

Tips for Organizing Your Manufactured Home Community

Unlike most homeowners, manufactured home buyers face all the new responsibilities of home ownership, and yet also carry the additional burden of rent for a lot and community rules.

Apartment tenants can quickly find a new place to live if there are problems with the landlord, but a manufactured homeowner does not have the same mobility. Moving a manufactured home is a serious expense, and finding a new park can be difficult.

For some manufactured home owners, what seemed a dream house can become a nightmare of broken rules and broken promises. Management may not always address problems when they arise, even when problems threaten a family's health and safety.

While many manufactured homeowners object to their situation, far fewer have actively taken steps to fix their problems and improve their community. While park management may quietly ignore complaints brought by individuals, it will more likely listen when one individual speaks for 30 rent-paying families that are unhappy with a situation. A tenants' community association can give residents a stronger, voice in negotiation.

Even in communities that have not experienced problems, starting a homeowners' and tenants' association can help to avoid problems in the future. An organization that is recognized by management helps open the channels of communication and allows residents to work together for the benefit of the whole community.

Remember, **there is strength in numbers!**

Following are tips for those who want to form one:

How to Begin: Meet Your Neighbors

There is no one particular way to organize a community. Every community is made up of unique individuals with unique problems and concerns. In some communities there will be more immediate problems, which may make organizing easier. In other communities, residents may live in fear of retaliation from management. These residents could require additional time to develop mutual trust.

- It is good, when starting out, to find out about any laws affecting manufactured homeowners and tenants. You should **know your rights** before you seek to organize your community. **Speak with your state**

representatives to find out if there is an agency that regulates the manufactured home industry in your area. Ask them if they can provide any information to you.

- Your state may have a manufactured homeowners association. Contact them to see if they can help you organize, or provide you with useful information.
- Get to know the people who live in your park. **Speak with your neighbors** when you meet them at the mailboxes. Invite them over to your house for coffee. Discuss problems or concerns you have experienced as a manufactured homeowner and ask them about any problems they've had.
- Often residents of a community will not be ready to start an organization. Sometimes a social event, or series of events, can help build the trust that is first necessary. **Arrange an event, such as a barbecue or fish fry**, to give neighbors an opportunity to meet and get to know each other. "[National Night Out](#)" is a great excuse to plan an event to meet your neighbors.
- Consider how to **advertise your event**. Can you create a flyer and distribute it house to house? Is there a central bulletin board? Maybe you would rather just speak with residents personally. One surefire way to get people to come is to advertise that you will provide refreshments.
- If you live in a multilingual community, and you speak only English, try to find someone in the local community who can translate your flyer and/or speak with non-English speaking residents.
- **Hold your event**. Maybe you will need to have a few social events before people loosen up and start talking. After your neighbors have become more comfortable with one another, you can take a moment during the event to speak about what you are trying to accomplish and why you believe it is needed in your community.

Getting Down to Business: Prepare and Hold a Meeting

Once you begin to know each other, you can arrange a meeting to formally discuss forming an organization. The key to a good meeting is preparation and more preparation. And maybe some fresh baked goods.

- **Create an agenda** for the meeting. It does not have to be too detailed, but should include everything you want to discuss. If possible, try to make the agenda available a few days before the meeting to allow for comments and/or additions. It is important to have a ready agenda because it shows

that you are serious about your cause and that you do not plan to waste anyone's time at your meeting.

- **Provide useful information.** Contact the state agency that oversees manufactured housing. Offer any information you have about state laws and the rights of manufactured homeowners and tenants.
- The night before your meeting, be sure to **remind everyone who said they would attend** by phoning or visiting them.
- **Prepare for the meeting.** Set up the meeting place for the number of people you expect to attend. Have a flip chart or erasable board and markers available. Be sure to have a sign up sheet and make sure that everyone who attends the meeting signs in. Have the agenda available, either as a handout or written where everyone can see it.
- Ask everyone who attends **to sign in** and give you contact information. Some people prefer to be reached by phone, others by email, and some by mail.
- **Keep your expectations reasonable.** Not every meeting will be well-attended. As long as there are three who are consistently interested in meeting and approaching your community's problems, you are in good shape.
- **Start on time.** You want your meeting participants to feel they are there for a reason. Late starts frustrate everyone who has made room in his or her schedule to attend.
- Make sure you have someone to **take meeting minutes**. If you have not have chosen a secretary, ask if anyone take notes at that particular meeting.
- **Begin each meeting with introductions.** Ask everyone to introduce him or herself and say why they have come to the meeting.
- **Review the agenda** and allow participants to comment or make additions.
- **Keep the meeting focused and open to participation.** It is likely the first time you all get together that people will want to gripe about their problems. It is important to allow everyone to explain their concerns, but be sure to always steer the meeting back to the agenda if an individual goes on for too long. It is okay to interrupt someone who is carrying on with his or her own personal problems and say, "this sounds like it might be a problem only you are having. Let's try to look at more general problems that we are all facing."

