WHEN TENANTS LEAD

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

HOUSEUS

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FORWARD

There's really no substitute for hearing people share their stories: what moves them, what scares them, what makes them feel hopeful and powerful and connected to their communities.

But we don't just tell stories for the sake of telling; we tell stories because they bring to life the work of organizing, of doing a thing together that we could not have done on our own.

Everything we do at HouseUS is rooted in the deep belief that tenants, organizing together, are at the core of any serious strategy that help create economies and communities that work for all of us. That work includes detailed policy reports, and lengthy legislative drafts, and it also includes the daily experiences of people taking risks, knowing their neighbors, challenging their landlords, of creating something new when nearly everyone around them tells them it's impossible.

As you read the stories from these organizers and leaders, please remember: there are so many more out there! We hope to share a glimpse inside the tenant-led organizing efforts at the heart of the HouseUS strategy, and to invite you into the very best part of our job: getting to know an incredible crew of people, all across the country, working together with other tenants to make a way where it seemed like none existed.

WITH THANKS

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Photo: Ismario Rodriguez Perez

Detrese Dowridge
2026 | Conference in New York City, NY

Baltimore Renters United: From Tenant to Community Leader

INTERVIEWEE

Detrese Dowridge, Executive Director

For Executive Director Detrese Dowridge of Baltimore Renters United (BRU), the entire trajectory of her life shifted with a knock on her door. Canvassers in Dowridge's neighborhood were organizing. The landlord of her property was a "repeat filer," habitually dragging tenant after tenant to court for failure to pay rent. While Dowridge, who was at the time between jobs, had received notices, she always managed to pay rent before the court date and assumed that was the end of it.

> "After I had paid my rent I started to receive additional notices claiming I owed additional money. To me something was off but I couldn't put my finger on it. I didn't know much about tenants' rights; I was just always under the impression that you just pay your rent and you move on and go about your day," Dowridge explained.

But from that point on, she began meeting with a housing organization and started learning about her rights as a tenant. A clear fact emerged: she was not alone, and she had a responsibility to help others. "At the time when I was volunteering, when I first got into it and found out what this landlord was doing, I began telling others and sharing the information. This work has inspired me to do the practice of Sankofa, taking what I found out and giving it back to other people."

Learning led Dowridge to share information with neighbors, and that sharing became the start of a path she never imagined for herself, first as a volunteer organizer, and now as the Executive Director of BRU.

> "I never thought I would be a tenant organizer or executive director," Dowridge shared.

Grounded in community and education, Dowridge armed herself with what she uncovered and began mobilizing for change. "When I started organizing, going to the meetings, learning about my rights, and canvassing my neighbors, we started picking up momentum," she said. And with that momentum came attention, especially from her landlord, who quickly resorted to retaliatory tactics, even attempting to bargain with her to stop organizing in exchange for wiping the alleged debt on her ledger clean. The retaliation only confirmed the depth of the problem.

Their strength grew as Dowridge and others learned to decipher landlord ledgers, uncover predatory practices, and demand accountability. A class action lawsuit, filed by Dowridge and two other tenants, revealed that their landlord was manipulating rent ledgers (also known as fee churning), charging tenants for payments already made, and taking residents to court with falsified claims of unpaid rent.

Baltimore's landscape for renters offers few protections. Tenant rights are poorly enforced, city mechanisms like 311 rarely produce meaningful results, and rent court has become a system that overwhelmingly favors landlords. Tenants often come to BRU for legal guidance and resources as a result of being let down by non-profit legal entities. BRU is a tenant-led organizing hub. Through organizing, Dowridge discovered that Baltimore's rental system functions through a cycle of deliberate confusion and sabotage. Fees hide inside rent balances. Water charges appear arbitrarily. Utilities arrive misbilled. Vulnerable tenants, often Black women and people with disabilities, are systematically targeted, taken advantage of, and pushed through a rent court process designed to undermine them.

Many early leaders in BRU had not personally experienced housing insecurity, creating a disconnect between policy work and lived experience. She and others insisted that those closest to the crisis must lead the movement, which resulted in Dowridge pushing BRU in a new direction.

As BRU grew, so did landlord retaliation. The system meant to protect tenants overwhelmingly sided with landlords far more often than with renters, creating a landscape of near total impunity. Still, BRU has persisted. They developed a membership model grounded in community and mutual support, offering monthly orientations that help tenants jump start organizing in their own buildings and communities. Tenants also learn to navigate rent court, one of the most hostile battlegrounds in Baltimore. BRU's court-watching efforts have exposed "rocket dockets," hearings that last less than three minutes. Judges often ask nothing more than, "Do you owe rent? Yes or no?" ignoring conditions like mold, infestations, or long-delayed repairs.

Dowridge recalls one recent case involving a BRU member, a mother of two children with special needs, who

filed for rent escrow after months of unsafe living conditions. Despite arriving in court with evidence and extensive documentation, the hearing was stacked against her from the moment she began speaking. "When she tried to plead her case, the judge was rude," Dowridge said. "He ended up giving her only 30% of her escrow money back. The landlord got the rest, even though she still had unresolved issues in her home." Only later did BRU discover that the tenant had the right to appeal. No one in the courtroom, not even the judge, told her. "They only give you a three- or four-day window to file an appeal," Dowridge explains, "and he didn't even mention it."

Meanwhile, the landlord had repeatedly shown up at the woman's home without notice, then accused her of refusing entry when she asked for proper notification. For a parent caring for children with specialized needs, the unpredictability has been destabilizing and harmful. "If the conditions in her property aren't right, her and her family aren't going to be alright," Dowridge emphasizes. "She had all the evidence and the judge just didn't seem to care."

Despite the systemic barriers, BRU has seen meaningful wins. They have helped form three tenant associations, supported a successful campaign for inclusionary housing, and organized a major action in 2023 when the Housing Authority of Baltimore City attempted to file mass cases for back rent accumulated during the pandemic.

BRU also helped expose discriminatory practices at American Management, leading to a major settlement for tenants facing source-of-income discrimination.

Press conferences, public actions, and tenant-led testimony have become the standard of BRU's approach. But organizing in Baltimore is not without challenges. Many renters juggle food insecurity, fear of retaliation, and the daily pressure of survival. BRU meets tenants where they are, offering education even when people are unable, or afraid, to organize. "As long as we can arm you with your rights and meet with you to help you understand the resources you can access and arm you with advocacy for yourself and others. That's fine with us." Dowridge said.

Working with outside organizations brings another layer of complexity. Too often, legal organizations reach out to BRU asking to dispatch vulnerable tenants to speak publicly but fail to protect them afterward. BRU now draws clear boundaries: If an organization wants tenant voices, they must involve tenants in shaping the policy itself. No more tokenization. No more extraction. "The people impacted are the people closest to the solution," Dowridge insists.

Today, BRU seeks deeper alignment in community collaboration, working with people unaware of their housing rights which includes formerly incarcerated people, disabled tenants targeted by predatory landlords, and teacher unions. When corporate landlords operate in multiple cities, BRU now collaborates with organizers across state lines to expose patterns of abuse. Amid rising political fear and cuts to Housing and Urban Development (HUD), BRU educates public housing tenants, many of whom face unique constraints that complicate strategies like rent strikes. They partner with national housing coalitions to help tenants understand what federal cuts mean for their homes and futures and ways to navigate through it.

