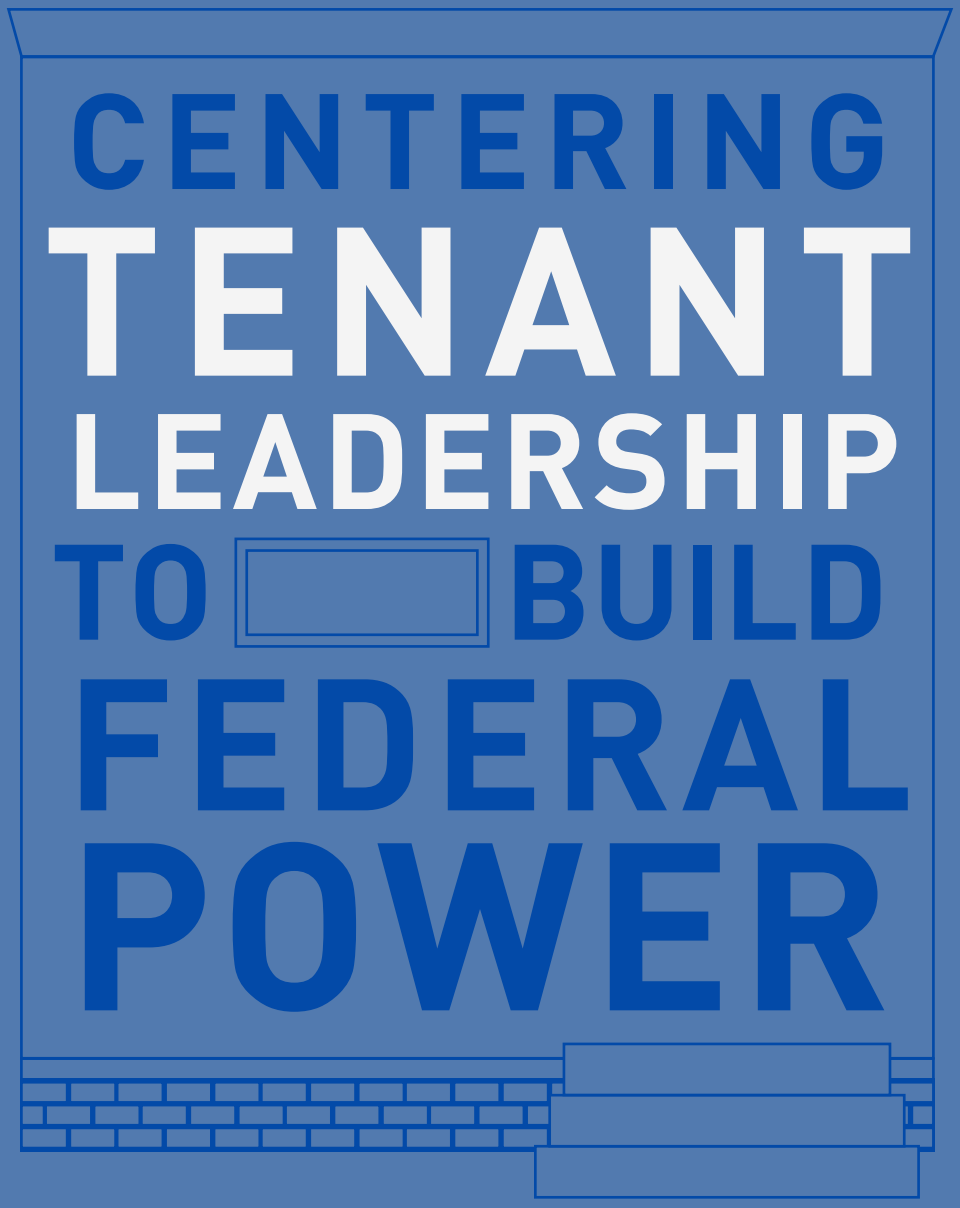
CENTERING TENANT LEADERSHIP TO BUILD FEDERAL POWER



How the Homes Guarantee campaign's strategic and structural choices shaped the options available to them

The P³ Lab
Possible Probable Powerful

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The P^3 Lab
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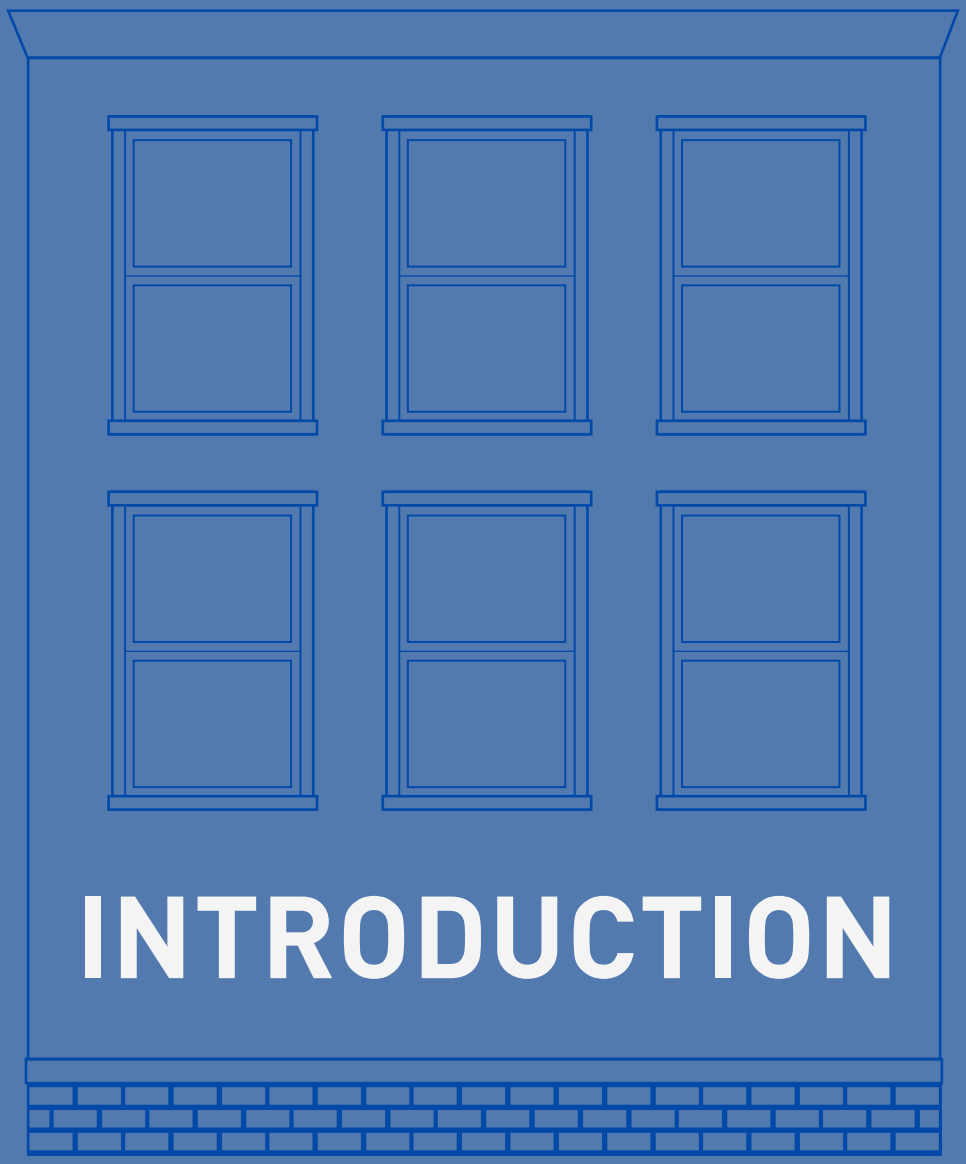


INTRODUCTION

Any effort to win political change faces often insurmountable odds.

A landmark academic study of a randomly selected group of 98 efforts to make federal policy change in the twenty-first century found that the overwhelming majority of them failed; in the vast majority of cases, status quo prevailed.[1] This was true even for campaigns that garnered tremendous media attention, money, public support, and other resources.

1. Baumgartner, F., Berry, J. M., Hojnacki, M., Kimball, D. C., & Leech, B. L. (2009). *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why.* University of Chicago Press.

In fact, despite conventional wisdom to the contrary, having more media attention, broader citizen support, or more (lobbying or electoral) money on one side was not necessarily predictive of winning. The mere fact of having more resources, in other words, did not translate to policy success. Instead, status quo arrangements often already reflected existing power dynamics in society. Given historic disparities in the United States, change efforts seeking to improve the lives of race-class-subjugated communities thus face an even steeper challenge. Multiple previous research efforts argue that this is particularly true for efforts related to housing, where powerful institutions have a vested interest in maintaining our current, profit-centered system.[2] Yet, for many such communities, the status quo is simply untenable. On issues related to housing, health care, work, education and more, too many families face unacceptable odds.

> To understand the necessary prospects for change, then, we must explore the outlying cases. What can we learn from successful campaigns that have bucked the seemingly insurmountable odds?

2. Rothstein, R. (2018). *The Color of Law.* Liveright Publishing Corporation; Taylor, K. (2019). *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership.* The University of North Carolina Press; Thurston, C. (2018). *At the Boundaries of Homeownership.* Cambridge University Press.

Community organizing, in which people are developed into strategic leaders embedded into a latticework of relationships within a structured vehicle for politics, is one avenue for change-making that has demonstrated the capacity to build the power needed to overcome the status quo. Unlike many other campaigns, those engaged in community organizing invest in ordinary people as their primary source of political power—and have defied the odds to win change for their communities.[3]

Although research shows us that this is a plausible and possible way to achieve socio-political change, it is not as common as some other approaches to change, especially at the federal level. Federal coalitions often rely on lobbying, media strategies, and exerting electoral pressure through campaign donations. Investing in the power of ordinary people runs counter to dominant paradigms of politics. Even in those campaigns that draw on people's activism as

3. Han, H., McKenna, E., & Oyakawa, M. (2021). *Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America.* University of Chicago Press.

part of their strategy, community members are generally mobilized into pre-determined actions rather than engaged as fellow leaders and co-strategists. Coalition strategy is usually set by policy experts and the staff of national organizations.[4] The scale, pace, and complexity of federal campaigns can make these choices seem like a given, and the possibility of relying on an organized base of constituents as your source of power farfetched. Yet given the uphill nature and likelihood of failure of any federal campaign that is seeking to improve the lives of race-class-subjugated communities, it is essential that we continue to experiment with new strategies and approaches to campaigning.

