



Tenant Solidarity

Tenants Union of Washington State
Affordable Decent Housing for All

Spring 2008

A **member** is a giver, joiner, supporter, or donor who—by their very presence—grant an organization credibility, political influence, expertise, outreach, validation, volunteer time, and financial stability



Housing advocates march to the Capitol Building where they lobby legislators to support housing in Washington State.

Fighting the good fight...

Why keep organizing even when victory feels far away

By Chris Jussero

Chris Jussero is a Tenants Union member who testified and lobbied for the passage of the bill to outlaw discrimination based on a renter's source of income—HB 1956.

In July of 2006, I was preparing to live in my van. According to the King County Housing Authority, I would receive a housing voucher after waiting 22 months. When I got my voucher only 5 months later, I excitedly started looking for a home. I searched for months. It was like having a sales job where all the prospects hung up on you, sometimes rudely, all day and every day. In this case, they were not rejecting a product. They were rejecting me. As a consequence, I would have to live in my van indefinitely.

During this time, I called the Tenants Union for help. Coincidentally, they were lobbying for the passage of a bill which

Update on Executive Director Search

By Irene Basloe Saraf

Irene Basloe Saraf is president of the Tenants Union Board of Directors and a board member since 2004.

For the past several months, two representatives each from the TU's membership, staff and board have been engaged in a very thoughtful, deliberate search for a new Executive Director. During much of this period, the TU was extremely fortunate to have Melora Hiller as the organization's half-time interim Executive Director. Melora brought her many skills, her dedication to the TU's mission, and her kindness to her work at the TU. Melora's last day was April 11 after six months with the organization. Before this newsletter is printed, the hiring committee will have continued interviewing for a long-term Executive Director. The TU has been able to continue its good and vital work throughout this transition because of the amazingly capable, devoted staff and the strong commitment of the board and membership. Working together, we will continue to have a successful transition and we will be excited to welcome a new Executive Director.

addressed my immediate need as a Section 8 renter. To make a long story short, they asked me to join their campaign.

After a long and arduous process, I found a great apartment in Tukwila before my search period ended. (The housing authority only allows a certain period of time to secure housing before one's voucher is terminated.) Though far from family, church, and friends, I was and still am happy and so very grateful.

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Fighting the good fight...

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In January of 2007, I went with the Tenants Union to give my speech in front of the law-makers in Olympia. I was excited! Back in the 1970's, my mom took me to protests and told me stories about lobbying congressmen for women's rights. Here I was, a chip off the ol' block. For two years we lobbied for the passage of our anti-discrimination bill. We tried one year, and then another to pass the bill. While our bill hasn't yet passed, I can honestly say that I am glad for the experience.

It was so fulfilling to contribute my best toward a good cause. I felt, from within my soul, so strongly about the injustice of such blatant discrimination. Even though I was nervous, I held the strength of hope that I could appeal to the compassionate and humane side of these legislators. Some of them only cared about numbers and statistics but *my* testimony—of how bad it is out there—put a face on the numbers. They heard, from my own lips, the real struggle and urgency of change—change to stop heartless discrimination bred from fear and blindness. When passed, this bill would ensure that people like me do not end up homeless.

I would be lying if I said I was not sorely disappointed and somewhat disillusioned by the cold-heartedness of the Senator who blocked this bill. However, instead of dwelling on what I could not control, I focused on the feeling of satisfaction I gained from testifying in Olympia. I had put forth my best effort to make a change for the people who need it most. It was a feeling so satisfying that I cannot even explain it.

The TU was very knowledgeable about the system in Olympia. They partnered with me. They updated me with calls and emails with the details of the campaign. I felt like an important part of the process.

I look forward to contributing my efforts for this very important cause. **If you are or have been in a situation like mine, I would very much encourage you to let your voice be heard.**



Renters need to remind elected officials that we vote. Here, Washington tenants rally to save funding for Section 8 vouchers.

“Tenants Don’t Vote”

There is a nasty rumor circulated amongst some elected officials that renters don't vote, and that therefore, renter's issues don't need to be addressed. The Tenants Union needs your help in dispelling this rumor. Ensuring that your voter registration is current and taking the time to vote in each election is critical to achieving the kind of change we need.

