition members would continue as the primary engines of the tactics that emerged, mobilizing participation from a range of Colorado renters in support of eviction protections.**

INSIGHT: Analyzing past efforts helps you build stronger strategies.

Analysis helped COHFA see where to redirect energy and labor, informing their revamped strategies: **shift the narrative while holding a vision for the long-term, leverage lobbyist and legislator expertise, build a stronger legislative advocacy coalition with partners whose expertise bolstered theirs, and neutralize opposition.** Alongside these, they maintained their two long-term strategies: **centering directly impacted people's leadership and building grassroots and grasstops power to put eviction protections on progressive platforms,** ideally first by passing FCE. Key strategic changes they made to build as influential a campaign as possible, between 2023 and 2024 were:

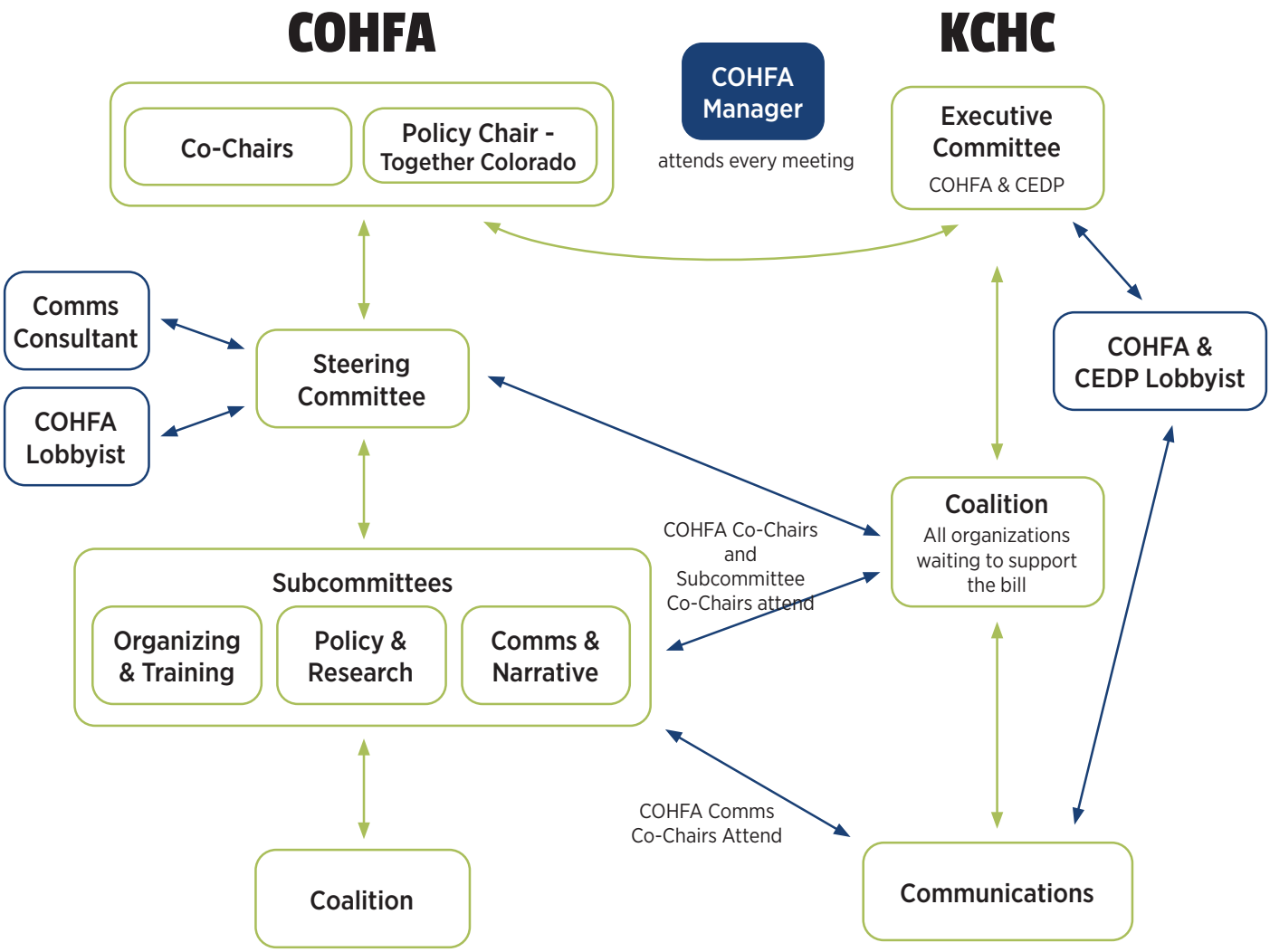
- Improved the legislative coalition structure by creating an official structure in partnership with CEDP, implementing a one-to-one voting system, and adding key staff positions to enhance accountability and efficiency in decision-making.
- Strategically shared decision-making power to ensure accountability to directly impacted people and to strengthen coalition negotiations.
- Shaped legislative priorities and responses to reflect community needs while focusing efforts on early success in the House.
- Revamped narrative strategy to align with renter needs, shift public discourse on eviction rights, and increase renter and public engagement efforts. This included adding a communications subcommittee to the legislative coalition.
- Activated external local and state partners to build coalition power and mobilize renter voices.
- Directly contracted a lobbyist to represent COHFA's interests in the legislative campaign.
- Hired a legislative coordinator to support negotiations and neutralize opposition.