Through it all, the message remains the same: **"They need us more than we need them."** Renters make the system function, and when they organize, whether through documenting everything, forming tenant unions, pursuing rent escrow, or exploring co-ops and community land trusts, they shift the balance of power.

For Dowridge, resilience comes from honesty and community. All BRU members are volunteers, and mutual care is the solid foundation of the work. Tenants continue to push, even when inspectors fail to follow up and the courts dismiss their struggles, and new challenges keep emerging, such as calls from residents in transitional housing, who face unclear and inconsistent protections.

Still, Dowridge keeps going. Because a volunteer once knocked on her door and she learned her rights. Because Sankofa teaches her to return what she has gained to those still finding their voice. In Baltimore, as in communities across the country, the movement for housing justice grows strongest when tenants lead the way.

Photo: Ismario Rodriguez Perez

Max Kronstadt
2026 | Conference
in New York City, NY

Colorado Springs Tenants
A Citywide Union Takes Root

INTERVIEWEES

Max Kronstadt, Lead Neighborhood Organizer
& **William Smith,** Lead Tenant Organizer

Colorado Springs Tenants (COST) rose from a housing landscape defined by scarcity and unbridled capitalist power. In a city long shaped by developers, the Christian Right, and the military-industrial complex, renters have rarely, if ever, been positioned as decision makers. Out of this gap, COST has mobilized to build something new: a citywide tenant union where none had previously existed. Grounded in structure-based organizing and inspired by labor and tenant movements across the country, this organization represents a deliberate shift toward collective power and care.

For Will, an organizer with COST, and Max, COST's founder, the work is just beginning. Since February of 2025, the two have been organizing tenant unions together, though Max had begun laying essential groundwork for years prior. Their initial campaigns were rooted in public housing, organizing with two tenant unions under the Colorado Springs Housing Authority. As their work deepened, they became increasingly drawn to models of citywide tenant power, particularly the work unfolding in Kansas City. "That was really our big model," Max explained. "We wanted to emulate some of the citywide tenant union work that was happening there."

That influence crystallized in the spring of 2025, when COST hosted a seven-week tenant organizing training series. The workshops covered the history of tenant struggles, the fundamentals of organizing, and the theory of change guiding their work. Just as importantly, the series served as an on-ramp for people across the city who were eager to create change but were disillusioned with conventional political channels. The tenant organizing they offer is a way back into personal and collective agency. The training functioned as a soft launch for what would become the citywide tenant union project, and by May 2025, COST had formally begun organizing under that framework.

The decision to organize tenants citywide was built on a sharp political analysis of Colorado Springs itself. "Renters have not been in the driver's seat, maybe ever in Colorado Springs' history," Max said. "In a lot of ways, it's a microcosm of U.S. imperialism," Will added. A citywide tenant union, they believe, is a way to build working class power capable of challenging who gets to shape the city—and for whom.

Since then, the organization has expanded its reach into the private market. At Aviator Apartments, tenants are plagued by mold, plumbing failures, broken heat, and chronic neglect and have organized to the majority and entered escalation with their landlord. For COST, this campaign is both a testing ground and a preview of what's possible. Aviator represents a type of property increasingly common in Colorado Springs. Aging complexes now charge $1,100 to $1,500 a month, and are owned by private equity groups that extract profit while offering little in return. "These places used to exist, but people were paying $600 to live in them," Max noted.

Now these types of housing are just as expensive as everywhere else, and the people who can't get into "better" apartments are forced into these unaffordable slums.

At COST, housing is not just a site of harm, but a strategic point of leverage. The organization aims to develop tenants into agents of change: "We see this as engaging people in the most intimate battle of their lives," Will said, "and then connecting those struggles to others happening across the city."

This clarity did not come easily. COST began years earlier as an informal advocacy group while Max was still in college. Much of that early work, by his own assessment, was never going to succeed. Advocacy and mobilization failed to place power in the hands of the people most affected. A turning point came when Max heard labor organizer Jane McAlevey describe the differences between advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing. "That really crystallized it," he said. "What we were doing wasn't building power."

Tenant organizing followed, initially without a clear blueprint. For years, Max was the organization's sole staff member, focused more on laying groundwork than on deep organizing. That changed when Will came on staff, bringing a background in labor organizing. "That labor organizing tradition translates so well to the tenant context." Will said. Over the past year, COST has organized three majority buildings and began practicing the kind of tenant majority leadership they had previously only studied.

The broader context makes the urgency impossible to ignore. Colorado Springs was once considered relatively affordable, but that reality disappeared after 2017. Between 2017 and 2022, rents rose by 50 to 60 percent. Today, nowhere in the city can someone earning minimum wage afford a two-bedroom apartment. The unhoused population has grown to nearly 6,000 people, a reality the city has long attempted to hide.

For the organizers, these numbers are personal. "I've never been able to live alone in Colorado Springs," Will said. "I have friends who've had to leave the city because the rent is so high. There aren't the jobs or amenities to justify it, it's just extraction."

What sustains the work, however, are the moments when tenants recognize their own power. One such moment came through Evan, a tenant leader in a public housing building. Evan, who lives with schizophrenia, spent years avoiding conflict to maintain mental stability. For two years, water leaked through his ceiling while management dismissed his complaints. What ultimately pushed him to organize was seeing his neighbors, older women and people with disabilities being treated the same way.

Now, Evan sits across the table from housing authority officials as part of a bargaining team. "He was pushing back against their bureaucratic B.S to their faces," Will recalled. Afterward, Evan said he felt "absolutely invigorated." For the organizers, that transformation from isolation to collective leadership, is the strongest measure of success.

While Colorado Springs Tenants is still young, the organization has secured concessions from the housing authority and is testing its capacity in the private market. Over the coming months, the focus will be on formalizing citywide structures and their official launch at a convention in March 2026.

> "No one has ever done this work in Colorado Springs," Will said. "It's exciting but it's hard."

As our world is rapidly being shaped by revolving omnicrisis such the housing affordability crisis, rise in cost of groceries, and limited healthcare options, these organizers are clear-eyed about the scale of the challenge. But they are equally frank about the path forward. "This is the first movement that's really been an antidote to the dread," Will said. For COST, organizing tenants in their homes is not just a strategy; it is the most viable path they see toward building real working-class power and a future where people can not only survive, but thrive.

Photo: Jane Addams Senior Caucus

Fox Shore Tenant Association celebrates their million-dollar win for tenant benefits and new community room with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Aurora
2025 | Aurora, IL

Jane Addams Senior Caucus
Where Care and Power Meet

INTERVIEWEE
Lilly Lerner, Executive Director

Jane Addams Senior Caucus (JASC), rooted in the windy city of Chicago, embodies a holistic model of organizing. Grounded in a community-centered approach that integrates legal action and social welfare, JASC's successes are built on a strong foundation that supports the holistic wellbeing of its members. "The organizing model that we use and that we implement here at Jane Addams is rather unique, at least for our context here in Chicago and in Illinois," explained Lilly Lerner, Director of JASC. For Lerner and the staff at JASC, tenant organizing is about more than just survival, it is about dignity and creating the conditions that allow people to stay in the fight long enough to win. "We do tenant organizing with a whole tenant approach."