- **Involve everyone.** It is vital that meeting participants feel they are being heard and that your fledgling organization will truly represent them. Especially since many feel the opposite is true when it comes to speaking with park management.
- **Determine the time, date and location of a follow-up meeting.** This gives participants a feeling of continuity, and highlights the seriousness of your purpose.
- **Before closing the meeting, review any decisions that were reached or assignments made.** Try to make sure these are in the notes - this way, there is a record of what was decided and who would do what before the next meeting.
- **End on time.** This is common courtesy, and people are more inclined to attend the next meeting if they know that their time is respected.

Building a Membership Base: Develop an Issue

In the beginning, you may find that only a few people consistently come to your meetings. This isn't a problem. Not everyone wants to be an active participant. You only need a handful of dedicated individuals to make an organization work. After you've held a few meetings, and you know who the key players are, you can begin to look at ways to build your membership. One question to consider is "Why join?" That is, what does your organization offer that can persuade a member of your community to become involved? Often, the answer to this question lies in your ability to develop an issue that the organization can help resolve.

- What are some of the problems people have complained about? **Is there a problem that affects most everyone in the community?** How easily can the problem be resolved? These are questions you and your colleagues will want to consider. Sometimes what appear to be many different problems are really just the result of one singular problem.
- Some problems may easily be resolved. Sometimes it is just a matter of finding out who is responsible for the problem and requesting that they solve it. **A quick, easy "win" is the best advertisement for the value of your organization.**
- More often than not, there are a number of different problems that residents have complained about. Your organization's task is to **turn a person's specific problem into a community improvement that helps everyone.** Speeding cars may be a problem; getting management to install speed bumps is an improvement. Water collecting in a portion of the community is a problem; asking management to improve drainage is an improvement.

- **Determine a strategy for winning the issue and build a campaign.** Figure out who your allies are and how they can help you. Also determine who ultimately has the power to give you what you want. (For example, can the park manager take care of your drainage problem, or is it really a matter for the city utility service?) Then develop tactics that take your organization's strengths into account. Enlist the support of your neighbors.

Growing the Organization: Plan for the Future

When you first started your homeowners association, you were just a handful of concerned neighbors getting together for coffee and complaining about your situation. Now you have successfully fought to resolve a problem and have 20 community residents that you can count on to participate in the organization. Your next step is to formalize the organization and think toward the future.

- **Hold elections for the leadership positions** (usually these will be President, Vice-President, Secretary and, if necessary, Treasurer). Chances are you already know who the leaders are and everyone will agree.
- **Form a by-laws committee.** The members of this committee will write the formal by-laws of your association, which explain how elections will be held in the future, who can be members, how much an annual membership costs (if you should choose to charge for membership), and so on. The committee can meet separately at a future date and come back to the general meeting with draft by-laws and its recommendations. Having by-laws in place makes it possible to become a legal, non-profit entity and can allow you to register with your municipality, as well as apply for government and private foundation grants.
- Think to the future. **Consider the mission, goals and objectives of your organization.** The "mission" is the reason for the organization's existence. One element of your mission might be "to educate manufactured homeowners of their rights." The mission is your overall vision for the organization. "Goals" are specific accomplishments you seek to make. Think about what results you would like to see from activity by your organization. A goal might be "to have management evenly uphold the community rules." Finally, an "objective" is a specific circumstance for achieving a goal, such as "get management to install speed bumps to reduce speeding."
- Once you have formalized the organization and have a strategic plan, you can **begin to think beyond just your community.** Do any of the other manufactured home parks in your area have a homeowners and tenants association? Perhaps you could **coordinate with other communities to address issues of mutual concern.** Eventually you might even want to organize at the city level.

Organizing your manufactured home community is a commitment that will take time and energy. It also requires a sacrifice on the part of the organizers, who may be putting themselves at the risk of a retaliatory management. **Be sure you understand the laws in your state and the protections they afford you before you begin to organize.** State organizations may be able to help. Try to work in an open, non-confrontational manner. Management is not always the enemy, and sometimes you will find that you can work together to resolve your community's problems.

Finally, keep at it. Building an organization is a slow business. As long as you and a few other concerned residents remain active, your group can grow. There may be slow times where no one in the community is feeling particularly concerned about an issue or cares to participate in the organization. Don't get discouraged. You should be prepared to rally the troops at short notice, in case a need for action should quickly arise. Keep your administrative documents in order, particularly the meeting sign-up sheets or membership lists.

With a homeowners association made up of good leadership and democratic participation, you will find that you have the power to determine what kind of community you live in.