Did you know you can vote at home? If you sign up to be a permanent absentee voter, all of your ballots will be mailed to you. The ballot simply needs to be postmarked on the day of the election (although some rules vary from county to county so be sure to familiarize yourself with your local rules). Many counties in Washington do all the voting by mail elections but in others, such as Pierce and King, you will need to sign up to receive the ballots by mail.

To register on-line and to get answers to related questions you can go to:

<http://www.secstate.wa.gov/elections/register.aspx>

Please note that forms and directions are available in Spanish, Chinese, Russian and several other languages. There is also detailed information for regaining the right to vote after a felony conviction.

If you don't have access to a computer, the Tenants Union can send you a paper voter registration form. Call Michele at 206-722-6848, ext. 114.

Victories for Voucher Tenants!

Tenants Union's Section 8 Tenants Organizing Project (STOP)

By Bette Reed and Emily Paddison



Bette Reed (pictured) is a board member of Puget Sound Alliance for Retired Americans and a resident in the Seattle Senior Housing Program. She is an active leader in STOP organizing and a Tenants Union member.

Emily Paddison has been a Community Organizer at the Tenants Union for five years. She works to support low income renters to win improvements in the Section 8 program and better accountability for landlords.

The Tenant's Union's Section 8 Tenant Organizing Project or STOP, has made amazing progress in its struggle to gain fair and impartial hearings for SHA tenants. Over the past several years the Tenants Union has heard a growing number of stories from individuals and families who have been terminated from the Section 8 voucher program at Seattle Housing Authority (SHA). The loss of a Section 8 voucher often results in homelessness. Tenants facing termination can have informal hearings which are supposed to provide them the opportunity to defend themselves against the loss of their housing to an impartial decision maker.

The vast number of residents approaching the TU coupled with horrific stories of unfair hearing experiences prompted the TU to request copies of the hearing transcripts under the Freedom of Information Act. For months members of STOP studied these transcripts covering six years of hearings. They discovered that in over 96% of the cases the hearing examiner decided in SHA's favor! This is an alarmingly disproportionate balance.

In many cases where residents provided documented proof that SHA was mistaken and that they were innocent of any violations, the examiner dismissed their evidence and terminated their voucher anyway. In others, they came to their hearing prepared to defend against one charge only to find that they were being accused of another, entirely different matter for which they were not prepared.

Armed with these case stories that clearly documented the serious problems with the hearing process, STOP presented their concerns to SHA. Initially, SHA general counsel and Section 8 staff denied that any problem existed at all. Next, backed by an army of concerned community organizations such as Puget Sound Sage, Hate Free Zone, Solid Ground, Communities against Rape and Abuse (CARA) and the Puget Sound Alliance of Retired Americans, STOP presented their case to SHA's Board of Commissioners. This got results.

Commission Chair David Bley and Executive Director Tom Tierney agreed to a series of four meetings with STOP, each meeting to address one of the four biggest issues impacting Section 8 voucher tenants in hearings: domestic violence; race, immigration and language; disabilities; evidence and fraud investigation. To date, the first three of these topics have been addressed.

As a result, SHA has taken the first step in assuring that hearings are conducted in an unbiased, legally grounded manner by assembling a panel of examiners with legal back grounds. They have agreed to almost all of the recommendations for program improvement brought by STOP tenants and experts from community organizations.

Having moved from an adversarial relationship, STOP is now working in conjunction with the housing authority to resolve the damaging effects of unjust voucher termination and win concrete improvements to the Section 8 voucher program. SHA has also agreed to make similar changes in the Low Income Housing Program.

The Tenants Union's STOP campaign thrives under the leadership of a dedicated and knowledgeable group of tenant leaders from the Section 8 and other low-income housing programs. SHA has also committed to increased accountability and long-term evaluation of Section 8 policies and hearing decisions in the form of a Community Review Committee. The committee will be composed of SHA board and staff, Section 8 tenants, and an array of invested community partners. The work of STOP has been crucial in the creation of fair and accountable practices and tangible policy improvements in one of the biggest landlords and largest affordable housing providers in the state of Washington.