This philosophy, cemented in labor organizer Jane McAlevey's "whole worker" model, has become the backbone of JASC's work. Here, tenants are not just seen as renters, they are supported across all aspects of their lives.

Founded in 1976, JASC has been a formidable fixture in Chicago's housing justice landscape. But the organization's current form came into focus more recently. Lerner, who had previously worked as a housing organizer at JASC, returned in 2022 as interim director and became Executive Director in 2023. In the years between, she founded the Tenant Education Network, an organization that would later merge with JASC in a shift that structurally reshaped its mission and capacity. This merger was intentional and transformative, allowing JASC to scale their work, retain all staff, and fully realize its vision of holding members' entire beings. "We did what many nonprofits do: tried to do intersectional work on a non-existent budget, relying on free legal help and student interns. Those programs are valuable—but doing this work on the cheap shows, and it deeply impacted us to move the needle on our organizing campaigns and direct service offerings."

What formed instead was a decision to invest seriously in tenants. Today, JASC pairs tenant organizing with fully funded in-house legal services and full-time social work support, creating a wraparound safety net that most tenants never had access to. Organizers remain focused on organizing, but they are backed by an attorney who represents members in legal battles from illegal car towing to fighting for their children in DFSS cases, and a social worker who helps tenants apply for benefits, secure healthcare, build resumes, navigate SSDI, and stabilize their lives. "We don't want our tenants to have to choose between 'am I showing up at this tenant meeting', or 'am I trying to find food to put on the table for my family.' So, if we can solve the food question, then we get them at the tenant meeting and they show up for themselves, and their neighbors, fighting for more, knowing that they deserve more." Lerner shared.

That commitment required more than just ethics—it required money. After a nonprofit lawyer suddenly dropped JASC and its members, the organization made an essential pivot. They partnered with Beyond Legal Aid to create a 50-50 shared cost model that incorporates a dedicated attorney within JASC, funded jointly and fully accountable

to tenant needs. "If we're going up against landlords with big shot attorneys," Lerner said, "we need a big shot attorney too. We need to act like we're here to win." The same logic guided the decision to hire a full-time social worker rather than rely on short term interns. Constant turnover, Lerner noted, was destabilizing for tenants who are already navigating a crisis. **"If you're serious about this work, you have to invest like you're serious."** At JASC, organizing, legal support, and social work function as a trio. Organizing remains the core, particularly in subsidized, project-based Section 8 buildings, where JASC focuses its efforts. The goal is not only repairs or improved conditions. In many cases, JASC's organizing pressures owners to sell buildings altogether. When that happens, tenant associations negotiate legally-enforceable collective bargaining agreements with new buyers, contracts that guarantee protections during rehabs and tenant benefits. "It's like a labor union contract," Lerner said, "but in the tenant space."

Recently, JASC secured part one of a contract of this nature, winning a signed agreement ensuring security retention after a building sale. It was a victory that came down to leverage and risk. Tenants, while fearful of delaying a long-awaited rehab, ultimately agreed to threaten the zoning change, a legal amendment to the building's zoning regulations that the developer needed to purchase the property. The alderman hesitated. The pressure mounted. On the eve of the vote, the agreement was signed.

"It wasn't polite," Lerner said. "It's moments like that when tenants face their fear, when tenants encounter and evaluate the risks and decide to do it anyway and see their strength and see we just took this multimillion-dollar cooperation to battle, and we won. It's crazy and it's amazing and it's life-giving. It's such a happy and healthy and beautiful reminder that that's the work. Working with people to get to a place where they believe that they can win and that when they have the opportunity and the leverage to do so, they fight like hell."

Those moments when tenants realize their power are what Lerner considers the true measure of success. Sometimes that power shows up in quieter ways. She recalls a tenant who had lived with failing appliances for over 5 years, holding them together with duct tape. After years of resisting written complaints, the tenant finally sent an email. Within weeks, HUD was involved. New appliances were installed. "She was freaking out, it was awesome," Lerner said.

Since the merger, JASC has also expanded its reach beyond its senior focus to work intergenerationally. "We are not just a senior caucus, our merger allowed us to expand our work to multi-family buildings as well. We now explicitly do work intergenerationally, so we work with families, young people and seniors."

The political climate has only raised the stakes. With SNAP benefit cuts, ICE raids, and growing fear within federal agencies like HUD, new layers of instability have formed. Rather than chase every crisis, JASC works to integrate responses where their skills are strongest: data collection around benefit losses, legal appeals for denied assistance, and rapid response training for subsidized buildings.

> "It's not about doing everything," Lerner said. "It's about knowing where you fit and doing that well."

That focus and clarity about power, investment, and collective care defines JASC's approach. In a landscape where affordable housing remains dominated by profit-driven developers and timid regulators, the organization continues to prove what is possible and replicable when tenants are supported as whole people and are trusted to lead.

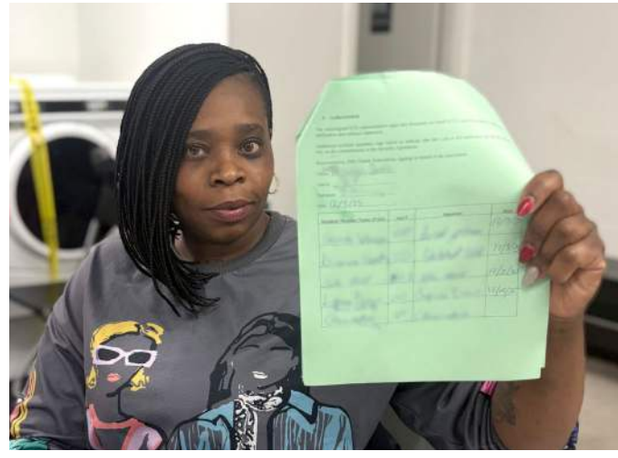


Photo: Housing Justice for All

Sumathy Kumar
New York City, NY

Housing Justice for All
A Majority in Motion

INTERVIEWEE

Sumathy Kumar, Executive Director

Viola, a 76 year old woman who arrived in New York from St. Kitts as a young girl, walks tirelessly with Sumathy Kumar, Managing Director of Housing Justice for All (HJ4A) and the New York State Tenant Bloc. Together they scale floor after floor, knocking on doors and mobilizing neighbors toward a Rent Freeze Campaign. When Kumar first met Viola, small framed and hair glowing pink, Viola was just about to retire from a long career as a social worker. In her early days, Viola started out cleaning for a social work office and from there was encouraged to pursue a degree in social work. While on the cusp of retirement, her fire for social change was far from burning out. Viola and Kumar initially partnered when the conditions of Viola's building were in deep disrepair and tenants were being pushed out due to rising cost of rent. **Rather than accept this situation Viola and Kumar organized neighbors, and won repairs and a rent reduction for not only her building but also for three other buildings owned by the same landlord.**

Despite winning a victory of her own, Viola was back on the chilly streets this January, mobilizing with HJ4A to push for a citywide Rent Freeze Campaign and a "rent freeze" Mayor. "Viola still came out for the rent freeze campaign and walked up six flights of stairs for the canvassing and is just really dedicated to talking to people and being part of the larger fight. She has a program that freezes her rent for her because she's a senior but is still out there trying to get a rent freeze for everyone. Part of the work is getting the repairs done and the stove fixed, but it's really more about the people that you connect with. And the bigger picture of being part of something that's going to change the world," Kumar said.

