

Executive Summary

ENERGY EFFICIENCY IN LOW-INCOME RENTAL PROPERTIES: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGING TENANTS IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

February 2024



Yale
SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC
HEALTH

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NEW HAVEN



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Introduction

Engaging Tenants in Collective Action: Barriers and Opportunities

People who rent and have low incomes often struggle to pay their energy bills. Often, this is because their homes are not energy efficient. Finding ways to ensure low-income rental housing is energy efficient is critical, particularly when landlords don't pay utility bills. Moreover, it is an issue that affects our climate and impedes efforts toward racial and economic equity, as well as health and environmental justice.

The goal of the Tenant Energy Advocacy (TEA) Project is to better understand low-income tenants' experiences with energy expenses, energy efficiency, and the potential for collective action around energy issues. TEA works closely with tenants including a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to meet our goals.



ADVOCACY POINT

We need to support tenant involvement in collective action to advocate for better regulations and support for energy-efficient homes.

More About Our Study

Engaging Tenants in Collective Action: Barriers and Opportunities

To gain insight into this critical issue, student researchers at the Yale School of Public Health conducted 12 semi-structured focus groups with 41 tenants and five landlords from New Haven, CT, and six individual interviews with activists engaged in energy and housing issues in the state. In addition to the featured focus groups and interviews, the study included the installation of air quality monitors in the homes of tenant participants.

This report notes barriers identified, and also shares opportunities to improve outcomes for all members of our communities.

Visit our [website](#) for more detailed information on the TEA study.



Insights From Tenants

ENERGY BILLS ARE TOO HIGH.

Low-income tenants in New Haven struggle to afford energy bills. This has worsened due to rising rent and energy costs. To pay bills and avoid disconnection, people cut back on essentials, use food pantries, borrow money from friends or family. Some live without light or heat.

ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS ARE ESSENTIAL BUT OFTEN INSUFFICIENT.

Challenges include eligibility, cumbersome applications, and limited funds. Some tenants, even with help, struggle to pay their share. Others are ineligible due to income requirements.



“

It is difficult to sometimes pay the electric bill on time because its cost is so high and then I have to think about the other bills that comes first like food and like rent. Those are priorities.”

“In so many ways, you’re really not catching up because you have this bill, but then you have a bill that’s already been processed for the following month. So you can be paying that bill for the following month, and you’re still at that \$1,000 mark. So it’s like you’re never paying catch up.”

TENANTS' HOMES ARE NOT ENERGY EFFICIENT.

Tenants know that their homes are not energy efficient. They use strategies like putting plastic over windows for insulation and minimizing appliance use. Some have to set their thermostats very high, leave stoves on, or boil water to stay warm. Landlords often neglect energy efficiency and basic repairs; they are often unresponsive when tenants contact them to report problems. Even when landlords are responsive about basic repairs, it is harder to get them to make larger upgrades or obtain energy-efficient appliances.

“

I do the plastic. The heat don't be on when I'm at work. I don't know what else, you know... if I have the heat off, I can feel the cold is coming through the vents... And that's when I turn the heat on, like I said, but just to get the coldness out... But don't have it all through the night because the bill gets so expensive.”

“Sometimes I have to put my oven on, I don't like doing it. But I have to keep myself warm...”



TENANTS HAVE VARIED EXPERIENCES WITH ENERGY EFFICIENCY PROGRAMS.

Some tenants have heard of energy efficiency programs but face application barriers and are skeptical about landlord interest.



“

I just wish there was more, you know, flyers or more communication on stuff like that, to also notify people to let people know, like me, I'm on Section Eight, that, you know, can I go and get this done? You know, have, you know, have them to come to my apartment and weatherize the house? Let me know what's what.”

“

I did sign up one year to Community Action for weatherization, but never heard anything from them... They did come, you know, gave me plastic and stuff. But that was only the one time, other than that. That wasn't helpful at all.”

“Coordinating times that I would be home for it and all that stuff... It's a three- family house, though we all got to be, you know, someone's coming into your house, you gotta be there and stuff like that.”

“I don't know if they'll be supportive... because they [landlords] don't really fix anything.”

POSSIBILITIES FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

Tenants are interested in collective action but face barriers like lack of knowledge, fear of upsetting landlords, and time constraints. Elderly tenants face additional challenges in participating in collective action. Communities are fragmented, hindering collective organizing efforts. Tenants lack confidence that change will happen; some focus on finding new living arrangements rather than improving current conditions.

“

We approach them together. All of us. So that's... That's basically the only way to get things done. See, one individually ain't gonna do it.”

“I'm just, you know, trying to save my money so I could, you know, find somewhere else... I'm just kind of over it now at this point.”

“I try to get people together to have like a general meeting. And they think, oh, no, we don't want to get him, the landlord, mad.”

INSIGHTS FROM SMALL-SCALE LANDLORDS

It is important to acknowledge that while many tenants told us about their landlords' lack of support for energy efficiency, some landlords are genuinely interested in making their properties more energy efficient. However, small-scale landlords we spoke to who are interested in this face barriers like lack of information, funding uncertainties, and difficulties navigating programs.