Tenants Union members, staff, and allies met with New Orleans activists



A view from the levees of the lower 9th Ward. The TU witnessed the devastation that cleared this once dense neighborhood of its homes.

Policy Expanding Our

Building Grassroots Power

By Alouise Urness

Alouise Urness joined the Tenants Union staff in Spring 2007 after being a member and volunteer for many years. She brings her innate knowledge of organizing and her passion for the rights of renters to serve as the Benson East organizer and hotline counselor.

When the Tenants Union delegation to the PolicyLink conference sat down at one of the 160 large, round tables in the Sheraton grand ballroom in New Orleans, we filled it with a circle of grassroots leaders and organizers. Around us sat circles of people from all over the country, all colors and ages, representing many perspectives on justice and equity.

The conference was an amazing chance to learn about some of the work being done in New Orleans and around the country to improve people's access to good housing, healthcare, transportation and education. Unfortunately, it was rare to find discussions of low-income people's own work. I'll be honest—the mostly academic and professional perspectives sometimes made it hard to stay enthusiastic through the four or five 2-hour sessions we attended each day. But there were moments where the work of the people shone. I'd like to share a few.

For more information, visit the following:

- Policy Link (www.policylink.org)
- West Harlem Environmental Action (www.weact.org)
- Long Beach Alliance for Children (www.theimpactproject.org)
- Common Ground (www.commongroundrelief.org)
- Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (www.gnocdc.org)
- Miami Workers Center (www.theworkerscenter.org)

One of the first workshops held was “Making the Case: Using Research for Community-Driven Policy Change.” A few of the presenters really did make the case for their work by showing that their work was *with* low-income communities, not just about them.

We heard about low-income people of color completing a six-week training program in Environmental Health and Justice Leadership put on by West Harlem Environmental Action. The leaders trained by WE ACT have been key to city legislative victories and on-the-ground protections in the highly polluted northern end of Manhattan.

Then we learned that in Long Beach, California, mothers of children with asthma stand by the highways counting the hundreds of semis passing their school each hour, monitoring particulate matter from diesel rail traffic with sensitive equipment. These community members are the source of

data behind the Long Beach Alliance for Children with Asthma's campaign to stop the growth of freight-transport hubs across the fence from their neighborhood schoolyards.

All 1600 of the conferees were introduced to an upcoming film on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina over lunch on the first full day of the conference.

Trouble the Water was produced by luminaries like Danny



Many believe New Orleans Public Housing, still in fair shape even after Katrina, should still be used to house many homeless residents.



A New Orleans lower Ninth Ward home, ruined by Hurricane Katrina. The community is still struggling to rebuild.

Glover as well as the filmmakers who worked on *Fahrenheit 9/11*, but we also met the folks who really made the film possible. After Katrina struck, Kim and Scott walked around their neighborhood, New Orleans' Ninth Ward, with a camcorder. They then met up with the professional filmmakers after being evacuated. Kim shared how having to leave the city was a wake-up call for her. She said she had never realized how bad things were in the Ninth Ward before she had to go stay somewhere else. She doesn't want things just back to normal, she told us, now she knows it needs to be better.

All ten members of the TU delegation chose to attend "Turning the Tide: Affordable Housing and Gentrification" on the last morning of the conference. A panelist from the Miami Workers' Center, Sushma Sheth, gave a powerful presentation on their work fighting gentrification. As part of a campaign called Regional Equity for Neighborhoods and Tenants (RENT), residents demanded benefits from the development happening around them. A concrete benefit they won was control in the bidding and contracting for projects in their neighborhoods.

At this same workshop, a professor from MIT spoke about the need for a 'hard supply' of affordable housing. His point riled some at the TU table, and not because we think there's plenty of affordable housing. The professor, Xavier de Souza Briggs, seemed to dismiss Section 8 vouchers and those who value them when he contrasted increasing the supply of affordable housing with "too much reliance on vouchers."

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New Orleans' Right to Return to Public Housing

By Lynn Sereda

Lynn Sereda is a longtime political activist, Section 8 tenant in southeast Seattle, and leader in the Section 8 Tenants Organizing Project. She is a member and dedicated supporter of the Tenants Union.