HJ4A has been a key lever for social change, embodying the practice of community compassion with collective action, since its inception in 2017. Led by Black and Brown women, this organization was a grassroots collective built with the goal of challenging the real estate industry and connecting tenants to fair housing opportunities. The organization's origins were shaped by the urgency of the housing landscape around it. Kumar entered the tenant movement as a young organizer, drawn in by the electric whirlwind of the 2019 rent stabilization fight. That campaign—creative, fast paced and unexpectedly victorious—revealed something important: tenants win when they act together.

But the years that followed showed how quickly gains can be threatened. Through the pandemic, HJ4A helped fight for the eviction moratorium and the push to cancel rent. Then, the political wheel turned with the end of the pandemic and priorities shifted, protections ended, evictions surged, and the coalition was stretched to its limits. After a bruising fight for Good Cause Eviction that produced a compromised bill, Kumar and the coalition reached a breaking point, "We threw everything we had, and it still wasn't enough. If Good Cause is supposed to be the low-hanging fruit,

how are we going to win universal rent control in the formation we had?" HJ4A needed change.

In 2023, the coalition made that change. Out of introspection and necessity, the New York State Tenant Bloc was born, a statewide vehicle designed not just to mobilize tenants but to transform them into an organized political force.

The goal was audacious: to organize 250,000 tenants—3% of the state's renters—the tipping point at which the movement can shift the course of history. But more importantly, the Tenant Bloc would unlock every resource tenants have ever held: not just storytelling or soft electoral pressure, but economic power, coordinated rent strikes, and the collective muscle of a voting bloc.

Their first test arrived almost immediately. In 2024, the Tenant Bloc launched the Rent Freeze Campaign, aiming to gather 20,000 commitments from rent-stabilized tenants who pledged to vote only for a "rent freeze mayor." They collected signatures. They called every signer. And monumentally, they won against all odds.

"It's an incredible proof of concept," Kumar said. "Now we have to build on it."

What many people overlook is that being a tenant is not just a condition, it's an identity that connects people to one another in deep ways. Seventy percent of New York City residents rent their homes.

> "Tenants are the majority," Kumar said. "And that's not a weakness. It's a source of power."

That revelation has transformed lives inside the movement. One tenant leader, Joanne Growl, a Puerto Rican single mother from the Bronx, put it plainly: "My whole life I've been made to feel like I'm a minority. This campaign made me realize I'm in the majority. I'm a tenant."

It is in spaces like HJ4A's coalition meetings where tenants from all across the boroughs gather, where this majority reveals itself to be more than a statistic but a pillar of community. Conversations often happen in varying languages. Karaoke nights playing traditional Bangla songs alongside 90's pop follow strategy sessions. Relationships form between people whose lives would otherwise never intersect.

Despite the mounting wins, work is far from done. Upstate tenants are fighting for the right to implement rent stabilization. Downstate, the rent freeze must be defended as landlords look for ways to undermine it. Statewide, tenants are preparing to organize hundreds at a time across entire landlord portfolios to bring social housing to their buildings.

Political winds will shift. Backlash will come. But Kumar, Housing Justice for All, and the Tenant Bloc are rooting themselves firmly in the future, a future of universal rent control and social housing. For Kumar, motivation comes from watching ordinary people become extraordinary leaders, people like Viola, Joanne, and the thousands of tenants discovering their collective power for the first time. New York's tenant movement is still in its transformation stage—messy, hopeful, and full of possibility. But one thing is clear, the majority is waking up. And they are learning, slowly but surely, that they have far more power than they were ever told.

Every canvass, every strategy meeting, every rent strike, every shared meal is rewriting what is possible, not just for individual tenants, but for the future of the state. And as long as people like Viola are climbing the stairs, the movement is moving upward.

Photo: Ismario Rodriguez Perez

Ben Iness
2026 | Conference
in New York City, NY

Nevada Housing Justice Alliance
Where Persistence Builds Power

INTERVIEWEES

Ben Iness, Coalition Coordinator at Nevada Housing Justice Alliance &
Taisacan Hall, Lived Experience Specialist at Nevada Homeless Alliance

Nevada's economy relies overwhelmingly on tourism, gaming, and mining; as a result, corporations wield outsize economic and political power. Adjacent to California, Nevada has long struggled with housing affordability, especially in the Reno area, where the Silicon Valley effect drove up rents, stressed infrastructure, and increased homelessness and displacement in the north. The affordability crisis, of which housing is a primary component, is now painfully felt across Nevada as corporations buy large swaths of housing stock. Since late 2019, the Nevada Housing Justice Alliance (NHJA) has been building a coalition and essential groundwork to challenge housing insecurity at the local and state levels.

Born at a moment when the Las Vegas City Council was attempting to pass an ordinance that criminalized unsheltered people, NHJA emerged out of necessity, an urgent response to a clear threat against the most vulnerable members of the community. Organizers quickly united to push back, drawing a line and refusing to allow punishment to replace compassion. That resistance became the seed of a statewide movement to challenge corporate power and protect tenant rights.

From the start, obstacle after obstacle stood in the way of defending tenant rights. Ben Iness, NHJA's Coalition Manager for the past three years, described the relentless pushback they encountered, such as policymakers killing pivotal bills and amending proposals until their human impact was diluted beyond recognition. In Nevada where the legislature only meets every two years, these setbacks carry extra weight. Every legislative day counts, and the pressure to organize and advocate is high, especially when bills make the difference between having a roof over one's head or facing criminal charges.

As NHJA continued to mobilize, 2022 became a turning point, marked by crucial funding and structural support that allowed the coalition to expand its reach. With this foundation, NHJA secured something that had long been missing from statewide housing conversations; a legitimate seat at the table. From that position, they amplified community voices, elevated grassroots leaders, and opened long-shuttered space for conversations about rent stabilization, tenant protections, and the lived realities of Nevada's housing crisis.

But the work ahead remains daunting. Nevada is the only state in the nation where eviction notices do not need to be filed through the courts before they take effect. Instead, a landlord can tape a notice to a tenant's door and the countdown toward removal begins, immediately placing the burden on tenants to navigate a confusing, often inaccessible legal process within a narrow time frame—often only a week. For those who cannot read English, or who lack transportation, income, or legal knowledge, this process is nearly impossible. "It's inhumane to have such a limited amount of time," Iness says. "It's unfair. There is often no due process. Priority number one is reversing that filing order."

To expose these injustices, NHJA launched a court-watching program, sending trained observers into eviction hearings across Clark County. What they found was alarming: hearings lasting two to three minutes, tenants receiving little explanation, judicial discretion used inconsistently and sometimes harshly, and courts were, "chewing people up and spitting them out," as Iness described. But presence mattered. As court watchers became a consistent force in the room, the atmosphere shifted. Judges slowed down. Questions were asked and outcomes improved. The findings strengthened NHJA's longstanding push for eviction record sealing, a policy that would help families avoid long-term discrimination. When a record-sealing bill passed the legislature in 2025 but was ultimately vetoed by the governor, the organization responded by doubling down.

Across all of these fights, NHJA has centered leadership development and community engagement. Rather than advocating for tenants from afar, they work alongside them, training community members to testify, canvass, organize, and speak truth to power. Through habitability workshops, Know Your Rights programming, and direct outreach, they help tenants navigate the system and build collective strength.