Victory Happy Hour with Co-Chairs and Sponsors

INSIGHT: Legislative coalitions build support for your base's interests.

A legislative coalition could rally support from interested organizations and strategic partners, but COHFA would need clear and effective internal decision-making channels that allowed the COHFA Steering Committee to lead. Established in the fall leading up to 2024's legislative session, Keep Coloradans Housed Coalition (KCHC) was a legislative campaign that leveraged legal and lobbying technical expertise and member power. Community Economic Defense Project (CEDP) contributed capacity to critical legislative negotiations, complementing the knowledge COHFA had of renters' current priorities. This helped KCHC strike a balanced orientation between the political realities for renters, which COHFA leaders in KCHC represented, and the legal and policy implications (e.g. what the bill would mean in court) throughout the major negotiation phases.

This diagram details how communication flows between COHFA and KCHC



Adapting the structure from the previous year to move more efficiently and balance leadership, CEDP and COHFA decided to formalize decision-making within KCHC as a one-to-one model, with CEDP and COHFA holding equal power. In cases of disagreement, decisions were deferred to the bill sponsors, trusted for their expertise in statehouse negotiations. However, on behalf of COHFA's Steering Committee, COHFA representatives in KCHC maintained a bottom line: **they would kill the bill if renters' core interests were compromised.**

The legislative coalition amplified the bill's visibility and importance, expanding the reach of grassroots actions and key messaging, and increasing political pressure. With added capacity in the legislative coalition, COHFA members could strategically direct their own–and focus on building power with their base.

INSIGHT: Partner and staff purposefully to strengthen your advocacy.

COHFA designed KCHC to keep renters' interests and participation in decision-making at the forefront, while leveraging partner strengths and member support for the campaign. Decision-making power remained with key experts: lived experience (COHFA), legal and policy (CEDP), and legislative (bill sponsors). Leaders opted to hire a coalition manager, legislative coordinator, and lobbyist to dedicate even more energy to shifting the political landscape.

The coalition manager, Misha White, served as a crucial link between COHFA and KCHC during the legislative session. By attending all COHFA and KCHC subcommittee, coalition, legislative coalition, and decision-making meetings, the coalition manager maintained a big-picture understanding of each coalition member's roles, strengths, and labor contributions. This perspective also positioned her to identify base priorities whenever bill changes were proposed.