One of the most meaningful experiences in our trip to New Orleans was getting to see firsthand the situation "on the ground" thanks to Dan, a New Orleans native and a volunteer with the Common Ground Collective. We were very privileged to ride in his minibus and hear from him the stories of people's struggles to recover from Katrina.

We witnessed the St. Bernard public housing complex, emptied of its residents and surrounded by chain-link fences with "No Trespassing" signs. The St. Bernard complex is in great shape; indeed public housing weathered the storm better than most structures. Now the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) want to demolish it, without guaranteeing its displaced residents the right to return.

Close-by, a couple hundred folks live in several blocks of tents, without housing two and a half years after Katrina.

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Equitable Development in

Touring New Orleans

By Jeri Gates

Jeri Gates is a Tenants Union member in the STOP campaign and recently served on the TU Board of Directors. She lives in SE Seattle and is making connections between the rights of low-income renters with anti-displacement organizing.

My personal eye opener came from observing the Hurricane Katrina Disaster that still exists today. As it turns out, the Big Easy isn't so easy for thousands of people who are currently left homeless, grieving, jobless and some maintaining low-paying jobs just to stay near their former pre-Katrina lives. It's a shame that many of them are without enough resources and are forced to live under the bridges in tents and barriers against the elements. The simple items of convenience that you or I take for granted are hard to come by. If you are unable to have hot meals, clean yourself up or get a good night's sleep, how can you function?

I cried many tears. I was angry that this could happen in the United States and furious that it did and that it was still happening—not to mention the toxic boxes that too few received to live in. Those who came back to nothing but fading or ill-promised assistance seem to hang on only because of their deep-rooted desire to reestablish themselves and their homes. The pride, determination and strength of these people, I can only imagine.

Even though I relate to most of the cultural experiences, since I share the same culture, I also relate to their pain. A lot of injustice goes on in other cities across the nation, some even in my own city of Seattle.

We all have a journey to travel, whether it is individually or together. Racial, gender, and social biases still block us from working together as human beings to find solutions to gentrification and other housing issues. I thank God for the committed groups and non-profit agencies in the cities that make change appear so much easier if we would only try.

I really appreciate the folks at Common Ground Relief—a small and powerful nonprofit organization which has never forgotten it's mission to tell the true story from the beginning to the end. I learned where the African American population really stands in the lower wards. They struggle and hope and organize for another chance at a new life in New Orleans. Common Ground showed me the real meaning of southern hospitality.

My impression of the people of New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward remains etched in my mind. They are strong-willed, have a great sense of community no matter how raw the situation, and are using survival skills that came from their histories of oppression and struggle. It made me look deeper within myself.



New Orleans' Right...

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This is called the Survivors Village and it is a self-managed, safe, and clean "home" to its residents, some of whom are the leading public housing activists in America. They have a saying, "as New Orleans goes, so goes the nation," meaning, if HUD succeeds in demolition of all public housing in NOLA, it will happen in cities all over the nation.

It was mind-boggling to see empty housing juxtaposed by folks living in tents. The latest news is that the city now wants Survivors Village to be removed from its site and relocated on a floating barge. Undoubtedly, this is because those with power and money want to make this injustice invisible to tourists and others.

There is a bill in Congress called the Gulf Coast Recovery Act (S. 1668). It contains several important tenant protections for NOLA residents in

housing units and allows displaced residents the right to return to them. This bill has been stalled in the Banking Committee for over a year, and we need to act now, before it is too late.

Please send a letter or make a phone call to Sen. Murray and Sen. Cantwell on behalf of this bill. For more information on the New Orleans Public Housing struggle, check out the website: www.survivorsvillage.com.

New Orleans

Reflections

By Tecla Catuna

Tecla Catuna is a Tenants Union member and organizer of the Benson East Tenants Association. She is vice president of the tenant organization that oversees the ownership and operation of their apartment homes in Kent. To learn more about the Benson East, contact Alouise at alouise@tenantsunion.org.

This article was translated from Russian by Marcela Pop.

What I had been hearing all along was that the PolicyLink conference was meant to be a movement for social change, equity, and freedom from bias and favoritism. With God's help I believe it is possible. People who unite and believe in their dreams—this is the future of this country.