This approach has already reshaped Nevada's housing landscape. Where housing justice was once dismissed as a fringe concern, tenant protections are now regularly debated in the legislature. Major stakeholders, including the Apartment Association, have begun acknowledging the need for systemic change, a shift that seemed unimaginable just a few years ago. In June 2025, the governor signed a lease and fee transparency bill, which took effect on October 1 and now requires landlords to clearly list all fees and terms up front. This is a win that will protect tens of thousands of tenants from predatory practices.

For Taisacan Hall, organizer with NHJA and Nevada Homeless Alliance, this work is both political and deeply personal. At 18, Hall came face to face with just how fragile home can be. When a constable pounded on her apartment door with an eviction notice and only 30 minutes to gather what they could carry, Hall, her infant brother, and mother found themselves without a place or a plan for what came next. What followed were nights in weekly motels, cars, the airport, spaces never meant to hold a family, let alone a young woman trying to keep one together. For Hall, housing instability wasn't just an abstract policy issue, it was lived in real time, in the constant calculation of how to survive and how to protect her mother and infant brother. "I remember standing on the porch and trying to figure out what to do with our lives," she says. "Because in a way it just ended." These moments of upheaval, responsibility and loss, sit at the center of the work that Hall carries forward.

After connecting with a youth homelessness organization Hall began transforming survival into stable living, and then advocacy, helping push forward policies like access to free vital documents for unhoused youth, changes rooted in what she once lacked. But what sustains her goes beyond policy. "I felt responsible for advocating for youth in my community, in part because I am in that space actively and this work is something that I felt I had to do. Things suck and they should be better. And I think change is inevitable. It's going to happen anyway. Someone has to do this work, and it might as well be the people that are closest to the issue because there are a lot of additional things, like making sure that folks are safe. And a lot of that comes from building community, talking to people. Working with them."

Today, NHJA continues pushing forward, launching a statewide housing agenda, deepening public education efforts, supporting tenants in election education, and preparing the next generation of grassroots leaders. With each roundtable, canvass, court watch shift, and advocacy day, NHJA strengthens a movement built on lived experience.

"There's always more to do," Iness says. "The resiliency to keep doing this work is automatic, from all of the connections that are forged through the day-to-day work and the parts that keep that flame lit. All the purpose and meaning from being in a role that supports life and healing from housing insecurity trauma. We try to support the partners in the same way we support ourselves. There is always more to do but it's not done in a single day, it's done by showing up everyday where we can, and staying committed to pieces of the long term strategy."

Photo: Ismario Rodriguez Perez

Nick MacLeod
2026 | Conference in New York City, NY

North Carolina Tenants Union
When Tenants Set the Terms

INTERVIEWEE
Nick MacLeod, Executive Director

In North Carolina, housing justice sits on the faultlines of a system that threatens to swallow tenants whole. Crooked slumlords operate with near total impunity in a state with some of the most landlord-friendly laws in the country. Public housing residents face privatization and displacement. Hurricanes rip through coastal and mountain communities, leaving devastating consequences in their wake. And recently, immigration enforcement has cast a constant shadow over entire neighborhoods, sending shockwaves of fear through communities. Inside that terrain, the North Carolina Tenants Union (NCTU), led by Executive Director Nick MacLeod, is battling for the soul of this country, creating a scaffolding where tenants are not only fighting to survive, but to be seen and allowed the space to lead.

MacLeod often points to a sentence taped to their office wall. “Something an old mentor used to say to me, and I like so much that it’s on the wall in my office is, ‘organizing done well creates dignity, even if you don’t win.’” That philosophy is a pillar that speaks to the depth of their work. Launched in April 2024 after nearly four years of building statewide tenant infrastructure, NCTU has grown from a single staff member to seven full-time staff over the course of the last year. They stand strong with more than 250 dues-paying members and locals in Asheville, Winston-Salem, Durham, Raleigh, Chapel Hill, and New Hanover County. But the growth is not just numerical. It is deeply relational.

Tenants usually arrive when things fall apart. Mold spreading across ceilings. Rats. Broken elevators. Rent increases. Plumbing problems. Dangerous conditions. And retaliation. They are not arriving with ideology. In Durham, that wrongness concentrated inside

Willard Street and Ashton Place, two apartment complexes owned by the same landlord. Tenants dealt with chronically understaffed maintenance, nepotism in hiring, security failures, broken locks, pest infestations, and unclean common areas. While complaint after complaint was filed, tenants' concerns went unanswered.

Then Jason Davies died. He was visiting his mother, Miss Davies at Ashton Place over Thanksgiving and had post-COVID cardiovascular complications. One fatal day, Jason found himself locked in a laundry room whose door had been repeatedly reported as unsafe by tenants. There was no staffing to respond. What had been negligence became an avoidable tragedy. For many, that grief could have meant withdrawal. Instead, it sparked organizing.

Tenant leaders such as Miss Cynthia, Miss Yolanda, and Miss Davies, Jason's mother, began gathering to prevent another life being lost. Through the Durham Tenant Circle, they built a committee inside their buildings. They knocked on doors. They mapped who was ready to act. And they connected individual grief to collective power. These ladies were organizing within a state legal system that offers tenants little leverage or protection. In North Carolina, tenants cannot withhold rent, even in unlivable conditions. Rent abatement typically requires suing a landlord in a complex and unpredictable process that often demands legal representation.

So tenants in Durham decided to shift the terrain. The "No Rent for Slumlords" ordinance was drawn up to make it a misdemeanor for landlords to collect rent on units with specified dangerous conditions. It established that qualifying dangerous conditions trigger 100% rent abatement. It simplified legal defenses against non-payment evictions and made group rent abatement cases more viable.

The campaign was directly tenant-led. Through the Tenant Circle, members debated and voted on strategy. They endured multiple city council work sessions. When city attorneys raised preemption concerns, there were dueling legal memos. When amendments threatened to weaken the ordinance, tenants refused to accept them. They packed the council chamber and forced a vote before municipal elections. In October 2025, the ordinance passed unanimously and tenants sang. They carried their signs, "No Rent for Slumlords, We Did This," back to their buildings and taped them to their doors.

"Folks find a way to take care of each other, especially when they're backed up against the wall," MacLeod reflected.

