



## **Case Study 3.6: New Settlement's Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA) Report: Tipping the Scales in Bronx Housing Court, 2013**

### **Background on Organization and Issue**

Every day, about 2,000 tenants go through the doors of Bronx Housing Court. Few tenants understand the Housing Court process and even fewer (less than 10%) have legal representation to help them navigate it. Since more than 98% of landlords are represented by lawyers, this creates an uneven playing field. Not surprisingly, Bronx Housing Court issues about 40,000 warrants of eviction each year, the most of any borough. In response, New Settlement Apartments' Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA) launched a campaign to reform Housing Court to make it easier for tenants to navigate. CASA is made up of community members who work together to improve the living conditions in the neighborhood and maintain affordable housing through collective action.

**Below is a description of the CASA Housing Court Reform Research Project, based on the Participatory Action Research guiding framework (see Tools [2.1](#) and [2.2](#)).**

### **WHAT...**

#### **Were the Organizing Goals connected to this research?**

- *To document the experiences of tenants in Bronx Housing Court and the challenges they face.*
- *To evaluate judges in Bronx Housing Court.*
- *To develop skills and leadership of members.*
- *To build the base of members in our organization.*
- *To educate Housing Court personnel and elected officials about the challenges tenants face in Housing Court.*
- *To develop recommendations to make Housing Court a place for tenants to access justice.*

#### **Overall questions did CASA want to answer through their research?**

- What is it like to be a tenant in Housing Court?
- What are some of the challenges tenants face in Housing Court?
- How does having a lawyer impact the outcome of a tenant's case and their overall experience in Housing Court?
- How do individual judges run their courtroom in Bronx Housing Court and how does this affect tenants?
- How do tenants and landlord lawyers interact in Bronx Housing Court?

#### **Information did CASA need to collect to answer these research questions?**

- Relevant laws and regulations that govern Housing Court polices and personnel
- Primary data about tenants' experiences in Housing Court through surveys and focus groups
- Secondary data about the average tenant in Housing Court
- Court data on the number of cases, types of cases, number of evictions, etc
- Data and stories on the impact of flawed Housing Court polices



## WHY...

### Is this research useful or important to CASA?

- Internally: to develop the leadership of its members through their direct participation in the research; to strengthen their Housing Court Reform campaign by gathering data and creating a report that can support the campaign goals; to increase CASA membership; and allow CASA members to share their stories.
- Externally: to educate the public and elected officials about housing court; to get media attention towards the need for better court policies and resources for tenants; to put pressure on Court officials to improve policies; to pass legislation to reform Housing Court.

## WHO...

### Are the stakeholders in this issue?

- Bronx residents in Housing Court (most of whom are low-income women of color).

### Is CASA trying to influence?

- The Office of Court Administration, Chief Justice Lippmann, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Fern Fisher, Bronx Supervising Judge Jaya Madhavan and Bronx City and State elected officials.

## HOW...

### Did CASA gather information (what methods did they use)?

- **SURVEYS:** CASA collected surveys from over 1,000 Bronx residents in an interview-style format during early summer 2012. Most of the surveys were collected from tenants that were at Housing Court, but some of the surveys were collected at CASA events and meetings.
- **JUDGE OBSERVATIONS:** CASA members randomly chose a sample of five Resolution Part judges to observe three times in order to collect quantitative and qualitative data about what actually happens in courtrooms and to identify differences between various courtrooms.
- **FOCUS GROUPS:** CASA conducted three focus groups (a total of 25 tenants) to collect stories about what it is like to be a tenant in Housing Court, including interactions with judges, hallway deals, why tenants are in Housing Court and landlord harassment tactics.
- **POLICY DEVELOPMENT:** CASA partnered with academics, lawyers and housing advocates who served as advisors to CASA members' during their policy development stage. The advisors provided key insights into legal, legislative and political challenges and opportunities. This guidance enabled CASA members to make informed decisions and develop strong, comprehensive policy recommendations.

### Did research supported CASA's organizing efforts

- Since the research commenced, CASA's membership has increased and new leaders have emerged. Several members now have research expertise in analyzing power structures, drafting surveys, collecting surveys, conducting focus groups, and analyzing data. CASA is using the final report to meet with elected officials and Court staff and are already gaining traction on their



campaign goals. The overall research process and final report only helped to solidify CASA's position as a leader on Bronx Housing Court issues.

- In August of 2017, Mayor Bill de Blasio signed the Right to Counsel Bill into law, which allows low-income tenants universal access to representation in housing court, and was a recommendation in the report. CASA and the Right to Counsel Coalition, formed after the release of *Tipping the Scales*, will now focus on the enforcement of this bill, which will be implemented over the course of 5 years, by zip codes; the coverage will be universal by 2022.

Click [here](#) to read the report and read coverage of Right to Counsel [here](#).