4. McCammon, H. J., Bergner, E. M., & Arch, S. (2015). "'Are You One of Those Women?' Within-Movement Conflict, Radical Flank Effects, and Social Movement Political Outcomes." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly, 20*(2), 157–178.; Baumgartner, F., Berry, J. M., Hojnacki, M., Kimball, D. C., & Leech, B. L. (2009). *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why.* University of Chicago Press.

This report describes a campaign doing just that: the **Homes Guarantee campaign**.

We track choices the campaign made from 2018 to 2022 about how to organize itself and what resources to leverage for power alongside the impact it was having in the world, finding that three key decisions shaped the ability of the campaign to expand its impact:

1. To see organized bases of tenants in member organizations rather than individual activists as their source of power;

2. To center their base of tenants as decision-makers and lead strategists while retaining important roles for staff organizers, policy experts, and funders in the coalition;

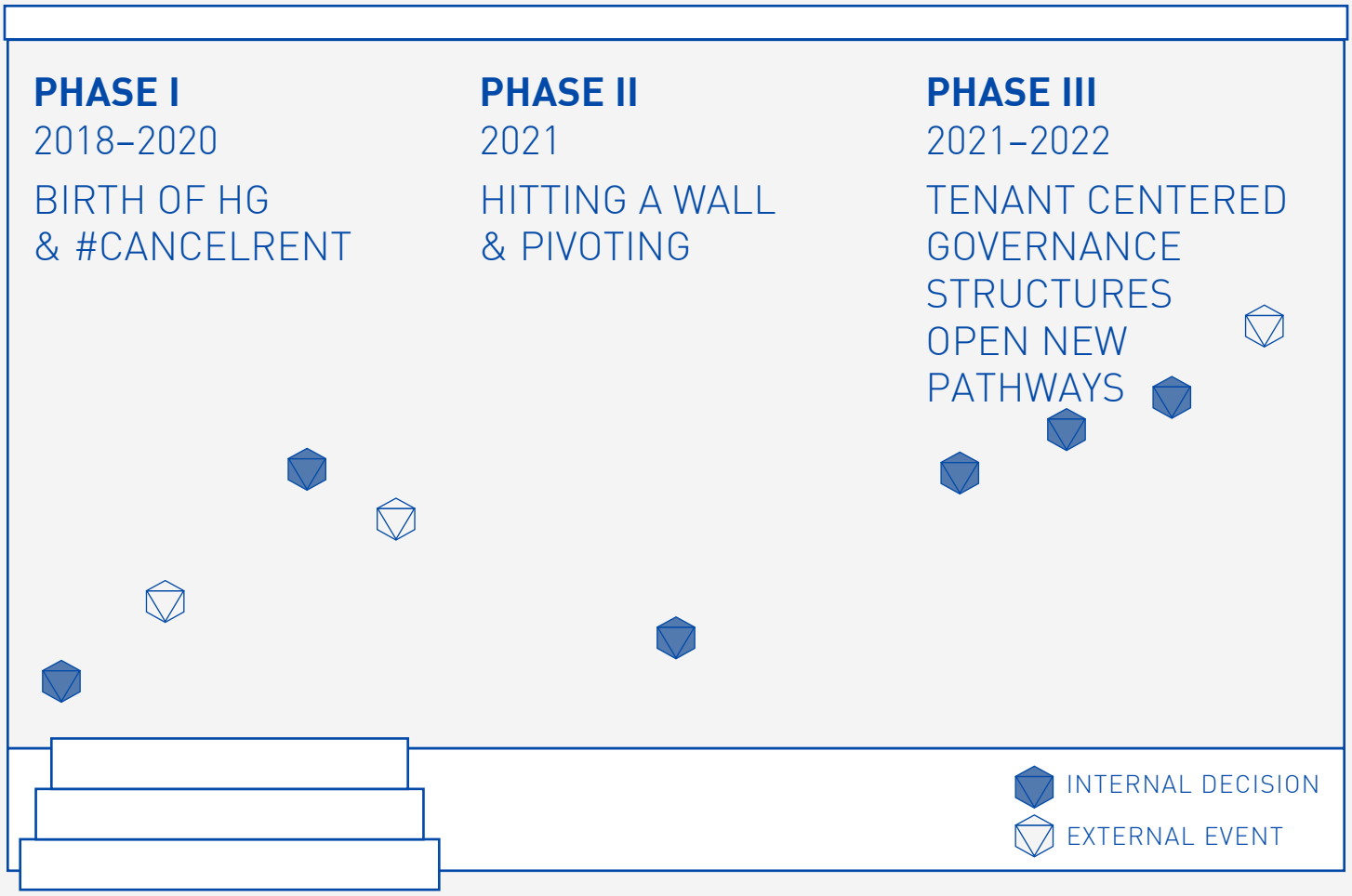
3. To develop an explicit governance structure that allowed the campaign to more fully inhabit these choices.

Many campaign reports focus on *what a campaign accomplished in the world*, putting a black box around the campaign's *internal practices and operations*. In this report, we specifically highlight how external impacts and internal decisions evolved alongside each other for Homes Guarantee—because *what* the campaign was able to accomplish depended on *how* they did the work.

How they organized themselves internally affected to whom they were accountable, how they developed strategy, and, ultimately, what they accomplished in the world.

The campaign's journey reveals the ways in which the three critical decision points listed above transformed both their internal operations and external impact: first, recognizing that their power must come from organized bases of tenants rather than individual activists; second, truly centering tenants as decision-makers while maintaining clear roles for staff and experts; and finally, creating explicit governance structures that allowed them to fully implement these choices. By illuminating these pivotal choices and their consequences, **we hope to generate learnings on how to advance a federal campaign for funders and community organizers seeking to build federal coalitions.**

TIMELINE OF
HOMES
GUARANTEE
CAMPAIGN



We divide our discussion of the campaign into three phases, depicted in the figure above. Each phase reflects how internal organizational choices shaped the campaign's external impact. The first phase, from 2018 to 2020, describes the birth of the Homes Guarantee and #CancelRent campaigns, which were initially run as more traditional, staff-driven campaigns. The limitations of this approach were revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the second phase, which describes the campaign hitting a strategic wall and pivoting towards more innovative approaches to building and wielding tenant power in 2021. The third and final phase describes the results of that strategic pivot from 2021 to 2022—during that time, Homes Guarantee adopted a tenant-centered governance structure that opened new pathways for impact. Through each phase, the strategic choices available to them directly reflected their internal choices about power and decision-making.

PHASE I: BALANCING TRADITIONAL & INNOVATIVE APPROACHES

PHASE I
2018–2020

2018
Launched campaign among People's Action affliliates with a more traditional, staff-led approach

2019
Had traction with key congressional allies

2020
Seized increased attention on tenants to mobilize individuals for #CancelRent

March 2021
#CancelRent fails to advance

INTERNAL DECISION

EXTERNAL EVENT

From its inception, the Homes Guarantee campaign attempted to balance traditional federal campaign approaches with a focus on tenant leadership.

This tension would shape the campaign's early development and ultimately reveal the limitations of trying to straddle both paths.

While tenant leaders initially inspired an ambitious vision for structural change in housing, the campaign struggled to translate this vision into real tenant leadership without clear governance structures. These challenges would become especially apparent during the COVID-19 crisis, when the campaign's reliance on individual activists rather than organized bases limited their ability to exercise power.

BIRTH OF HOMES GUARANTEE

The Homes Guarantee campaign grew out of the long history of work around housing at People's Action, a national network of member-based, power-building organizations. These efforts stretched from work in the 1960s investing in neighborhoods targeted by predatory lending up to fighting for solutions for poor homeowners in response to the Great Recession. But in the years following the Great Recession, this work largely went dormant in the face of a reduced funding landscape for advocacy related to housing issues.

In 2017, an immigrant rights organizer named Tara Raghuveer approached collaborators at People's Action with a proposition. She had done research on eviction and was baffled by the way housing had receded as a political priority despite its outsized impact on people's lives. She proposed that People's Action bring her on board to relaunch their housing work with a new federal campaign. People's Action hired Tara as their housing campaign director.

As a starting point, Tara and others at People's Action convened a group of about 50 leaders in late 2018 for a retreat to select an issue for their campaign. The leaders primarily came from People's Action affiliates and included tenants, unhoused people, public housing residents, and staff organizers. Linda Armitage, for instance, came from the Jane Addams Senior Caucus. Tammer Ibrahim, an organizer with Reclaim Philly, had met Tara at a People's Action event around the same time that his constituents were stating clearly that one of their biggest problems was housing.

At the convening, Tara and the other organizers presented the leaders with possible issue campaigns, each reflecting a more traditional approach to solving housing issues. These campaign options focused on policy changes like expanding housing vouchers, or the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit. Each option was rejected by the leaders, who felt that the potential campaigns suggested were too narrow and would not actually solve the challenges that they faced. Instead, with an awareness that the upcoming presidential campaign would create an opening to redefine priorities related to housing, the leaders called on People's Action to develop the equivalent of a Green New Deal or Medicare for All of housing: an ambitious and visionary campaign that would go beyond narrow policy changes and instead be part of a broader structural change in housing that centered the welfare of tenants.

> These tenant leaders thus inspired the Homes Guarantee campaign, as convening attendees worked to develop a new framework for how to approach a fight for a federal guarantee to housing.

At this early stage of a campaign, a common path forward in federal campaigns is for organizing staff and policy experts to take the lead in determining the exact policy goal and the strategy for achieving it. Homes Guarantee could have followed this path—or they could develop new structures that continued to center tenant voice. In the early phases of the campaign, the team attempted to do both: staying true to their organizing roots by exploring how tenants could be centered in a federal campaign while also pursuing relatively traditional legislative strategies at the federal level and engaging policy experts in the field to identify policy solutions.