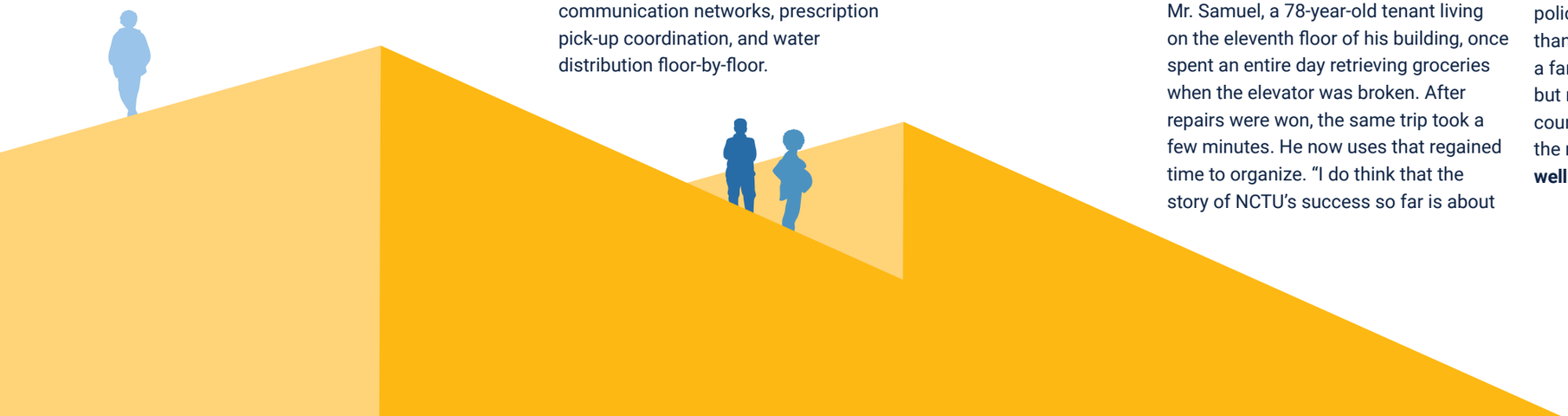
Within weeks, conditions began to shift. Maintenance staff were fired. Janitorial services were hired. Security improvements were implemented. After more than a year of fighting, tenants secured building-level wins. But the ordinance was not just about code enforcement. It was about dignity and safety. Combined with state law, tenants can now get 100% of the rent times three if landlords fail to secure repairs. "The tangible wins are visible," MacLeod said. "But the real transformation is tenants no longer being told 'you ain't much.'" **This exemplifies how people are discovering power collectively and mutual care becoming normalized. This work is a witness to the social fabric being reknit through struggle.**

And in places like Healy Towers in Winston-Salem, a nearly 100-unit public housing high-rise home to primarily seniors and disabled residents, the fight continues. For years, tenants endured mold, sewage backups, elevator failures, and deferred maintenance. Miss Edith, an 80 year old resident leader, began organizing for repairs and dignity in 2023. Her intrinsic care for her neighbors led her to build a food distribution system inside the building which scaled up after the cut to SNAP benefits, feeding

a large portion of the community. This was amplified after they managed to win back control of the communal kitchen. In order to conduct a structure test for how much support the movement had and to shake off any fear of retaliation, the organizing committee asked tenants to place stickers publicly, on doors, walls, and pillars as a show of solidarity. Over 80% of the building came through. Across the corridors they read, Healy Towers United. A declaration of collective strength and a new era.

Almost immediately, that collective strength was tested through a direct conflict with management. For years, tenants at Healy Towers United, led by Miss Edith, had been pushing for the reassignment of a maintenance worker that they described as abusive. Residents reported that the staffer yelled at tenants and at one point told them, "I own this building." During the dispute, Miss Edith told another staff member that if the situation was not addressed, "something is gonna happen." Management responded by filing an eviction against her, alleging that she had threatened staff with bodily harm when she was only referring to the situation's need for safety. Tenants organized in her defense, mounted pressure on management, launched a second sticker campaign, and were able to defeat the eviction. They also secured their original demand, and the maintenance worker was finally reassigned.

Focused on building resiliency, NCTU has welded together a community that tends to their neighbors' immediate needs for food, comfort, and protection. Tenant associations double as food distribution hubs. Leaders coordinate elder check-ins during storms. In partnership with immigrant-led groups, they build safety plans and rapid response systems in the face of ICE enforcement. During hurricanes, tenants organize mesh communication networks, prescription pick-up coordination, and water distribution floor-by-floor.



Across cities, such as Asheville, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Chapel Hill, Carrboro, Durham, Raleigh, Greenville, Wilmington, NCTU is working to expand "No Rent for Slumlords" style ordinances statewide. The strategy is iterative: local versions reflecting specific tenant needs, building toward stronger, combined protections.

Internally, the organization is structured democratically and ensures that the board is made up of elected tenant leaders who hold final power to make decisions, with representation proportional to dues-paying membership. The guiding principle is clear: "Power proportional to how much a decision affects you," MacLeod stated. The theory of change is equally direct. Start with immediate needs, build a collective fight, win material improvement, free up time and energy, restore dignity, expand leadership, win policy, and repeat at a larger scale.

Mr. Samuel, a 78-year-old tenant living on the eleventh floor of his building, once spent an entire day retrieving groceries when the elevator was broken. After repairs were won, the same trip took a few minutes. He now uses that regained time to organize. "I do think that the story of NCTU's success so far is about

listening to tenants. They know what they need. My job and our staff's job is to build the structure so that the leaders can make decisions and drive and then we're there to back them up. If we don't listen to Miss Edith, if we don't Miss Cynthia, we fail. There's just no way it works without them," MacLeod noted.

In a state where housing justice lives at the intersection of neglect, state-sanctioned harm, and climate disaster, NCTU is constructing something that will withstand the test of time: not just policy wins, but relationships, and deeper than that, a community that moves like a family. It is through not just resistance, but resilience. And on office walls, in council chambers, in high-rise hallways, the reminder remains: **"organizing done well creates dignity, even if you don't win."**

Photo: SC Tenant Union

Members attend a State of the Union gathering.
2026 | Charleston, SC

South Carolina Tenant Union
Changing the Record

INTERVIEWEE

Kenni Cummings, Executive Director

Strolling through downtown Charleston, new construction offers the promise of "affordable housing", while evicting Black and low-income tenants onto the streets in order to accomplish that mission. In a state that carries legislation that permanently stains individuals' records with evictions, the challenge of finding safe housing becomes an impossibility for locals trying to rebuild their lives.

These are the conditions under which the SC Tenant Union (SCTU) organizes. Built for tenants, by tenants, the Union is one of the few forces propelling change in South Carolina's housing landscape. Under the leadership of Executive Director Kenni Cummings, the organization confronts a state long used as a federal testing ground for decisions that often block community access to bodily autonomy and material resources. With political obstacles barricading the door to equitable human rights, SCTU is campaigning to provide tangible change to citizens who are stifled by discriminatory laws.

Across South Carolina, eviction laws remain rooted in punitive, outdated frameworks. An eviction filing becomes a lifelong stain on a tenant's record, no matter the circumstance or how many years have passed, oftentimes barring them from accessing housing. For tenants trying to rebuild, this record becomes a cemented trap door. At SCTU, changing that is personal. Many of their own members have lived through the consequences of antiquated eviction policy, fueling a push for statewide eviction sealing legislation. The proposed policy would allow individuals to close their eviction records and pursue housing without being permanently followed by a single moment of crisis.

Years ago, SCTU hired a lawyer who didn't even realize he carried an eviction from his college days. Despite his education, resources, and professional standing, the decades-old filing continued to sabotage his housing applications, a testament to just how enduring and unforgiving the system is. For many union members, the consequences are even more life altering. Three members recently became unhoused after evictions. Without stable shelter, they missed essential emails, lost access to housing opportunities, and faced courtroom retaliation tied to their organizing work. One member's living conditions have become so dire that he now faces losing a limb. For each of them, sealed eviction records would mean the possibility of immediate relief, safe, healthy environments, and stability.