During the five major negotiation phases, White distilled the political and tenant-reality implications of amendments for COHFA's Steering Committee, which decided COHFA's vote in KCHC. She focused on the political calculus — **What do we gain or lose? How do these amendments affect our base and their lived realities?** — to help the steering committee make informed decisions fast.

CEDP's chief legal services officer, Rebecca Cohn, provided incisive legal and policy analysis of how various amendments would play out in court. COHFA and CEDP's shared insights informed any concessions COHFA's Steering Committee made, supporting a decision-making process that maintained the community's bottom line.

> "I know I can bring things other organizations can't. I know there are things they can do that I can't. How do we bring the resources, access, and capacity to get toward that same goal?"
>
> **— Melissa Mejía,**
> ***Head of State and Local Policy at Community Economic Defense***

INSIGHT: Building a wide network of progressive allies is essential.

The campaign built a critical mass of progressive supporters, building on longstanding relationships with groups across movements to elevate FCE as a top progressive priority going into the session. To bridge the voices and interests of renter communities with under-the-dome influence, COHFA hired a legislative coordinator, Emma Bliesner. She set a framework for strategic engagement with KCHC's executive committee, carefully mapping out opposition, allies, and opportunities to influence. For instance, she helped identify and track key districts where COHFA would focus organizing efforts like town halls to apply political pressure.

Covering under-the-dome targets, the legislative coordinator focused on engaging lobbyists while the coalition manager met with potential allies outside of the dome to recruit them into KCHC and identify specific engagement opportunities. Together, COHFA, CEDP, and the legislative coordinator leveraged relationships across the progressive ecosystem to garner support and move 33 organizations to join KCHC in support of the bill.

The bill sponsors applied their own buy-in strategies to fellow legislators. A critical turning point in influencing Democratic legislators was Representative Mabrey's invitation to bring House Speaker McCluskie to eviction court between sessions. As Senator Nick Hinrichsen explained, FCE legislation deals with fine details and loopholes around contracts, and the human impact of legislation can be lost. Mabrey gained a powerful ally in helping the House Speaker see first-hand how Coloradans were impacted by evictions, especially with regard to lease renewal. Speaker McCluskie, who had previously voted no on FCE, was compelled to host the January 2024 press conference in support of the legislation with COHFA on behalf of her caucus.

INSIGHT: Move to negotiate and neutralize early.

Between the summer of 2023 and the announcement of the 2024 FCE bill, KCHC and bill sponsors worked their respective influence and relationships to negotiate towards neutralization with legislative and lobby opponents to the bill. **Early neutralization efforts clarified opponents' positions.** This informed COHFA Steering Committee and subcommittee leaders' work in coalition to assess membership priorities and bottom lines in the policy, get clear on tactics, and prepare to counter industry lobby arguments effectively.

Neutralizing key opponents meant that opposing legislators had to substantiate their opposition beyond the positions of industry lobbies, which had largely been addressed by the time the bill moved from Senate committee to the Senate floor. The earlier legwork that had occurred in coalition to back and inform bill amendments with tenants' priorities allowed COHFA's Steering Committee representatives to move quickly on the Senate floor negotiations when there wasn't time for consultation.

INSIGHT: Investing in an experienced lobbyist as a coalition pays off.

COHFA chose the right lobbyist for the campaign, with two decades of lobbying experience and a long-standing relationship with the coalition and several of its members. The lobbyist, Tonette Salazar, had previously lobbied for coalition organizations Together Colorado, UNE and 9to5 Colorado, but COHFA leaders made a pivotal shift in how to engage her expertise for the 2024 campaign.

"In 2023, 9to5 Colorado, Together Colorado, and UNE agreed to come together and leverage our individual lobbying contracts," Medrano says. "Normally, lobbyists would call each of us individually with updates. But if we moved as a block, they could update us all at once, which helped us move decisions together. It's rare for organizations to do that, but there was enough trust to make it happen." **This choice facilitated better communication, streamlined their efforts, and lessened the workload the co-chairs had managed in the previous year's campaign.** It helped the lobbyist confidently represent the interests of the coalition as decisions were made.