In June 2019, Representative Chuy Garcia hosted a congressional briefing for the Homes Guarantee campaign with a range of other Members of Congress and their staff during an annual People's Action convening. The team was surprised to discover the degree to which they were taken seriously by attendants. This validated their instinct that there was a vacuum when it came to solutions to our housing crisis, but it also forced them to realize that they needed to move beyond having a good idea into having an actual strategy to win change.

Over the summer, Homes Guarantee organizers began a process to collaboratively develop a briefing book. This effort was supported by an organizer named Kevin Simowitz, who had just begun a contract with People's Action. Like Tara, he was grounded in locally based community organizing and lived outside of DC. He had spent years organizing at a People's Action affiliate, Maine People's Alliance. After leaving MPA, he worked at a national organization, Caring Across Generations, focused on organizing family caregivers, older adults, and people with disabilities in support of transformative caregiving policy. This meant that he brought both an understanding of how to advance federal policy and a belief in the value of organizing impacted people.

115 movement allies and institutions reviewed the briefing book draft and submitted feedback, including from policy experts, staff organizers building bases of tenants and people experiencing homelessness, and tenants themselves.

This book laid out a series of smaller, bureaucratic campaigns that would lead to guaranteed housing in the United States, beginning:

"Everyone living in the United States should have safe, accessible, sustainable, and permanently affordable housing: a Homes Guarantee."

Crucially, the book focused strategically on solutions that would change the political economy of housing by decreasing the power of landlords or private housing and increasing the power of tenants. This framework would endure as a north star throughout internal and external shifts in the years to come. The collaborative process as well as the campaign to launch it into the world positioned the Homes Guarantee campaign as an important new voice in tenant organizing and housing policy.

Homes Guarantee published their briefing book in September 2019. In the months that followed, Senator Bernie Sanders largely adopted the Homes Guarantee briefing book as the housing agenda for his presidential campaign, and Representative Ilhan Omar agreed to introduce a bill in partnership with the campaign. It was, in some ways, a significant win to bring tenant issues into the public conversation alongside progressive champions, similarly to the way that Medicare for All has shifted conversations about health care. In this sense, Homes Guarantee had responded to the initial call from their leaders to advance an ambitious vision for housing. Given the difficulty of winning federal legislation, it's not uncommon for the momentum that Homes Guarantee gained in 2019 to be deemed a victory in and of itself, and for campaigns to double down on a strategy that focused on access to elected officials or media. **But the tenants involved in Homes Guarantee were clear that a narrative bill wasn't acceptable because it didn't impact their living conditions. It's not enough to have a Medicare for All bill for housing if the campaign wasn't making progress toward achieving that vision. The tenants agitated Homes Guarantee's organizers to develop an actual strategy to win changes that tenants would feel in their lives.** For that to happen, progressive champions introducing a Homes Guarantee was insufficient.

At this point, Tara also made a choice that would shape her approach to the campaign. Following the leadership of tenants she had met through her research around eviction in Kansas City, she began to organize directly with tenants in what would become KC Tenants. Having a federal campaign director actively involved in local organizing is rare.

Campaigns tend to prioritize experience in federal politics. As KC Tenants built momentum in the coming months, Tara sought to bring the same approach of centering organized tenants into her national work at People's Action. Tara saw the potential of using locally-focused, tenant-led organizing as a way of building traction for federal wins—an unusual approach since organizing was traditionally thought to be more effective in state and local campaigns, but less relevant at the federal level. While this insight about the importance of local organizing genuinely led by tenants themselves would prove crucial to the campaign's later success, Homes Guarantee still lacked the structures needed to fully implement this vision in its early phase.

As Tara dove into organizing in Kansas City, Homes Guarantee was struggling to put their commitment to center tenant leaders into practice. They operated largely without a clear structure or intentional strategy in this phase, and they lacked a formal governance structure that put decisions in the hands of tenants. Staff members and policy experts ended up making many decisions, even though tenants were consulted on the briefing book.

While it is common for coalitions to operate like this, without clear governance structures, this lack of clarity enables organizations and leaders to operate on the logic of exit[5]: if the coalition veers from their interests, they are more likely to leave than to realign their interests with the coalition. Ultimately, the coalition is unable to hold a stable group together.

This approach would leave the campaign vulnerable as they began to build momentum in the coming year.

5. Hirschman, A. (1972). *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty.* Harvard University Press.

COVID-19 & #CANCELRENT (2020–2021)

The following year, a pandemic wound up forcing the campaign's challenges in building their base to the forefront, as the campaign struggled to channel unprecedented national attention into real power for tenants. In March 2020, COVID-19 and the ensuing shutdowns rolled across the country, creating a historic crisis for tenants alongside unprecedented attention for the issues that tenants face. Calls to #CancelRent grew on Twitter and among local tenant organizers, and tenants came to the center of a national conversation in an unprecedented way.

Homes Guarantee sensed that this paradigm shift created by the pandemic would create a political opening for the campaign to move beyond the attention they had generated in the previous year to simultaneously win tangible victories and build their base of tenants. The campaign responded on two parallel tracks: attempting to pass federal legislation and hosting weekly organizing calls.

On the legislative front, in March through April 2020, the campaign partnered with Rep. Omar to attempt to pass a bill that included #CancelRent. Their hope was to generate pressure from the left on Representative Maxine Waters, who chaired the powerful House Financial Services Committee. But Rep. Omar's team was unable to whip cosponsors for the bill or move it through committee. The bill was introduced on April 17, 2020, and by the end of April it was clear to the campaign that the bill was dead. They also attempted to get a Senate companion to the bill but couldn't find someone willing to carry it.

When Democrats began to focus on rental assistance, Homes Guarantee pivoted to try to insert conditions on this assistance that would prioritize tenant needs over landlords. Ultimately, COVID-19 relief bills that passed ran counter to the benchmarks laid out in the briefing book because they strengthened landlords instead of weakening them. Without a base of tenants or other source of power, the bills that Homes Guarantee was advocating for would flounder.

The campaign also repeatedly tried and failed to bring tenants into conversations about COVID-19 relief legislation with key players in the federal housing ecosystem and progressive coalitions. While they had meetings with the House Financial Services Committee and the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, they weren't operating as strategic partners and felt at a power disadvantage. According to Kevin, #CancelRent "was certainly treated on the Hill like a message bill, press

Delegation Training, September 2021

release, opportunity to call attention to a topic that needs more attention. It wasn't seen as a serious legislative or policy proposal and certainly not something the Democratic Caucus would fight to include in the relief bill."

They were similarly dismissed by coalitions of progressive organizations and the Congressional Progressive Caucus, who didn't see relief for tenants as a priority. Tara recalls being told by a leader of an emerging table focused on emergency response to the pandemic, "There's no chance. Housing's just not going to be on this list … We're not putting #CancelRent on this. We're not hearing this from enough groups."

In parallel to their legislative efforts, Homes Guarantee launched an open weekly meeting, "Homes Guarantee Thursdays," in an attempt to harness the grassroots energy emerging from online calls to #CancelRent. These calls ran from March to December 2020.

Initially, hundreds of tenants responding to open calls on social media and other sources participated in the weekly calls. Many individuals who were joining the call were in immediate crisis and needed money for rent.

> **Homes Guarantee organizers struggled to provide people with much-needed updates on the current state of federal rules and support related to tenants while simultaneously pulling them into a longer-term fight for tenants.**

The campaign developed a new structure, led by a core team consisting of People's Action staff and a mix of staff and leaders from People's Action affiliates and other Homes Guarantee organizational members. Lacking a clear set of tenants governing the campaign, decisions were made by whoever showed up to HG Thursdays and the core team. As was the case the prior year, while this core team was committed to centered tenant voices, it was approximately half staff members. Most importantly, the tenants who attended HG Thursdays represented only themselves, rather than a base of fellow tenants in their home communities. In addition to not being led by a clear set of tenants, the new structure could not keep up with the rapidly shifting climate that

COVID-19 created politically and health wise. The campaign remained in rapid response mode, simply trying to keep their heads above water as conditions worsened for tenants.

Although campaign leaders wanted to ensure that any short-term wins simultaneously built capacity towards their long-term goals, they did not have a strategy to do so. As Kevin put it:

> *It was the earliest days of big Zoom. It was total chaos ... And it really opened up these big questions about ... an onboarding strategy. What do you do when 1,000 people join a Zoom and are like, what should I do, I can't pay my rent.*
>
> *I don't know that at that time I would've said, we had a campaign. We had a structural framework for a campaign. But we didn't have this sort of campaign where if people hopped in the chat, we could be like, 'okay, here's the two calls to action that we need you to do. Here's a series of structure tests that determine who's actually able to move in their own orbit and organize some people.'*

Centering their organizing around HG Thursdays meant that Homes Guarantee was primarily engaging individual activists rather than organized bases. People tended to find Homes Guarantee organically, through Twitter or an interview with Tara, rather than through their involvement in an organization that was part of Homes Guarantee. Grace White, who joined the campaign as a staff organizer in August 2020, notes that "there were a lot of tenants that were politicized by the pandemic and who could not pay their rent, right? And we didn't have the structure or the containers to wield power. It was too diffuse … **The #CancelRent campaign, it was like coalition of the willing individual tenants, and it didn't work."**

Attendance at the Thursday calls waned. Their attempts to support attendees in taking action beyond the weekly calls did not translate into

consistent participation or a growing base. Grace describes a few moments that made this clear: “We were trying to [generate calls] and nobody really made phone calls. We said we were going to do a day of action, and we had five people show up at [#CancelRent banner drops] in two cities. And I think the [#CancelRent] bill was reintroduced at one point, but we couldn’t move it beyond that. It was just like we did not have the power we needed to run the campaign that would be needed to win something.”

With no structure for decision-making, the campaign lacked accountability to any set of Homes Guarantee leaders. There was high turnover among tenant activists and no relational or structural path for the organizers to hold them accountable.