Building Grassroots Power

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We discussed this troubling statement among ourselves, but soon had an opportunity to take this concern and our impressions of the conference further.

The TU's senior staff member, Michele Thomas, was invited to join the panel for the conference's final session, billed as the "Closing Town Hall: Claiming the Big Idea." On stage in that ballroom, Michele did what the TU often does: hold those in power accountable. At a conference as in many other settings, power lies in being heard and especially in deciding who gets heard. On behalf of the TU delegation, she advocated for the voices of more grassroots members in the conference sessions. Michele used the dismissal of Section 8 vouchers in that workshop as an example of people feeling talked about—and unheard—at the conference.

Dr. de Souza Briggs must have recognized himself in the critique—he sought us out later that evening to ask about it. A TU member and voucher holder clearly explained the concern and the MIT professor attempted to explain what he had meant to say. Again, the work of the people—in this case the STOP leaders—shone through.

During the conference people shared about the challenges, insights, and wisdom when striving to create social change and justice in this country.

I learned that in order to advocate for housing, we need to create networks with people not just from our own region but from all over the country.

I learned that the decisions we make today will either better or worsen our children's and grandchildren's lives.

And I learned that it's up to us.

As a tenant, I shared about the Benson East's tenant ownership structure and as well as our desire to help other tenants create similar models: tenant-controlled housing projects.

I was impressed by the number of people that took part in the conference. There were a total of 1600 people representing the arenas of transportation, housing, and health.

The Tenants Union delegation was made up of ten wonderful, compassionate, and kind people. I will always remember when we all sat down and shared how we felt after visiting the disaster area in New Orleans. There were tears in each person's eyes sitting at the dinner table. It was emotional and real. It reminded me that when disaster hits, we are so small in the face of nature and God. Hurricane Katrina affected people on many levels. People were left without family, children, and housing—left with nothing. While we are confronted with hardships and lack of housing for the low income people in Washington State, the situation is even worse in Louisiana.

Imagine wanting to go back home, but unable to return because your home was demolished.

I was once again impressed by Michele, our dear friend from the Tenants Union. She talked skillfully about the conference's merits and its lacks. She listened to our thoughts and ideas. She talked about Benson East, which drew attention from people who are interested in Section 8 project-based housing. I felt once again well represented by one of our greatest housing advocates—the Tenants Union of Washington State.

Please share 10% or more of your “economic stimulus” check with the Tenants Union!

You may have recently received an appeal from the Tenants Union to ask you to consider giving or pledging a share of President Bush’s economic stimulus package. We thank those who have generously given and pledged already! Donations sustain the hard work of the organization and ensure that we have the resources to fight the good fight. Throughout the 30 years of the Tenants Union’s lifetime, the collaboration of our members and allies have strengthened and sustained the critical organizing and services we provide:

- **Empowerment-based education services** to provide renters with information to protect their families, including the 1,000 renters we helped in the past year alone;
- **Legislative advocacy** to fight for laws like the Slumlord Accountability Act in 2005 and our ongoing work to outlaw discrimination based on a renter’s source of income;
- **Building-based and community organizing** to transform injustices into powerful victories, like the Benson East in Kent, where Section 8 tenants purchased their apartments and became the first tenant-owned complex in the Northwest and the Section 8 Tenants Organizing Project (STOP) where Section 8 renters are coming together to win fair and accountable housing authority rules and polices.

The Tenants Union will continue to lead the effort to win healthy, affordable, and dignified housing for all. But we need your help to continue this work. If you haven’t given yet, please consider pledging or giving 10% or more of your tax rebate today. Simply fill out the enclosed form and send it back in the envelope.

And if you the good fortune not to qualify for an economic stimulus rebate, please be as generous as you can be.

Join the TU at our Annual Membership meeting

**Thursday, May 22nd
6:30—8:30 PM**

**Yesler Terrace Community Center
917 East Yesler Way, Seattle, WA**

Elect Board members, hear tenants’ testimonies from conferences in New Orleans & D.C., celebrate organizing victories, and learn about upcoming Rental Housing Inspection Program legislation. Share your ideas! Our members shape key decisions at the Tenants Union!

Dinner with program

Call 206-722-6848 ext. 114 to RSVP

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