In addition to campaigning for statewide policy reform, SCTU is also leading a Public Housing Redevelopment Campaign in response to Charleston's city expansion of affordable housing and public housing redevelopment plan. Historically, redevelopment

has displaced Black and low-income residents in the name of false progress. As a result, public housing tenants across the city are mobilizing to protect themselves from forced displacement. Cummings describes how the eviction sealing legislation and redevelopment campaign intersect, “Charleston Public housing authority is one of the biggest evictors in our state. It’s been really great to talk to people about what the redevelopment process looks like legally, and how we build strong tenant unions in several different complexes but also a larger one” they explain. Understanding the legal process around redevelopment, building strong tenant unions, and organizing tenants under one shared block has become essential. As redevelopment looms, eviction rates rise, clearing buildings more quickly to pave the way for new structures few current residents will ever be able to access.

The eviction sealing bill, introduced March 2025 and backed by bipartisan support, aims for passage in May 2026. If successful, it would immediately alter the trajectory of families statewide, those already carrying the weight of past evictions, and those bracing for forced eviction from Charleston’s redevelopment efforts.

At the heart of SCTU’s work are deep, reciprocal relationships with the community. SCTU is an organization that breathes the work of community practice as they train and uplift the confidence of individuals to show up not only in organizing but in all moments of their lives. Speaking about one of the tenant leaders, Cummings brought up Ms. Angela, a woman who did not initially consider herself a leader in the organizing spaces, but after being encouraged to take on leadership roles, has fully come into her own within the work. Ms. Angela went from being involved in the background of the work, to mobilizing folks to attend meetings and inspiring change during the gatherings. Cummings remembered Ms. Angela saying,

> “Something has to shake and I gotta be the one to shake and change them.”

This is the quiet power of SCTU; not only shifting policy, but cultivating leaders who can tackle broken systems maintaining a status quo

of oppression. To help manifest the vision of a more equitable future, SCTU embodies the social justice pillars of direct action, daily practice, and community accountability. As crises surrounding policing, Black maternal health, immigration enforcement, and displacement intersect, organizers across the Carolinas are coming together with the shared recognition that housing justice is deeply connected to every fight for human dignity. While ICE vehicles continue to disappear people from their neighborhoods in broad daylight, the urgency of building community power grows.

Cummings emphasizes that this work is slow, intentional, and sustained. Progress comes from showing up time and time again with heart, and committing to the long arc of collective transformation. SCTU organizes around humanity, gathering in ways rooted in Southern hospitality: shared meals, mutual respect, and the understanding that everyone has a place at the table. Tenant organizing is not individual work; it is deliberate, patient, and built through practice. It requires a community dedicated to keeping one another safe, fed, and tightly held through every setback and every victory.

Photo: Ismario Rodriguez Perez

Emma Rehac
2026 | Conference in New York City, NY

Youth Alliance for Housing
The Village We're Building

INTERVIEWEE

Emma Rehac, Founding Director

Emma Rehac was raised by New York City. Uptown Manhattan sidewalks, public school hallways, subway platforms, and borrowed apartments layered the rhythms of a childhood defined by movement, precarity, and observation. At just 24 years old, Rehac is the Founder and Director of the Youth Alliance for Housing (YAH), a youth-led organization confronting one of New York City's most urgent and entangled crises – housing. Rooted in deep lived experience, Rehac understands that change often happens when young people are given the resources to fight for their futures. "Being a teenager is really hard and we are failing all of our young people. I remember when I was a teenager and it just felt like you were stuck in a hole you know. It feels like you're fighting for your life and you have no idea of how much better it will get. This is why having a political home is really important for young people, having that place to land and that community to lean on, " Rehac shared.

Growing up, Rehac and her younger sister moved 22 times, all across uptown Manhattan. They ended up living in Central Harlem, a predominantly Black and Brown neighborhood, as a mixed-race family. This experience sharpened Rehac's awareness of racial, cultural, and class dynamics. "I always cared about the issues around me, I always had this deep sense that something wasn't right and I refuse to just accept things the way that they are," she recalled.

Her mother's Dutch background shaped Rehac's pragmatism and worldview, but instability shaped her urgency. Without extended family, no aunties or cousins to lean on, community had to be built elsewhere. Home was rarely a place of rest. Rehac began working at age 12, grew up fast, and filled her schedule to avoid being inside a space that never quite felt safe. "I think that's the experience of so many young people," she said.

"We're conditioned to think housing doesn't impact you unless you're unhoused. But housing justice is also about having a place to exhale. A place where you can be the truest version of yourself."

After leaving years of electoral organizing behind at just 17, Rehac joined a housing justice organization in Harlem. She was the only young person in the room, often the only person under 50. Still, she stayed and learned quickly. Just days before the COVID-19 shutdown, she hosted a youth listening session to hear directly from young people about housing and community needs. When everything moved online, that listening session didn't disappear. It multiplied.

Young people kept meeting. They trained together on Zoom. They shared stories. They organized. COVID exacerbated every existing inequity, and housing shot to the forefront, but no one was organizing young people around it. Out of necessity, the Youth Alliance for Housing was born. YAH officially launched in December 2020, initially focusing on political education and mutual aid, while participating in broader campaigns like Good Cause Eviction, canceling rent, and the Homes Guarantee.

By 2022, YAH formalized further, secured a fiscal sponsor, and began running its own strategic campaigns aimed at building long-term change. The organization is completely youth-led and member-led, defining "young people" as anyone 25 or younger and "tenants" as anyone without full control over their home. That includes renters, students, people in shelters, unhoused youth, and even those with mortgages who are effectively tenants of the bank.

"We're trying to build a shared tenant identity the same way the labor movement built a worker identity," Rehac explained. "Young people are largely excluded from tenant organizing because they're not on the lease or paying rent. But they're still tenants. They still don't have agency over where they live. No social movement in this history of the world has ever succeeded without young people."

Today, YAH runs multiple campaigns across the city and beyond. One of their central efforts focuses on universities as landlords. Columbia University is the largest private property owner in New York City. NYU is the largest in the state. Yet students living in university housing don't have leases, they have housing contracts, which strip them of tenant protections

while still charging them. YAH is building student-led tenant unions, particularly across SUNY campuses, to demand that these contracts be recognized as leases subject to state tenant laws.

In the city, YAH is a co-founder of the Livable Futures Package, a slate of youth-focused legislation. They are actively campaigning for the Community Opportunity to Purchase Act (COPA), which would give tenants the first opportunity to buy buildings when they go up for sale, keeping housing in community hands through nonprofits and land trusts.

At the building level, YAH is helping form tenant unions especially in buildings owned by Pinnacle, one of New York's most notorious slumlords. Pinnacle, a bankrupt landlord, owns many rent-stabilized buildings and has systematically attempted to remove rental protections. As Pinnacle's properties head to auction, YAH and its members are organizing to give tenants a say in who owns their home next. "We are campaigning to build the first city-wide tenant union to exist in New York. We are campaigning to slow down the auction process so tenants have more choice over who their next landlord is," Rehac noted.

That philosophy came into focus at a co-op in Queens. After a fire displaced much of the building, a young tenant named Safi joined YAH seeking assistance. Residents fought to return and when they did, were charged steep repair fees for repair work that was never completed. Eviction notices followed. Through YAH, Safi became part of a broader organizing effort. From learning to articulate her own story to helping build a tenant association and knocking on neighbors' doors with Spanish, Mandarin, and Urdu translators, she fought not just for her own housing, but for everyone's ability to stay. What began as an individual crisis became a collective campaign, reflecting YAH's belief that young people are not just impacted by housing injustice, they are capable of leading the response and protecting their neighbors.