> **Homes Guarantee organizers are far from alone in the type of challenges they faced during COVID-19. Many organizers have struggled with how to navigate upsurge moments in recent years, from Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter. We often consider the central challenge to be identifying ways to absorb newly mobilized people into our organizations. Yet, for those who are organizing a constituent-base as their approach to building power, bringing people into a structure where governance, decision-making, and accountability are explicit is also important to consider.**

The campaign was struggling on both fronts—unable to build sustained engagement through HG Thursdays while simultaneously failing to gain traction in Congress. These fights made it clear that the campaign did not have enough power to get advance any sort of solution for tenants and reinforced a sense that, while their efforts were raising the profile of the issue and centering Homes Guarantee as a leading voice in the country on tenant issues, they weren’t serious efforts to pass legislation.

The window that had opened at the beginning of the pandemic began to close during summer 2020 in the face of shifting political terrain. With Senator Sanders out of the race for president, tenants were out

of the national electoral conversation. The uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd appropriately shifted the focus of many organizers and activists towards policing and police violence. And any COVID-19 relief legislation had to be signed by President Trump, who was largely hostile to tenant issues.

> Put together, these events made it painfully clear that Homes Guarantee did not have the power it needed to achieve its goals. Yet, alternative paths forward remained unclear. According to Tara, "… as early as the summer of 2020, we were like, 'We don't have the power that we need. That's a big problem. We need to spend the next several years building power.'"

After these realizations, the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021 represented a deeply challenging period for Homes Guarantee. The campaign continued to fight for #CancelRent to be included in pandemic relief bills, but efforts to build their base floundered. Both Grace and Tara were drawn back toward locally focused work. Feeling a deep sense of accountability to her relationships in KC Tenants, Tara refocused much of her energy back toward their new Black organizing fellowship.

Grace homed in on the challenges that Homes Guarantee had faced in building a sustained base of tenants. While many People's Action affiliates had tenant-members, their structure as multi-issue groups created challenges in focusing on organizing tenants outside those who self-selected as leaders. Individual tenants who joined HG Thursdays weren't actually engaged in organizing their communities. To solve for these challenges, Grace experimented with seeding tenant unions through online-to-offline organizing under the theory that organizing tenants would require a vehicle more fully led by and focused on tenants. After identifying three places with disparate tenant organizing emerging in South Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky, Grace put out Facebook ads that said, "Facing eviction? Fill out this form to get support." When people filled out the form, Homes Guarantee would invite them to come to a meeting about ways to defend themselves against an eviction outside of the courts. They measured how many

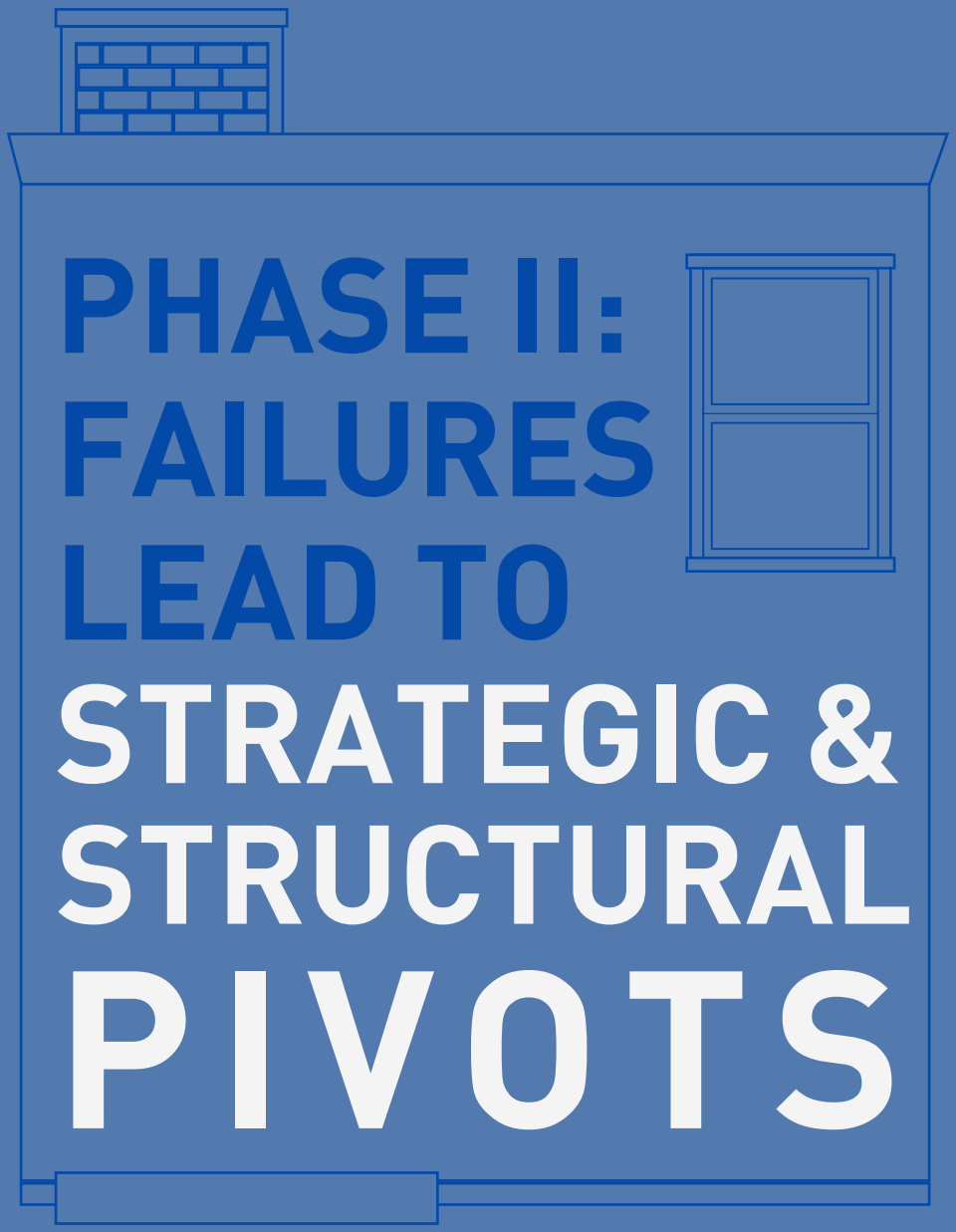
people would answer the phone, how many people attended a meeting, and how much they were paying to build the list per name, per phone number, per email. They were able to build lists of people at a reasonable price but found that, without a local organization to move people into, there was little for these newly engaged tenants to do.

In 2021, Homes Guarantee launched new attempts to pass a bill to cancel rent as a way of testing their power after the last year of organizing and in the context of a more favorable Congressional and presidential landscape. As a secondary goal, they sought to extend and improve the Federal Eviction Moratorium through work that KC Tenants did to pressure Representative Emanuel Cleaver. While President Biden did extend the moratorium after taking office, he failed to include any of the improvements for tenants that they had advocated for. Provisions meant to support tenants built the power of landlords. As the core team's weekly meeting notes from this time include, "We were … taken to school by the moderate Democratic wing of the Democratic Party, who were taken by the rental assistance demand."

As part of this push, the campaign launched a digital organizing push to generate calls to Congress and collect stories on #CancelRent and rental debt on February 23. By March 5, they had only made 170 calls. A planned Day of Action on March 1 only had three sign ups.

Then, on March 11, Rep. Omar reintroduced the Rent and Mortgage Cancellation Act. It again failed to advance. That same day, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 passed Congress without many of the components that Homes Guarantee had fought for. As Kevin put it, **"In some ways, it was just an update of the power analysis of, yeah, we had lots more people who were engaging with us than before the pandemic … [but] we just don't have the power to move a serious piece of legislation at the federal level."**

Homes Guarantee recognized that tenants weren't a priority for traditional progressive or housing coalitions and that, as long as they weren't an organized constituency, their needs would continue to be ignored. Facing this reality forced a reckoning for Homes Guarantee about their path forward yet freed them to search for answers outside the traditional approaches.


PHASE II:
FAILURES
LEAD TO
STRATEGIC &
STRUCTURAL
PIVOTS

PHASE II
2021

Recognizing their lack of base left them without power, HG pivots campaign strategy and organizing approach

INTERNAL DECISION

EXTERNAL EVENT

As the campaign hit a wall, it had to reconsider its strategy on two levels: first, how was it seeking to exercise power in the world? Second, was it organized internally to build the power it needed to effect change?

Ultimately, the failures of 2020–2021 would force two fundamental realizations that would reshape the campaign:

First, their source of power needed to shift from individual activists to organized tenant bases.

Second, they needed formal structures to truly center tenant leadership.

One could imagine a number of potential responses from the campaign at this moment, including a return to more traditional federal campaign strategies like investing in lobbyists, more staff, or doubling down on a social media strategy. But across Homes Guarantee, organizers and leaders felt clear that their long-term path to power lay in bases of tenants.

Emma Rehac, from Youth Alliance for Housing, assessed the situation as such: “If we were to hire a lobbyist, we could lobby for certain things, but that’s not building the power of tenants. And so always situating our short-term strategy also in long-term strategy, [we were] recognizing that we need to be building unions, not only to be winning #CancelRent, but to be winning literally anything else that we’d ever want to win in the future, we need to get really serious about our base building.”

Kevin noted that, unlike many federal campaigns which are led by DC-based staff, “none of us live in DC … All of our instincts are outside campaign instincts of how to build a [campaign].” This orientation, and their failure to gain traction by partnering with either progressive champions or traditional policy partners, led them in different directions than traditional federal campaigns.

To identify possible options moving forward, Tara, Grace, and John returned to the briefing book created in 2018 at the outset of the campaign. While much had changed in the campaign, this document still served as a north star pointing them in the direction of their core strategy: winning stepping-stone campaigns that decreased investment in private housing and the power of landlords on the way to guaranteed housing.

They also took note of success that the electoral working group of Homes Guarantee was having supporting tenant organizing around the Buffalo, NY mayoral race. Homes Guarantee hosted two research-a-thons to prove that the incumbent was a puppet for the developers and corporate landlords, supported Our City Action Buffalo in making 7,000 phone calls to Buffalo tenants, and created a co-governance training. They began to feel that that their most powerful work was done in collaboration with local grassroots organizations and leaders, rather than engaging individuals directly.

