



## Case Study 3.8: Stand for Tenant Safety, 2015

### Background on Coalition and Issue

The Stand for Tenant Safety (STS) Coalition is a group of tenants' rights and legal service organizations working with low-income communities in New York City on issues of construction in buildings occupied by tenants. Members of the coalition noticed that landlords were conducting gut renovations and other major renovation projects in occupied buildings, where many of the tenants lived in rent regulated units. Landlords were systematically using construction as a way to push tenants out of rent stabilized housing, pressuring tenants to take buyouts to make way for tenants that will pay higher rent.

The entity responsible for responding to tenants' complaints about construction is New York City's Department of Buildings' (DOB). The DOB had been slow and ineffective; tenants had a hard time navigating the DOB system and rarely got their problems solved by the DOB.

In order to learn more about the experiences of rent regulated tenants with this issue, the coalition wanted to collect information about the effects of long term construction on rent regulated tenants, and whether the resulting conditions constituted harassment. The coalition partnered with the Urban Justice Center's Community Development Project to conduct research about the experiences of rent regulated tenants in rent stabilized buildings.

The coalition produced the "Stand for Tenant Safety" report about their findings from the research, and used the report to push forward a package of legislative bills that would strengthen the NYC Department of Building's ability to address reckless construction in buildings.

**Below is a description of the Stand for Tenant Safety 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?

- Explore how major construction has impacted the health, safety, and well-being of tenants in rent-regulated New York City buildings.
- Document the extent to which major construction in rent stabilized buildings constituted harassment.
- Determine whether DOB's website, documents, and policies were accessible to tenants that were in need of assistance.
- Generate data that will support the passage of legislation to curtail tenant harassment through construction and improve oversight and customer service of Department of Buildings.

#### Overall questions did the coalition want to answer through their research?

- What is the experience of rent stabilized tenants undergoing major construction? Would any of these experiences constitute tenant harassment?
- During major construction, are landlords of rent stabilized tenants complying with current housing maintenance code and other applicable codes?



- Is the DOB adequately & effectively enforcing the laws that protect rent regulated tenants?
- Do these laws sufficiently protect rent regulated tenants in buildings undergoing extensive construction?
- Is the DOB website accessible to tenants (including those with limited English proficiency)

## WHY...

### Is this research useful or important for the coalition?

- The research supported a legislative package of 12 bills proposed by the coalition in order to implement systemic reforms within the DOB.

## WHO...

### Are the Stakeholders in this Issue?

- Rent regulated tenants experiencing construction as harassment.

### Was the coalition trying to influence?

- The New York City Council, Mayor's Office, and the Commissioner of the Department of Buildings.

## HOW...

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

- **Short survey:** The coalition collected about 150 surveys in English, Spanish, and Chinese in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Leaders and organizers targeted buildings owned by bad-acting landlords, and surveys were collected via door-to-door outreach and at events and meetings.
- **Interviews:** Leaders and organizers conducted 4 interviews in order to collect qualitative data about how construction has personally affected tenants' lives. The tenants were from the surveyed buildings.
- **Secondary data:** Researchers used the DOB website to look up complaints, violations, fines and permits for the surveyed buildings that were undergoing major construction.
- **Legislative review:** Legal partners reviewed the legal definition of harassment in order to determine whether construction constituted harassment. Research was also done on the current legal landscape in order to draft the legislative bill package.

### Did Research support STS's organizing efforts?

- The survey project provided opportunities to base build and educate community members. Leaders working with the survey developed outreach skills and a deepened understanding of what constitutes tenant harassment.
- The data collected through the research was written into a report, presented to the New York City Council and used in the coalition's organizing and advocacy for passage of the 12 bill legislative package.

### Did research impact policy change?

- Following the release of the report, the coalition partnered with NYC Council members to introduce 12 bills that would strengthen the NYC Department of Building's ability to address reckless construction, including:
  - [Int 0939-2015](#): This bill increases fines for landlords who do construction work without a permit;
  - [Int 0960-2015](#): This bill establishes a Construction Bill of Rights for tenants requiring landlords to inform tenants about the type of construction being done and how long it will take; any services



that may be affected (such as loss of hot water) and how the landlord will address those; and information about where tenants can call if they have any issues during construction;

- [Int 0924-2015](#): This bill requires the DOB to issue orders to correct underlying conditions in a building when tenants are ordered to vacate due to unsafe or unfit conditions; this curbs possible incentives for landlords to keep buildings unsafe as a method of forcefully removing tenants.
- By the end of 2017, the City Council passed all 12 of STS's bills and Mayor Bill de Blasio signed 11 of them into law. The bills significantly increase protections for tenants against landlord harassment, by increasing tenants' ability to take abusive landlords to court, as well as measures that will curb dangerous and unsafe construction.

Read the report [here](#), and coverage of legislative wins in [City Limits](#), [East Village Patch](#), and [Curbed New York](#).