In just two months during 2025, YAH helped launch six new building-level tenant associations. The pace is fast, but the philosophy is intentional. "We believe our work is only as powerful as the depth of our relationships," Rehac said. "We'd rather be an inch wide and a mile deep than a mile wide and an inch deep."

That depth shows up everywhere. Every meeting has good food and music. Members cook and clean together. Young people learn how to use knives, how to portion meals, how to take care of shared space and themselves. YAH runs mutual aid networks that prioritize sustainability over crisis crowdfunding. They host block party style community events with free food, clothing drives, harm reduction workshops, and spaces for young artists to perform or sell their work without any barriers, no proof of need required.

YAH's model is shaped not only by process and politics, but by lived experience. Rehac herself was kicked out of her home at 18 during the pandemic. On paper, survival seemed unlikely. In reality, her organizing community carried her. "I had homemade meals six days a week," she said. "I was cared for. That's why the personal is political. I do this work for myself as much as for anyone else."

In a moment of economic collapse, political instability, and widespread grief, YAH is building something quieter and more radical, a village. A place where young people are not tokenized but trusted. Where leadership is collective. Where tenants, especially the youngest ones, are learning to see themselves not as powerless, but as part of a growing majority.

As political winds shift and new opportunities knock, including a mayor elected on a rent freeze platform, YAH remains focused on its long-term vision; building a politicized, knowledgeable, and organized generation of young tenants who see themselves as powerful, connected, and deserving of stability. "We always talk about how it takes a village," Rehac said. "The question is how we return to that village and how we learn to be good villagers." At YAH, held by an intentional and powerful collective, that return is already underway.

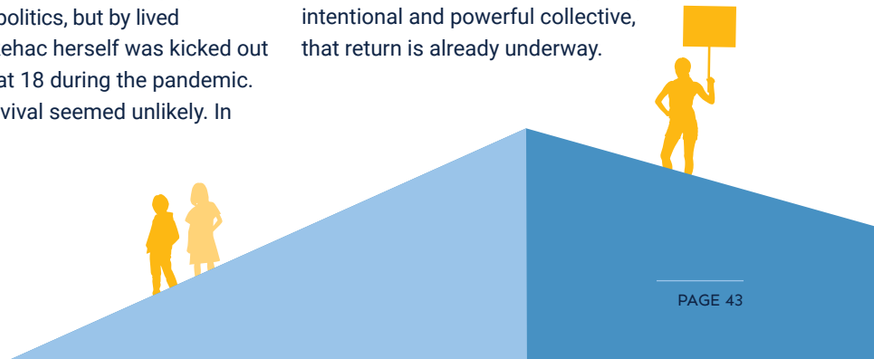


Photo: apartments.com

TENANT LEADER PROFILE

Mr. Kevin Murray

QUESTION

Can you tell us a little about yourself — where you were born and how you came to be where you are now?

My name is Kevin Murray. I'm 42 years old. I was born and raised right here in Chicago. I'm a father of two, and I've been living in Damen Courts for about 10 years now. I work full time. This is my home.

QUESTION

How did you first get connected with JASC?

I first connected with them around April or May of 2025. Actually, my girlfriend met Tammi from Jane Addams Senior Caucus (JASC). Tammi was canvassing around the building. I wasn't home, I was at work but my girlfriend called me and told me she met someone who was willing to help with the maintenance issues that we were having.

When I got in contact with Tammi, she explained what she does with the organization and asked me what problems I was dealing with. I told her everything. She wrote it down and brought it back to the organization. After that, they reached out to me. Within a few days, I started seeing improvement. Tammi also told me how important it is to send emails and document everything.

QUESTION

What were some of the issues you were struggling with in your unit?

The carpet needed to be replaced. My bathroom wall was tearing down from water moisture and wear and tear. The tiles were terrible. The appliances are old and go in and out. I put in I don't know how many work orders. Management would say it was out of their budget, or they would just ignore it.

QUESTION

When did things escalate with management?

Right after I got involved with (JASC). One day after we had begun the process of organizing for better conditions in my unit, my girlfriend and I were outside having a couple's argument. It wasn't violent. We were just having words with one another. The next day, management sent me notices saying we disturbed the peace, violated policies, violated the lease agreement, and that we were very violent. They even said mace was used, which wasn't true.

The landlord said they had video evidence of the event but when we asked for the footage, she didn't want to show it. That's when I had to get attorney Peter Luck involved and we connected with him through (JASC). He requested the video and reviewed it. He said it didn't look violent at all.

In the end, management tried to bar my girlfriend from the building and before the landlord handed me the notice, she actually told me, "I was going to leave it alone, but since you want to get involved with them [JASC], here you go." That's when I knew we were dealing with retaliation.

QUESTION

What were some of the methods of retaliation?

Management tried to bar my girlfriend from the building and claimed we were in violation of the lease. The landlord also tried to raise my rent by almost $200. Peter asked her and her lawyer to send information to justify it. After emails went back and forth, it never even went to court. I believe she knew she was wrong. She dropped the increase. Winning that felt good. It felt great. For a long time, it felt like she was just doing whatever she wanted around here. They're still looking into the case because they feel like the rent could be lower. (JASC) are still working on it till this day.

QUESTION

Are there still ongoing issues?

Yes. We're still going through the process of retaliation and trying to get new appliances. These appliances have been here I don't know how long. Peter is still on them to this day. JASC is consistent. They don't give up.

QUESTION

How has this struggle affected you personally?

It's been very uncomfortable. When someone tells you who can and can't be in your unit, that's stressful. The landlord has been harassing us. When you're dealing with threats, that's stressful. It affects how you show up in your life. I lived with these issues for about seven years. Nothing was getting fixed. But since I got involved, it's less stressful. Now my place is starting to feel more like a home.

QUESTION

Have other tenants experienced similar issues?

Yes. I know at least two other people dealing with similar things. A lot of people are scared to get involved because of threats. Management threatens to put people out. That's why people don't want to speak up. That's why it's important for people to know their rights.

QUESTION

Have you participated in organizing efforts yourself?

Yes. I've done canvassing once or twice, depending on my work schedule. Me, my girlfriend, and Tammi went door to door. Tammi explained what the organization does and why it's important. I enjoyed it. It's good trying to get everybody together and team up to get things done the right way. I've also been to Zoom meetings and in-person meetings. I attend most of the meetings. They're respectful. They give valuable information. They stress keeping things between members and respecting each other. The meetings have been successful.

QUESTION

What would you tell someone who's on the fence about joining a tenant association?

Most definitely, join. Before I got involved, I didn't know my rights. A lot of people don't know their rights. That's the biggest thing. Don't be afraid. That's what they always tell us.

QUESTION

What keeps you resilient through this process?

The association. The organization doesn't give up, they're consistent. They build me up to want to do it. Knowing I've got help makes me more charged up to keep going. Some people give up because they think they can't win. But when (JASC) came along, they showed me it's different.

QUESTION

How has this experience changed your life?

It's changed my life because it's less stressful now. My place is starting to feel more like a home. I feel supported. I feel like I can stand up for myself. Like I say all the time, for years it felt like management was just doing whatever they wanted. Now I know my rights. And I know I'm not alone.

HOUSEUS