On March 10, 2021, Tara, Grace, and John presented three potential scenarios to the core team. They could (a) continue to push on #CancelRent for the next legislative package, (b) pivot to focus on an incremental win, like a National Tenants Bill of Rights (NTBOR), or (c) seek to do both at once.

The group had a robust discussion of each approach. Some were concerned that there was no longer a path to cancel rent, and that tenants and organizers needed a win. The National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) had indicated that they would be willing to work with Homes Guarantee on a tenant's bill of rights, which made it more strategically attractive. Others also felt that a strategy of pushing towards a NTBOR would help build the capacity of the campaign and team. Some organizers worried that tenants were facing an immediate crisis of rental debt and eviction, so they needed to continue to focus on #CancelRent. Other organizers worried about how an NTBOR would be enforced. The group also discussed other options besides the two that had been presented, including addressing predatory lenders, corporate landlords, and gentrification.

> Notably, the participants felt like this process was a genuine debate rather than a conversation in which the facilitators have already decided for them. Linda Armitage of the Jane Addams Senior Caucus said, "That's the one thing about our leaders, they never impose stuff on us. We always had to talk about it and vote on it ... And we were encouraged to say no and why we were saying no to anything. Yeah. So, I definitely felt like I had a say in it."

Across the campaign, there was broad agreement that their best path to increasing their power was to invest in building their base of tenant leaders. Tammer described feeling clarity that, "unless there is a big grassroots movement in specific locations across the country … we don't have the power to make this change happen." Emma remembered, "if we're getting really, really clear on running a campaign and building long-term power for tenants all across the country, we had to get really clear on base building and building unions, and then just considering what is

our capacity and what are we going to put our energy toward? We are not putting our energy towards something that isn't actually engaging that many people, and also not building unions and not developing leaders."

In discussing whether to continue fighting to cancel rent, Grace remembers Marsha Cole, a leader with Jane Addams Senior Caucus, saying, "We don't have time to pick fights that we can't win, and we can't win this #CancelRent fight. We've got to figure something else out."

Finally, they agreed that it was worth exploring an NTBOR, determining that it would meet their goals of winning tangible change for tenants while building their long-term power through an organized base of tenants and powerful relationships with housing policy groups.

The core team decided that a subset of the group would work collaboratively to determine a set of strategic options. This group included tenant leaders, organizers, and policy experts. The proposal team returned to the full group two weeks later with a more detailed proposal for how Homes Guarantee might pivot to focus on an NTBOR. The core team discussed it, and all committed to taking the proposal back to their organizations and getting clear on their commitments and capacity to pursue this strategy by the next meeting. They agreed that if 15 organizations wanted to move forward with the campaign, that they would begin building out a strategy. By April 7, 15 organizations had said yes, and Homes Guarantee committed to re-focusing their efforts on an NTBOR rather than continuing to fight for #CancelRent.

While Homes Guarantee had not yet developed an explicit structure for governance, they organically began to rely on this type of decision-making cycle in which a group of leaders discusses the overall direction, a subset fleshes out the details, and the leaders generate feedback and buy-in from their organizations before the campaign moves forward. They invited input from policy and political partners but prioritized the feedback of tenants. While the process may have required more time than Homes Guarantee staff making the decision on their own, Homes Guarantee ultimately emerged with stronger ideas and deeper buy-in from their members.

> Importantly, Homes Guarantee leaders also worked to identify how their effort to win an NTBOR would simultaneously build their base. In a shift from their approach of building a base of engaging individual, self-selected activists, Homes Guarantee would now shift to engage people connected to each other in relationally grounded vehicles nested within the campaign.

On April 21, 2021, the proposal team presented a potential timeline for an NTBOR campaign to the core team. Acknowledging that their efforts to build a base via individual activists were failing and sticking to the campaign's ethos that "the people closest to the problem are closest to the solutions," the team also presented a proposal to engage tenants and unhoused people to collaborate on a vision for what an NTBOR would include, through what would come to be called the Period of Radical Imagination. The core team brainstormed on the proposals, and then the proposal team incorporated that feedback into an updated proposal that was presented to the full group on May 5. By May 19, they had agreed to both plans and began planning for a summer of base building in collaboration organizations that were grounded in constituencies of tenants, such as tenant unions, community organizations, regional collaboratives, and labor unions.

While Homes Guarantee felt clearer on shifting to organize alongside local organizations, the team was still struggling to determine the best way to incorporate tenants in decision-making. While the core team agreed at the May 19 meeting to begin inviting leaders to attend these calls, this led to mix results, with few leaders joining. Yet, they were committed to this direction. Kevin recalled that "all of us had these experiences with campaigns, that said they were centering the leadership of poor tenants or the 'directly affected people' and didn't actually do it." Simultaneously, Tara was experiencing at KC Tenants that, not only was it possible for tenants to lead decision-making, but it was also extremely important to building a culture of accountability:

> *One of the big structural differences between our campaign and any other that I've seen at the federal level is that as campaign director, I am also deeply accountable to a local base in a way that most people running national campaigns are not. So, it's both an accountability thing but also a vision thing of I actually believe that it's possible because I see it with my own eyes every week that leaders can lead on strategy … So I think that's non-negligible, whereas I think a lot of people in national campaign roles either have never or haven't for a long time been in a position of actually setting up leaders to lead strategy.*

They headed into the summer clearer on their strategy both in what they wanted to win externally and how to build their power via bases of organized people within local groups. They were less clear on how to actually center tenants in the decisions of the campaign. This combination of strategic clarity alongside governance challenges would shape the next phase of the campaign.

The lessons they learned about the importance of organized tenant bases would soon lead to important shifts in Homes Guarantee's governance and accountability structures and open up new possibilities to win material change in the lives of tenants.

PHASE III:
TENANT CENTERED GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES OPEN NEW PATHWAYS

PHASE III
2021–2022

April 2022
Denver convening demonstrates the value of new structure, as staff, tenants, and policy partners align

Summer 2022
White House includes new HG campaign goals in series of listening sessions. In response, HG sets more ambitious goals.

Winter 2021–2022
Develop grassroots strategy team to ensure tenant participation and make decision-making structures explicit

Summer 2021
Summer of Radical Imagination informs campaign direction, builds base. Ends with 600-person call and DC delegation.

INTERNAL DECISION

EXTERNAL EVENT

In the years that followed, Homes Guarantee engaged in iterative cycles of building their base of tenants through local organizations and sharpening their governance and accountability structures to center this growing base. These cycles, and the power built through their base, simultaneously allowed them to identify and develop new campaign goals on the pathway to an NTBOR. They committed to simultaneously staying nimble and strategic in reaction to the political terrain around them, but steadfast in their focus on their long-term vision.

PERIOD OF RADICAL IMAGINATION LEADS TO A NEW STRATEGY

During the Period of Radical Reimagination in summer 2021, Homes Guarantee made major pushes to build their base and reorganize their funding and policy support.

The base building effort was designed to meet two goals at once:

1. **To inform what they would prioritize in an NTBOR by inviting input from tenants;**

2. **To invest in base-building efforts within member organizations and emerging tenant unions, shifting the source of power for Homes Guarantee from a set of individual tenants to organizations with organized-bases of tenants.**

Homes Guarantee received funding that allowed them to redistribute grants to local organizations and tenants who were seeking to build out a tenant union in their community. Beau Revlett, a recent college graduate from rural Kentucky and founder of Lexington Housing Justice Collective (now KY Tenants), said that he saw this as “a [clear] choice to invest in the local organizations within Homes Guarantee to build out the tenants’ union.” It also allowed policy and political partners to invest staff capacity in the kind of research and policy innovation that the team had come to believe were essential to winning a federal campaign.

During the Period of Radical Imagination, Homes Guarantee invited member organizations—both People's Action affiliates and local tenant unions—to run coordinated texting and call programs, house meetings, tenant union meetings, and online surveys. In addition to supporting participating organizations with funding, Homes Guarantee also supplied materials and training. The campaign collected findings from the Imagination Sessions' facilitators via online survey forms and at cohort calls. The resources came with very few requirements. Organizations were allowed to develop their own approach to the Period of Radical Imagination, as long as they were focused on building their base of tenants and invited input on the NTBOR. This approach also meant that, rather than feeling like participating in a federal campaign was detracting from local work, local organizations felt that participating in this base-building push would advance both local and federal goals at once. The campaign's investment in local organizing validated Tara's early insight from KC Tenants about the importance of building power through local tenant organizations—what had started as an unusual choice for a federal campaign director was now becoming central to their strategy.

Imagination Session hosted by Youth Alliance for Housing

Emma found that this support manifested on multiple levels: growing their base, advancing local campaign goals, and leadership development for everyone involved. "I think the Homes Guarantee is one of the very few spaces with adult organizers that really deeply invested in me and my organization and our leadership development beyond just us as token young people. And so ever since I've been really invested in the Homes Guarantee, in their work, and yeah, been really adopting a lot of their methodologies for organizing for other organizing I do more locally."

Where organizations didn't already exist but tenants were demonstrating interest in organizing, HG used their resources to support the development of new tenant unions. Beau had joined HG Thursdays in 2020 and was the rare tenant who organizers were able to build a deeper, lasting relationship with from that period. In August 2021, the money that Homes Guarantee regranted to KY Tenants as part of the Period of Radical Imagination allowed KY Tenants to hire Beau as staff. As Beau explains, "the Kentucky Tenants Union exists because of the Homes Guarantee campaign." Root Cause Research Center transformed into the Louisville Tenant Union, and building-level tenant unions grew in St. Paul, MN and Stockton, CA.

This was a key shift from previous approaches to developing strategy within Homes Guarantee. Not only was it proactive rather than reactive, but Homes Guarantee was meaningfully distributing their strategy across their base rather than among a small number of local and national staff members. Following through on this approach to developing strategy not only improves the strategy but also deepens the commitment of participating tenants.[6] This differs from many federal campaigns, in which strategy is developed top-down and power is grounded in policy expertise and national organizational stature.