“

[T]he availability of financing or other incentives to help make it much more straightforward for those landlords, I think, is important.”

“They could advertise, let people know. Because they really need it most. A lot of people, really most people, need it.”

“Even though all those materials are out there on the web. Yes, it’s a black hole, or a green hole.”

INSIGHTS FROM ACTIVISTS

Activists recommend organizing accessible events to bring tenants together, focusing on immediate needs, and addressing structural issues perpetuating energy injustices.

“Making it a community event and then making the education component kind of secondary and a little smaller, I think, is important, right? Because I’m sorry, no one wants to spend their Saturday going to some presentation about something.”

“I see the commodification of housing as this key site where the commodification of human life itself intersects with people’s real immediate, tangible needs and the tangible conditions that they’re facing in the day-to-day.”

Recommendations

Tenants and their allies should consider practices that ensure energy efficient, affordable housing for all members of our communities. Our recommendations are specific to the state of Connecticut, but many will likely be relevant in other states.



Prioritize energy affordability. Learn more about energy assistance programs in your area. Share what you learn with individuals and families who need help paying their energy bills



Prioritize access. Advocate for resources about energy assistance in English, Spanish, and other languages relevant to your community.



Prioritize engagement. Build relationships with and work alongside housing justice groups, including tenant unions, as well as, climate change activists. Show up for them and ask them to show up for you!



WAYS TO ORGANIZE YOUR COMMUNITY

Ask people what is most important for them.

1. Build your community by meeting your neighbors.
2. Provide food and ensure accessible language supports so that everyone feels welcomed.
3. Offer information about energy assistance and efficiency.
4. Share examples where collective action resulted in change.
5. Suggest different ways to get involved including contacting legislators, writing testimony, or testifying at hearings, in-person or virtually. Be sure to provide your audience with templates for support for specific bills.

Resources

Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA): This statutorily-charged quasi-judicial agency ensures Connecticut's investor-owned utilities, including the state's electric, natural gas, water, and telecommunications companies, provide safe, clean, reliable, and affordable utility service and infrastructure. Visit their website for related news, resources, and to file a complaint about a utility service.

Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection Weatherization Assistance Program: The U.S. Department of Energy funds the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) and assists low-income persons in minimizing energy-related costs and fuel usage in their homes through retrofits and home improvement measures. Visit the website for a breakdown of the WAP in Connecticut, including eligibility criteria, how to apply, and other options for those who do not meet the criteria.

Connecticut Energy Assistance Program (CEAP): Through this program, Connecticut residents can apply for energy assistance funds and access information on affordable utility payment programs. The program is administered by Connecticut's Department of Social Services in partnership with local Community Action Agencies throughout the state.

Connecticut Fair Housing Center: The mission of the Connecticut Fair Housing Center is to ensure that all people have equal access to housing opportunities in Connecticut, free from discrimination. In support of its mission as a nonprofit entity, the Center conducts statewide education and outreach to ensure residents understand their fair housing rights and works with state and local governments, housing professionals, and others to promote compliance with federal and state fair housing laws.

Resources

Connecticut Tenants Union (CTTU): The union brings together tenants, tenant unions, and tenant associations from across the state to demand stronger rights for tenants; an end to displacement, landlord harassment, and eviction.

Good Cause Eviction Protections: Learn more about the efforts of the Connecticut Fair Housing Center to expand good cause eviction protections in Connecticut.

Home Energy Solutions – Income Eligible (HES-IE): This program provides valuable weatherization measures to help renters and homeowners reduce their energy bills by making their homes more energy efficient.

I Heart My Home: Through this cost-free, one-stop shop, residential renters, owner-occupants, and landlords get counseling on how to make their buildings more energy-efficient and deploy clean energy and sustainability practices at those properties to ensure a transition to an inclusive, equitable energy future.

Operation Fuel: This nonprofit organization provides emergency assistance to Connecticut residents struggling to pay utility bills and advocate for energy affordability. Visit their website to apply for assistance, to access information on energy affordability, and to review research reports, including maps comparing energy affordability by state.

www.teaproject.info: Access resources and briefs summarizing our learnings around barriers to energy equity and ways to advocate for energy affordability and efficiency, including information on state-based energy efficiency programs.

Acknowledgements

Community Advisory Board (CAB): Doreen Abubakar, Kathy Fay, Kenneth Gillingham, Susan Harris, Alycia Jenkins, Steve Latham, Jenell Lawson, Paula Panzarella, Bruni Pizarro, Tiffany Robinson, Tenaya Taylor, Patricia Tully, Mike Uhl, Bridgett Williamson, Mina Williamson, Darlene Yule

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Partner Organizations: Neighborhood Housing Services of New Haven, Junta for Progressive Action, Community Action Agency of New Haven (CAANH)

This project is supported by funding from the SNF Fund for the Integration of Theory and Practice and the Yale Planetary Solutions Project. Thanks to students from the Yale School of Public Health, Clinic in Climate Justice, Law, and Public Health, who supported the conduct of the Tenant Energy Advocacy study and the research, writing, design, and editing of this report.



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The TEA Project can help with materials, templates, and ideas! Stay connected.

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