FCE Bill Signing

Post-Signing Debrief

INSIGHT: Work with allies to center organizing at every step.

While some might bury a policy that is not politically feasible, White says instead, "[COHFA asks] what is needed to make a policy politically viable?" Importantly, COHFA's lobbyist, CEDP, and even the bill sponsors were willing to follow the strategic lead of organizers and adhere to their long-term priorities. This underlines the importance of shared bottom lines amongst legislative coalition members — especially because centering organizing is a departure from lobbying norms.

"Maybe our coalition didn't love some of the compromises that legislators were making, but there was unity — not only in vision but also in strategy; there was trust between the leaders of the coalition and everybody else involved in the fight." says Representative Mabrey, who co-sponsored the bill.

In two instances bill sponsors made compromises they understood to be necessary with consent from COHFA's steering committee. However, COHFA insisted that the sponsors attend coalition general meetings to explain their reasoning and willingness to negotiate. This level of engagement from bill sponsors with coalition general members is uncommon. COHFA took the time to prepare members and set up the meetings to be spaces of mutual respect, which they saw as necessary to making their commitment to the people who would be impacted by the policy a reality.

COHFA was careful to build with partners who were willing to let them lead with their community expertise and deferred to the coalition's strategies. Each coalition partner had clarity on its stake and strongest offering, and a willingness to engage in good faith — even if they had strategic differences with a renter-centered approach.

KEY LESSON #3

Narrative Strategy Was an Indispensable Organizing Tool

The 2023 campaign brought unprecedented media attention to COHFA, connecting reporters with renters for widespread coverage. However, the dominant media narrative that year cast renters as victims and legislators as would-be heroes protecting them from individual bad actor landlords, overshadowing the organizing and power-building work of renters, while leaving corporate landlords out of the story altogether.

Coming out of the 2023 legislative session, COHFA's communications subcommittee focused on shifting this narrative as part of its longer-term strategy to highlight the role large corporate landlords play in blocking key renter protections in Colorado. **COHFA invested additional resources in values-aligned communications consultants** to support the earned and social media needs that balanced both the long-term narrative and shorter-term legislative campaign. Members of the COHFA communications subcommittee were active in the temporary KCHC structure, bringing essential perspectives on how to frame messaging in a values-aligned way.

As part of this overall strategy, COHFA also invested in a communications strategy that built the narrative skills of its grassroots members. Desiree Westlund, who co-chaired the COHFA's communications subcommittee alongside Katie Garcia, described it this way: **"We're not just training members as spokespeople for a campaign; we're teaching them how to think about and see narrative through their own stories."**

COHFA recognizes that renters have inherent agency, dignity, and a right to housing; their long-term vision is co-creating a world that reflects and elevates that reality. In 2024, they utilized their for cause eviction campaign to forward their larger narrative of housing as a human right, centering an organizing approach. They wove unified messaging about winning better conditions and building power for renters now across all communications materials, including training documents, legislative meeting talking points, op-eds, social media, and more.

INSIGHT: Change the argument to shift public perception.

The name of the 2024 temporary legislative coalition — "Keep Coloradans Housed Coalition" — was a strategic change from the previous session. In 2023, key legislators had argued that the housing crunch in Colorado was simple; the problem was supply, and the solution would be building.

To be clear, there is a significant housing supply issue in the United States and in Colorado. It's just not the only issue that contributes to housing insecurity. More than coincidentally, the supply argument aligned with the interests of corporate lobbyists and powerful real estate coalitions, which stood to benefit significantly from state investment in building projects. COHFA identified that speaking against the supply argument would muddy their messaging.

Instead, COHFA doubled down to focus on the immediate needs of current renters. Many Coloradans were at risk of losing their housing immediately due to evictions. Significant building projects, which often take years to come to fruition, would not provide renters the security they deserved in the present. But in 2023, that message fell on deaf ears. COHFA took those learnings into 2024, giving its temporary legislative coalition a name that did double duty as a bulletproof slogan. **What legislator could effectively argue against keeping Coloradans housed?**

INSIGHT: Strong messaging alignment is critical.