As Tara, Grace, and Homes Guarantee focused on building their base, Kevin's role shifted to focus on fundraising and organizing policy and political partners through a newly launched philanthropic fund, HouseUS. HouseUS raised an initial $7.5 million from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Ford Foundation. One of the early rounds of grants made by HouseUS went to policy and political partners of Homes Guarantee, in the hopes of supporting organizations who were in deep alignment with the Homes Guarantee campaign and who could make their work legible among the existing housing ecosystem in DC. These grants allowed the partners to dedicate staff time to Homes Guarantee and created a framework for HouseUS to orient policy experts to Homes Guarantee's commitment to centering tenants.

6. Han, H. (2014). *How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations and Leadership in the 21st Century.* Oxford University Press.

	Pre-Pivot	Post-Pivot
Base-Building Strategy	Self-selecting tenant leaders who joined Homes Guarantee independently or through a People's Action affiliate.	Tenants organizing through a local, tenant-focused effort like a tenant union.
Campaign Focus & Decision-Making Structure	Reactive campaign to #CancelRent with unclear, distributed decision-making. Decisions often made by staff organizers.	Pro-active campaign to advance a National Tenant Bill of Rights generated by organized input of tenants. Decisions increasingly made by tenants representing a base of organized tenants.

Two breakthrough events demonstrated to Homes Guarantee's leaders that their new approach was paying off.

First, on June 10, Homes Guarantee hosted a national Zoom call to launch the NTBOR. It was attended by 429 people, with turnout driven by local tenant unions. After the disappointing days of action in 2020 and earlier in 2021, this dramatic increase was a breakthrough moment. It demonstrated that their members were bringing power to the table in the form of an organized base of tenants, rather than representing only themselves, and that they were bought into the idea of an NTBOR.

Tenants' Bill of Rights launch

Building on this momentum, in September, Homes Guarantee seized on an opportunity provided by People's Action, which had funding available for their campaigns to bring delegations to DC, to bring 11 tenants to meet with senior White House advisors and agency officials. This was a profound moment for the campaign on multiple levels.

First, the delegation demonstrated that their base was deepening to include tenants beyond the types of self-selecting leaders who been participating. Tenants who attended were strategically propositioned to attend because of their experiences with specific pandemic-era programs. Grace called local organizers to find tenant leaders who had faced eviction during the pandemic, couldn't pay their rent, and/or couldn't get rental assistance. For Homes Guarantee, this effort represented growing clarity around which tenants to organize for which campaigns and a base that reflected these tenants.

Second, they realized that a small number of powerful tenant leaders can have an outsized impact. Homes Guarantee organizers used a new approach

DC Delegation, September 2021
Photo: Ebony Sellers

to training with the tenants who attended. Their "Power Meetings" training provided leaders with the negotiation skills needed to meet with a decision-maker. Other trainings focused on campaign targeting, so that tenants understood the strategic reasons who they were speaking to and why. Together, these trainings represented a real commitment to tenants actually leading significant campaign strategy and activities.

The impact of this leadership development on the tenants, organizers who joined them, and the administration officials they met with was clear. Elyse Redden from Faith in the Valley said, "If you have any kind of role, somebody works with you to perfect that role that you're going to do. I find that to be very valuable for the person who's doing the training and the person who's doing the learning because there's actually training going on both ends. I find that to be very dynamic … It's not that you're thrown into doing something that you're not prepped for. We spend a lot of time, the campaign spends a lot of time prepping for what you have to do."

Tara recruited a tenant from Beau's neighborhood and KY Tenants to facilitate the conversation with Gene Sperling, Senior Advisor to the President and Implementation Coordinator of the American Rescue Plan. Beau shared that he saw the tenant really come into her own in the moment through the training and coaching that Tara offered:

> *[She] had been evicted from her family's trailer park during the pandemic in March of 2021. [She] is a quiet 17-year-old and someone who doesn't always trust their own voice. Tara asked [the tenant leader] to lead the meeting with Gene Sperling. Then [she] did, and [she] was terrified … here [she] is going into this meeting with the person who is in charge of one of the largest spending plans in American history, and we're going into the meeting to make demands of this person. [The tenant leader] then was on* Democracy Now! *the next morning. I woke up and listened to Amy Goodman interview my 17-year-old neighbor. That was beautiful."*

Not only were the tenants transformed, but federal officials they spoke to had been disconnected from the people experiencing the COVID-19 relief programs that they worked on and were deeply impacted by hearing direct experiences of rental assistance programs and their shortcomings. This strengthened the Homes Guarantee leaders' belief in the power of an organized base of constituents over mobilizing individual tenants.

Third, they confirmed a growing belief that, while legislative victories were out of reach in that political moment, meaningful wins were possible through federal agencies. They tried and failed to secure commitments from either Representative Maxine Waters, the Chairwoman of the House Financial Services Committee, or representatives of the White House, including Gene Sperling and members of the Domestic Policy Council and National Economic Council. It became increasingly clear that between the upcoming midterm elections, in which it was predicted that the Republicans would win control of Congress, and President Biden and the Democratic Party's struggles to pass the Build Back Better agenda, the campaign did not have the power to pass a piece of federal legislation.

However, because their commitment to following tenant leadership had led them to explore all possible avenues to achieve wins for tenants, they also explored administrative pathways. Homes Guarantee was able to secure a commitment for the Treasury Department to convene a formal Tenant Advisory Board to guide the remainder of the rental assistance program, and a commitment that Treasury would attach conditions to any funds that go directly to landlords, securing critical tenant protections. This relative victory, in contrast to their experiences with Congress and the White House, energized the group and made them believe that administrative wins were more attainable in the short term and, consequently, were an important pathway to continue building toward their long-term vision.

The overall experience of the trip to DC was profound for all participants, from Homes Guarantee organizers like Tara, to policy and funding

partners like Kevin and local tenant organizers like Beau. Beau says that "the support, the training, the clarity of the way that those three or four days were run has left a permanent impression on me as an organizer and, I think, is indicative of larger reasons that the Homes Guarantee Campaign has been successful because there is such a clarity on the craft of organizing and the ability to take ordinary people who have a hunger for change in their lives and in their communities and to provide them with the tools and the frameworks to do their own work."

With a growing base and new possibilities opening up for administrative wins, Homes Guarantee organizers returned from the trip and began to develop a campaign to win components of the NTBOR through federal agencies while exploring adaptations to their governance structure.

INSTITUTIONALIZING TENANT DECISION-MAKING

While Homes Guarantee was seeing their efforts to build their base pay off, organizers were frustrated that attendance at cohort calls—a key space for strategizing, relationship building, and decision-making—was primarily made up of staff rather than tenants. The idea that "the people closest to the problem are closest to the solution" was a longstanding core value of Homes Guarantee, but they were learning that it was difficult to embody this value without an explicit structure to do so. Many of the people who were driving decisions were not actually the individuals experiencing the consequences of the country's unjust housing system, such as rental debt or fear of eviction.

After the delegation to DC, Grace and Tara began to map out a process to develop a strategy for administrative wins related to the NTBOR. They would begin with an "issue cut" process, in which they would collectively identify possible bite-sized, winnable pieces of the NTBOR to focus on throughout winter 2022. The process would culminate in April 2022 at a convening in Denver where they would select a short-term campaign to focus on and craft a campaign strategy around that specific issue.

To prepare, Grace and Tara decided to pause the cohort calls and develop a new campaign structure that would more explicitly center tenants. Grace reached out to a People's Action colleague, Mehrdad Azemun, for advice. He suggested that Homes Guarantee implement a "price of admission" for being part of the decision-making teams in the campaign, rather than just generally encouraging staff organizers to bring tenants—

in other words, requiring participating organizations to have tenant leaders represent them at Homes Guarantee strategy-development and decision-making meetings rather than exclusively staff.

That winter, Grace worked with a set of organizers who had already been deeply involved with Homes Guarantee to develop a proposal. In January 2022, the cohort team of Homes Guarantee voted to approve the new structure, and Grace proceeded to make a series of propositions to organizational members to restructure the campaign decision-making process under a "Grassroots Strategy Team."

The new structure included different levels of commitment that tenant organizations could opt into:

THE GRASSROOTS STRATEGY TEAM

Organizations that had at least two tenant leaders they could proposition to join the Grassroots Strategy Team for the next six months were considered to be at a "membership level." The expectation included:

1. Attend three two-hour meetings on Zoom to prepare for the Denver convening, including the planned issue cut process.
2. Attend the Denver convening.
3. Participate in building the campaign strategy for the chosen issue cut after Denver, including attending bi-weekly campaign meetings.

THE CORE TEAM

Within the Grassroots Strategy Team, a core team of 10–20 self-selected members would generate proposals and make decisions that required a quick turnaround.

MOBILIZING LEVEL

Organizers who could not find two tenant leaders to join the GST, or who were not comfortable propositioning their tenant leaders at this level, were considered at the "mobilizing level." These organizations were not active decision-makers in the campaign, but Homes Guarantee would keep them in the loop about future actions, etc. Some of them continued to receive support from Homes Guarantee in their base building efforts.

Grassroots Strategy Team
Two tenants and an organizer from member organizations. Makes decisions related to campaign strategy and tactics.
Core Team
10–20 members of GST who develop proposals and make tight turnaround decisions about campaign strategy and tactics
Policy & Political Team
Decisions related to the execution of campaign strategy as directed by the tenant leadership team, as clarified in January 2023
Base Building Cohort
Leadership development for staff organizers
Mobilizing Level
Organizations who want to participate in actions but have less capacity and commitment for strategy and organizing

This structure sought to balance a range of considerations, ensuring that all member organizations were building a base of tenants and including the voice of a wide range of tenants while simultaneously providing clarity around who was making what decisions and protecting the ability to be nimble in moments of urgency. It also allowed flexibility for groups with less capacity to still be part of the campaign at the mobilizing level, while honoring people making a bigger commitment with increased ability to shepherd the campaign's strategy on the core team.

