

Resident Councils: A Voice for Public Housing Tenants

Resident participation is vital in offering residents a way to build working relationships with the housing agency and create a positive living environment in Public Housing. One form resident participation can take is the resident council. These groups play a part in improving the quality of life for Public Housing communities and bring a wide variety of issues to the attention of PHA from safety and health issues to pet and common area use policies.

A resident council is a group of Public Housing residents who organize by holding elections for officers and adopting by-laws that serve as a roadmap for how the council will conduct its business. The council's democratically elected board must consist of five board members who have been elected by the voting membership.

Public Housing residents can serve on resident councils if they are: 1) heads of household (of any age) or 2) a household member whose name is on the lease and at least 18 years old. Council members cannot be in violation of the lease. They also have to meet any additional requirements that are written into the resident council bylaws.

PHAs must acknowledge a duly elected resident council as the one voice of the residents and support its tenant participation activities. The housing agency should make sure to meet with a new council whenever one is elected. In fact, the housing agency should approach the resident council to set up an initial meeting and provide materials on its occupancy, admissions policies, and tenant participation policies.

Also, communication should not stop with this initial session. The PHA should encourage a flow of information and addressing outstanding issues or concerns through meetings and other means of communication. Finally, the relationship between the PHA and the resident council should be formalized in a written Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which is updated every three years.

HUD provides housing agencies with money for tenant participation activities. PHAs then make these funds to properly elected resident councils. The PHA and its resident council must work together and decide how the funds will be used for tenant participation activities; if the PHA and the council cannot agree on how the funds should be distributed, then the housing agency takes the matter to its local HUD field office. Tenant participation funds may be used to support training activities, meetings, resident organization and other related activities such as: neighborhood cleanup, crime watch, outreach programs, resident training, and household training.

Residents' concerns, ideas, and preferences should be key factors in the PHA's decision-making process since the residents have firsthand knowledge of what is needed in their respective communities. By developing a productive working relationship, the residents and PHA can flourish together.

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