COHFA's cohesive communications strategy ensured messaging alignment across that coalition, within KCHC, and among aligned groups. COHFA's Communications Subcommittee, composed of member organizations with communications capacity, led efforts like crafting narratives, training directly impacted individuals, and developing toolkits. They worked closely with COHFA's Organizing Subcommittee, which recruited and trained renters and small landlords to testify and speak to the media. They ensured that the campaign-focused messaging aligned with longer-term goals to win protections for renters in Colorado by **bringing trained spokespeople, action alerts, digital toolkits, and messaging that met both short and long-term objectives.**

INSIGHT: Build power with the story you tell.

The campaign communications were an opportunity to build renter power through storytelling, while moving public perception toward the rights of renters, regardless of if the bill passed.

Prior to the 2024 session, COHFA commissioned polling that revealed the frame of protecting "good renters" was popular and effective. They knew they could create a path to victory for FCE legislation using binary language. "Many of us were trained to do traditional campaign messaging: you test, you poll, you figure out the most progressive thing you can get away with saying, and that's what you go with to win," Westlund says. But COHFA wanted to frame all renters as deserving of eviction protections — not only the "good renters," however subjectively that might be determined. Recognizing that creating moral hierarchies of renters clashed with both their coalition values and their long-term legislative strategy, they sought another way into the win.

While they identified corporate landlords as the villains in the 2024 story, they were mindful not to identify renters as victims. They made sure legislators were understood to be potential allies and collaborators, rather than the heroes of this now people-populated story.

COHFA subcommittees built power through training and organizing renters to claim their own stories. Instead of elevating the role of elected officials, **COHFA focused on the rights and agency of renters.** Legislative testimonies and media interviews underscored this framing; renters spoke about their experiences around eviction from a position of strength and personal dignity, addressing policy points at the same time.

Even if it was at odds with typical legislative campaign messaging tactics, COHFA maintained a bottom-line commitment to its base. **They recognized that narrative work elevates bigger visioning and possibility,** a chance to move the public story of Colorado renters closer to the story of renters fighting for safe and stable housing for all.

INSIGHT: Direct action can shift internal narratives.

COHFA activated their base through creative storytelling, including a direct action called "The Slummies." After the 2023 loss, some activists wanted to protest the governor and the couple of legislators who killed the renter protection bills behind the scenes. But, it was unclear how this would advance their goals. With power building in mind, COHFA instead prepared and activated their base to crash an annual awards celebration for the key lobbying group representing landlords, the Colorado Apartment Association, holding a simultaneous mock award show in a nearby park. Members told their stories and presented five awards, in categories like "The Worst Rent Hiker." They then marched to the black-tie corporate landlord event and a small group disrupted it to present the offenders with their Slummy awards.

"There was a little bit of reporting on it, but **the biggest impact was that it helped people in the coalition understand who our enemy actually is**," Westlund says. "We get stuck in very traditional organizing that's exclusively focused on the legislature and moving swing votes. But it's corporate landlords who are pulling the strings. It was corporate landlords who lobbied and killed our bill. Getting that into people's minds shifted how they spoke to the media."

"It shifted how we were thinking as a coalition going into the 2024 legislative session, and we

were clear, we hammered corporate landlords hard,'" she says. The Slummies functioned as a training that helped directly impacted people understand what a narrative action feels like — and how insisting on deeper narratives can create the conditions for policy change.

INSIGHT: Put people in the story.

As Senator Hinrichsen alluded to, policy is about people, but they can get lost in the volume and formality of legislative language. COHFA moved the FCE story from passive to active, creating clear stories with real stakes. Renters weren't just losing their housing; instead, they were being forced out of their housing by corporate landlords and real estate investors, who seized any available opportunity to flip working class people out of their homes and jack up the rents.