Contrary to fears that the creation of the Grassroots Strategy Team and the larger commitment that it required would lead organizations to exit Homes Guarantee, the opposite was true. From the perspective of the tenant leaders, it felt like the next stage of the campaign's evolution rather than a hard pivot. Homes Guarantee saw an increased number of participants in regular meetings and deeper commitments among participating organizations. 75 people attended the first meeting HG held after the Grassroots Strategy Team was formed, a significant increase from its previous meeting in which only 25 people attended. After the first meeting, it felt less like the tenants were joining a meeting where decisions had already been made, and more like their role was to help decide. Grace says that "it just felt like everything changed once we had tenant leaders that were clear that they were representing their local organization on this federal fight."

Similarly, we often assume that more people participating in a decision-making process will inevitably make it more difficult. For Grace, as the lone full-time Homes Guarantee organizer, the Grassroots Strategy Team clarified her role and brought ease to their decision-making process. She saw herself as a steward of the campaign rather than its leader.

Having an explicit governance structure is consistent with research from Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues and others who have studied coalitions.[7] Having clear, collectively understood, and consistent mechanisms for decision-making means that people understand their roles and responsibilities, allowing groups to make decisions while

7. Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action.* Cambridge University Press.

retaining trust and buy-in, even in rapidly changing scenarios.[8]

While they redoubled their efforts to center tenants in the campaign, Homes Guarantee also sought clarity around the role of staff organizers and policy experts.

On the staff organizer side, Homes Guarantee decided to pair the creation of the Grassroots Strategy Team with a Base Building Cohort, to invest in organizing staff and a shared approach to organizing tenants. This leadership development program ran from February 2022 to December 2023 and consisted of two-to-three-hour-long gatherings roughly once a month. The gatherings could include skills training, peer coaching sessions, popular education, peer agitation sessions, wise councils, and/or case studies of tenant organizing. In addition, participants were paired with a peer coach who they were expected to meet with at least two to three times over the year.

Grassroots Leadership Team, Denver Summit

8. Dentoni, D., Bitzer, V. & Schouten, G. (2018). "Harnessing Wicked Problems in Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships." *J Bus Ethics 150*, 333–356. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3858-6; Foster-Fishman, P.G., Berkowitz, S.L., Lounsbury, D.W., Jacobson, S. and Allen, N.A. (2001). Building Collaborative Capacity in Community Coalitions: A Review and Integrative Framework. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 29*: 241–261. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010378613583; Levine, Peter. (2022). *What Should We Do? A Theory of Civic Life.* Oxford University Press.

To participate in the Base Building Cohort, staff organizers first needed to participate in a base building training, which provided a grounding in shared language and understanding of base building and leadership development.

HouseUS simultaneously made explicit what the role of policy and political partners was and was not. While they would leverage their knowledge to do research and develop policy proposals, the Policy & Political Team would take directives from the tenants. Previously, policy partners had provided informal guidance to Homes Guarantee staff but hadn't necessarily interacted with tenant leaders. This represents another deviation from many federal campaigns, where the policy leaders are given more decision-making authority over what policies to pursue.

Jeremie Greer, the Executive Director of Liberation in a Generation and a member of the Policy & Political Team, says that "this isn't how Washington works … in Washington, you follow the lead of politicians, or funders, or board members, or whatever … But my understanding and how I wanted to position LibGen throughout all this is wherever the tenants want us to go, we're going to go, because it is their campaign and we're here to support it."

This approach was possible because the policy and political team participants were clear that their ability to move their agenda relied on an organized base of tenants. Tara and Kevin made specific decisions about who would be on the Policy & Political Team, not based on who had the most clout in Washington (because they felt that they could help people build that if needed), but who was bought in to the idea of letting tenant leaders take the lead.

With this new structure in hand, Homes Guarantee worked to deepen their shift from a reactive campaign to a proactive and strategic one.

ALIGNING IN DENVER & RECOGNIZING THEIR EXPANDED POWER

As 2021 came to an end, Homes Guarantee went through a process to determine their next campaign that would simultaneously transform them internally and open up new strategic options.

Combining what they had heard from tenants throughout the previous year with their new interest in exploring the administrative solutions that arose during the DC delegation in September 2021, Homes Guarantee began exploring enforcement questions related to an NTBOR. The Policy & Political Team developed a set of possible issues to move forward with: attach good cause eviction as a condition for Low Income Housing Tax Credit, require all cities receiving Community Planning and Urban Development grants to implement a Tenants' Bill of Rights, or create an Office of Tenant Protections at the CFPB.

In April 2022, Homes Guarantee brought tenant leaders, policy team members, and organizers from across the country to Denver to discuss the proposal and determine a path forward. Differences between urban and rural tenant unions emerged. However, relying on the decision-making structure set that winter and the capacity for negotiation built through Homes Guarantee's focus on leadership development, the tenants on the Grassroots Strategy Team aligned around a campaign to build an Office of Tenant Protections at the CFPB.

As disagreements emerged, staff organizers or policy experts could have stepped in to make the choice or gloss over the tension. To Jeremie, this insistence on having tenants make the

final calls on strategy is important to Homes Guarantee's credibility. When they say that they represent the wishes of tenants, people know that they mean it:

> *I think that the lesson from Homes Guarantee is that you've got to follow tenant direction. I think the tenants have to be the one … The most impacted people should drive the agenda-setting process, the strategic planning process, and the execution of this. Us who are in a professional role in that should sit in a supporting role to them.*

> *A lot of people say it. You're going to end up in a lot of spaces where people say that. But to actually do it is hard because it takes a level of trust and belief, actual belief, that people know well enough to make decisions for themselves and that they actually don't need me to make the decision for them. That's all. Because that's a humbling experience for us on our side. That, to me, is what happens in the Homes Guarantee campaign in a way that I have not been involved with in a lot of other processes. Like an actual humbling of ourselves to say, 'No, they're going to make the decisions. They know best.' Like I said, I had a belief on how it should be a better avenue. Me to humble myself to say, okay, maybe they're right turns out they were.*

As staff organizers, Tara and Grace were clear that their role was to create a space where tenants, organizers, and policy professionals could make a strategic decision. For Tara, centering tenants is neither pushing them towards a "correct" choice nor abdicating any role at all. "My perspective on that question of how [tenant] leaders can actually lead on strategy is not just ask people, 'what do you want to do?' … **The organizer's job is to assess strategic opportunity and come to the leaders with a set of options and provide a really clear decision**

point. Then update that analysis over time and provide more moments for leaders to make decisions about what to do."

Grace shared that, "I think there's a tendency in federal campaigning for paid staff to already have selected an issue cut and then organize organizations and people into a campaign around it. And people are exhausted by that. They don't feel bought into it. They feel like they're being put into something that they didn't have a hand in making a choice about. So, it was really, really critical that this deliberation was in person and it was real and it was long and people felt like we had chewed over every aspect of it by the end of it, and there wasn't some predetermined outcome that we were gunning for as paid staff."

The Denver convening was the first time that the new governance structure was put to the test as tensions emerged. Yet, participants from a range of backgrounds—Homes Guarantee organizers, tenant union members, and policy experts—all remember this convening as a pivotal moment of formation for the campaign that led to sharper strategy, deepened commitment, and increased capacity.

This commitment was visible tangibly—six groups committed to the core team, ten committed to being campaign members, and three committed to being mobilizers—as well as experientially.

Jeremie recalls, "In Denver was the time where all was like, 'Okay, this is what we're doing. Are you committing to this?' I literally remember a group stepping up in the room to it. From New York to Florida, to Kentucky, of course, Missouri, yeah, all across the country, California, people stepping up and it all coming together, 'Okay, this is what we're going to do.'"

Beau described the convening as building the collective strategic muscle of the campaign in invaluable ways, saying that "It was incredibly clarifying for us to get really specific about, 'This is what we want, this is who we're targeting, and we're going to commit to that over the long run.' I think that, for me, that's what was important about

the April 2022 convening. I do conceive of that as a significant shift." To Beau, this was in stark contrast to the approach during the September 2021 DC trip, where the opportunity to go to DC and present to policymakers came first, and the decisions around what the ask would actually be was more "on the fly":

> *Denver was the launch of us doing strategic campaigning together instead of … running a narrative campaign like #CancelRent or doing this one-off set of meetings like we did in September [2021, in DC] … The vehicle for that was this grassroots strategy. To me, it's like, the action is the lifeblood of the organization, and it was launching this campaign that really got things moving. It's within the context of the campaign that you can have people in clear roles. It's within the context of the campaign that you can get people excited about the work, that you can demonstrate to people that what you're doing matters.*

Emma was impressed by the continued commitment to center tenants: "I think that [bringing tenant leaders to Denver] just established the seriousness of what we're trying to do, and the seriousness of base building and engaging our member leaders to be part of this decision making, of this is not just like we're going to fly out the organizers."

Finally, Elyse shared that the experience of doing the issue cut together was transformative, not just in determining a path forward, but in building their collective capacities: "To see that in real time and to be in that space where dialogue and conversations and people are talking about what their base feels like or what their base wants to see happen, that was really powerful for me. Then to cut through, to go through all of that, you have these long intense sessions and people are doing different skills, you're capturing information on, you're speaking. So there's a lot of development actually going on. So to see that and to be a part of that, so then I become like, 'Yeah, I want to do more this.' So that's how that convening

was for me. That was the experience that I had and that made me really want to figure out or to learn more things that I can do to be contributive."

With these commitments in hand, Homes Guarantee agreed to collectively fight for an Office of Tenant Protection. But rapidly changing political and economic conditions would require them to be nimble in the coming months while relying on the deepened alignment generated in Denver to hold the campaign together.

In May, the White House caught Homes Guarantee off guard when it announced a series of listening sessions on tenants' rights. The commitment to engage with tenants felt simultaneously like a major win and a drop-in-the-bucket of what was needed. On one hand, the listening sessions represented the first time in generations that the White House was committing to advance tenant issues. One the other, the fact that they emerged seemingly out of nowhere made Homes Guarantee believe that they had underestimated the power they had—assuming that tenant issues weren't on the White House's agenda at all—and set the bar too low in their recent issue cut process. The campaign felt as though they were expected to join a listening session and move on.

The listening sessions suggested that there was a larger window to win changes for tenants, leading their tenant leaders to push the campaign to demand not only a widely attended listening session, but what Homes Guarantee would call a "power meeting" exclusively for Homes Guarantee at which they would advocate for expanded demands of the administration.

This generated tension with some members of the Policy & Political Team, who were reticent to shift to a new issue after spending so much time identifying a short-term campaign in advance of the Denver convening. At this point, disrespect of the tenants' leadership could have taken over. Homes Guarantee could have fallen back on the status quo belief that a policy expert would know best, rather than their values or governance structure. Instead, staff organizers worked with the policy team to reground in the importance of flexibility to seize the opportunity to win concrete change for tenants.

White House Meeting, July 2022

Homes Guarantee regrouped and successfully advocated for their own listening session with the White House with the goal of advancing their larger campaign for an Office of Tenant Protections, while launching a set of additional demands to attach tenant protections to federal funding.

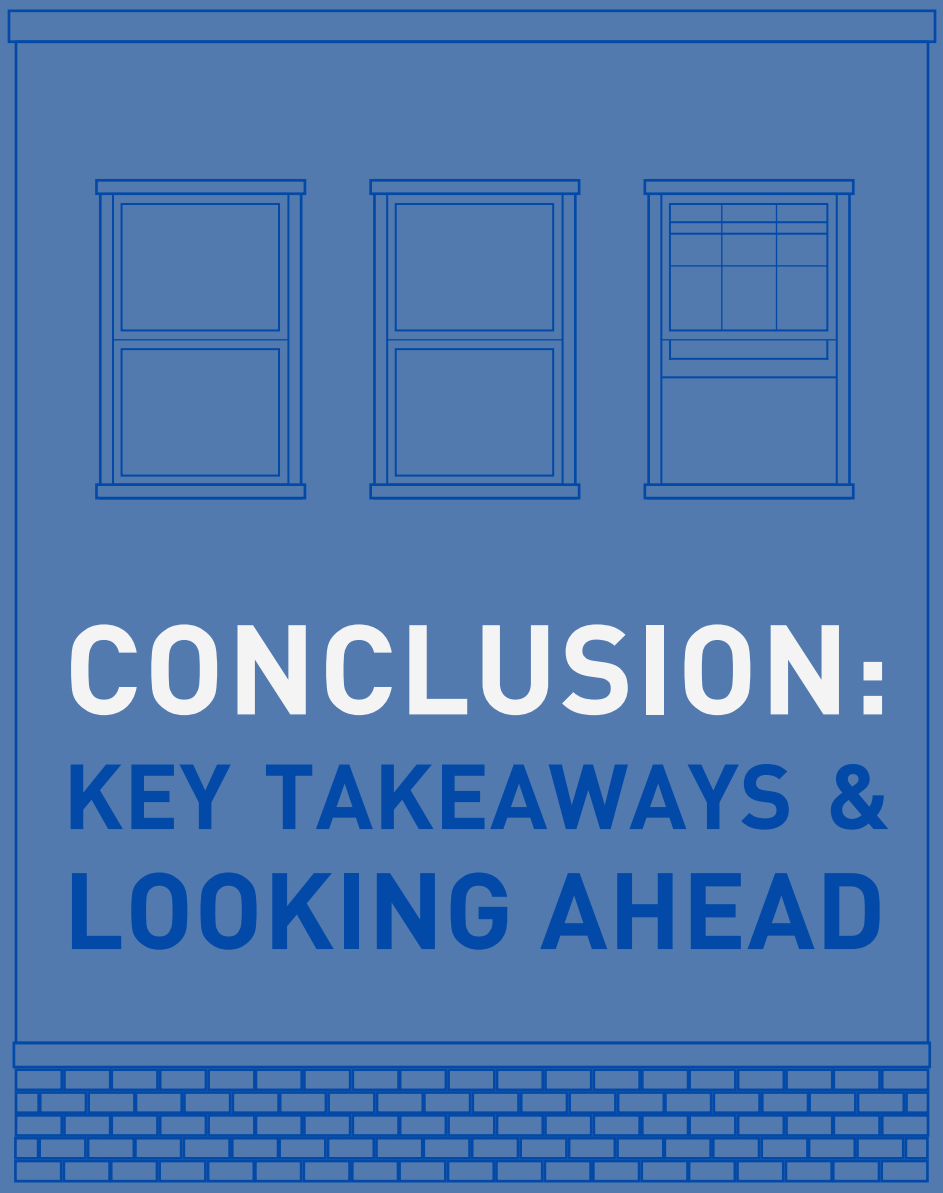
Simultaneously, inflation began to spike. Rents rose rapidly across the country. Homes Guarantee began to see housing not only as a domestic policy issue to be tackled from many directions, but as a central economic one with the cost of rent at the center. “The rent is too damn high!” became their rallying cry. This influenced not only the policy solutions necessary but their organizing strategy. They realized that their ability to influence the FHFA, for example, relied not just on political maneuvering but also the ability to have economic leverage. This would

require tenants organized not just in any organizational vehicle, but specifically in tenant unions.

These shifts in the political and economic landscape posed challenges to Homes Guarantee. Yet, with their sharp clarity around the long-term strategy, a more solid structure in place, and deeper relationships that emerged from Denver, Homes Guarantee was able to pivot quickly to respond to the inflation crisis and demand more from the White House through the remainder of 2022.

Tara says that "we had made a whole set of decisions in Denver that weren't correct … That could be seen as a huge waste of time. I think a lot of leaders did feel tense about having spent so much time making that decision. But the groundwork we had laid about what we were trying to get done ultimately, and then the commitment to bring the best strategy, not just the strategy we had decided on, landed us in a position where since that pivot was made, we've been working on what I truly believe is the [best] strategy … We wouldn't have gotten there had we not set up those decision points and been willing to blow it all up when we realized that it wasn't actually the right set of things."

After six months of organizing from Homes Guarantee, the White House released a "Blueprint for Renters' Rights" in January 2023. Homes Guarantee felt that the part of the announcement that was most shaped by the campaign was that the FHFA, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac would launch a process to conduct stakeholder outreach and engagement to identify the opportunities and challenges of adopting and enforcing tenant protections, including policies that limit egregious rent increases at properties with Enterprise-backed mortgages going forward. The White House, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Treasury Department (Treasury), and HUD also agreed to meet with a "broad, diverse, and varying group of tenants and tenant advocates" on a quarterly basis to hear their perspectives on dynamics in the rental markets and opportunities to strengthen tenant protections, a commitment that Homes Guarantee also credited to their organizing efforts.



CONCLUSION:
KEY TAKEAWAYS & LOOKING AHEAD

The Homes Guarantee campaign's work through 2022 displays a trajectory defined by cycles of experimentation, failure, and reinvention.

Each phase built upon lessons learned, as the campaign developed new approaches to tenant leadership and governing structures that would ultimately reshape their possibilities for impact.

While their story continues to evolve, several key insights emerge about building power for transformative change at the federal level.

THE PATH FORWARD

Since 2022, Homes Guarantee has continued to engage in iterative cycles of building their base through local organizations, investing in tenant leadership, and sharpening their short-term campaign focus on a path to guaranteed housing. In 2024, this led the leaders of Homes Guarantee to exit People's Action and to launch the Tenant Union Federation (TUF). Going forward, Homes Guarantee will exist as a campaign of TUF. This decision emerged from growing clarity on two fronts. First, winning a Homes Guarantee would require a rigorous commitment to organizing tenants specifically. Throughout their existence, Homes Guarantee found that this was difficult to do in multi-issue organizations, which struggle to balance competing interests and center tenant leadership and decision-making. Second, as their medium-term campaign goals shifted from passing legislation to administrative solutions, Homes Guarantee realized that it needed economic leverage in addition to political power. This could only come through a tenant union.

As Tara reflects now, she sees that the seeds for this shift were planted back in the critical summer of 2020, as they began to shift from engaging individual activists to focusing on local organizations with bases of tenants. "I don't think we had all the clarity we needed back then. In fact, it's taken us four years to get to the place of like, '… We need to build a practice of tenant union organizing.' But that clarity began summer of 2020."

The founding tenant unions of TUF include those who were especially invested in organizing leaders that live in properties

with federally backed mortgages and, on a broader level, were ready to organize at the building level with tenants. While they will continue to work with some existing partners to build local tenant unions, other organizations will leave the campaign. Many of the multi-issue organizations who had previously been more involved with Homes Guarantee were less invested in or ready to support building-level organizing or wanted to focus on housing issues outside of federally backed buildings.

This strategic clarity arrived through the cycles of base-building, leadership development, and strategic planning that the campaign had engaged in since 2021. Tara says that “our power has sharpened our strategy … As we’re about to entertain the idea of assessing our strike readiness [at federally backed properties], for example, that’s not something that’s remotely possible in a world where we’re organizing randos outside of a base or when we’re organizing bases outside of a union. That’s only possible in a world where we’re organizing bases of people in tenant unions, and even today that’s still not possible, but we’re getting there. But there’s a level of strategic clarity that our focus on getting there allows us to have now, even before we’re there.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The full picture of the Homes Guarantee campaign and its impact is still in formation. Yet, by illuminating the way that choices Homes Guarantee made about its source of power and internal structure impacted its strategic options, we hope that funders and organizers seeking to build federal coalitions will take key lessons as they continue to experiment with new approaches to fighting for change at the federal level:

1. **Without a base of organized tenants, Homes Guarantee was unable to gain traction and lacked power. Their impact increased when they shifted to see building local bases of tenants in their own communities as their source of power.**

2. **It is possible to center those most impacted by the problems a campaign seeks to solve while still maintaining flexibility and ability to make decisions. Doing so requires an explicit governance structure, with clear roles and leadership development not only for member-leaders, but also staff organizers, funders, and policy experts. While members' decisions take precedence, staff organizers and policy experts set the stage with strategic options, shepherd processes, and invest in leadership development of tenants.**

We look forward to continuing to learn from TUF and their Homes Guarantee campaign in the coming years.

APPENDIX A: DATA & METHODS

This report emanates from a review of 468 internal documents from the Homes Guarantee campaign. Additionally, we conducted 10 interviews totaling 610 minutes with a range of Homes Guarantee stakeholders: leaders and staff organizers from member organizations, policy partners, and Homes Guarantee staff.

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