By demystifying the forces at play, the story of eviction in Colorado became a story where there was no foregone conclusion. Everyone involved made choices that had consequences — including legislators. COHFA's grassroots mobilization of town halls, committee hearings, coordinated email outreach, social media, press coverage, and written media drove this point home by centering the voices of impacted renters.

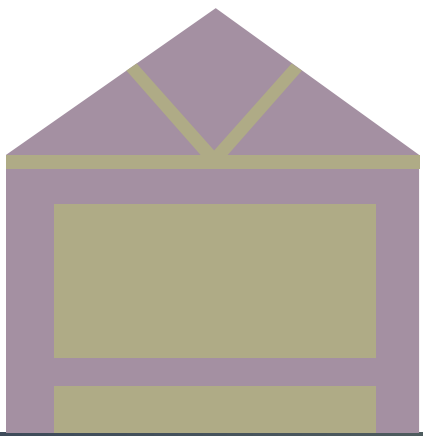
During the session, COHFA was strategic to queue up renters to speak when it mattered the most, adeptly debunking opposition's vague claims with real stories of renter discrimination — like one renter whose lease was threatened because of a political bumper sticker, or another who lost lease renewal after she declined a sexual advance from a landlord. Imbuing the fight with real people and concrete storytelling helped highlight the myriad ways the law left renters vulnerable.

Case Study: Conclusion

> "We intentionally structured this campaign in a way where everybody involved used their power, but renters had the biggest weight of decision-making power in how the bill was shaped."
>
> **— Carmen Medrano, COHFA Co-Chair**

COHFA's 2024 campaign demonstrated that **centering organizing** can build power among directly impacted people, change ingrained narratives, shift the political landscape, and drive meaningful policy change. Early investment in an inclusive structure that supports values-aligned, base-centered decision-making was critical to COHFA's winning campaign strategy.

In partnership with aligned organizations, COHFA developed a stronger, smartly-staffed temporary structure to build collective power in the legislative campaign. This expanded the reach and influence of the careful strategies that its steering committee and subcommittees developed coming out of their previous legislative defeat, driven forward by all members throughout the 2024 campaign. Moreover, **they proved that it is possible to develop policies with and for renters** by building statewide and grassroots power to advance tactics inside and outside the Capitol, shift narratives to align with their vision for a just housing landscape, and connect local and state housing and allied organizations to pool resources toward a common priority.



Key Takeaways for Grassroots Coalitions:

Align policy and lobbying efforts with organizing principles.

- Keep the long-term vision for your base in clear sight.
- Protect and build on coalition organizing tactics to maintain and move political pressure for your legislative agenda.
- Use legislative campaigns as opportunities to simultaneously organize, build coalition power, and activate your base.
- Maintain organizing interests by de-centering the short-term political win as the only important strategic angle for policy.
- Allow the deeper stakes of your base to inform your choices around lobbying and communications tactics in the short term.
- Be explicit about your priorities and seek lobbying partners who are well positioned to negotiate on behalf of your coalition's interests.

Staff and contract to protect organizing capacity.

- Fund and hire necessary lobbying, coalition management, and legislative staff to strengthen information-sharing and protect leaders' bandwidth to negotiate on behalf of the base.

Invest in decision-making structures and processes that represent base perspectives by design and in process.

- Don't just talk or outsource expertise, do the work — especially leaders.
- Commit to clear agreements that mandate all members' contributions, values, and positions. This includes agreements for temporary structures with stakeholders who share bottom-lines but different strategies.
- Discern whose strengths are in service to what end.
- Define desired roles and create parameters that harness those with respect to the technical or strategic strengths partners offer.

Narrative strategy is organizing.

- Get clear on the big-picture story and find ways to tell it that increase legislative buy-in without compromising base values.
- Don't tell the story without the strong voice of the base.
- Let the story move the narrative landscape, regardless of the short-term outcome.

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