

Organizing can give tenants power to effect change

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A renter doesn't generally hold much sway with a landlord or

management company, but when tenants organize, their power can be formidable.

Case in point: Two renters in a southern city organized a tenant union for the purpose of expelling a property management company with a history of mistreating its tenants. They achieved their goal when residents en masse attended a city council committee hearing, told stories of the company's egregious behavior, and pushed for termination of the city's contract with the company.

That infuriated the housing director, who proceeded to "treat our residents in public the way she treats them in private meetings," a tenant union spokesperson said. The plan worked: The city's contract with the management company was canceled four days after the meeting.

"It is often the knee-jerk reaction to assume that [fundamental change](#) has to come from the top," said Jamila Michener, associate professor in the Department of Government in the College of Arts and Sciences and senior associate dean of public engagement in the Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy.

"And to see how people were changing their own lives," Michener said, "and doing it through organizing, is just inspiring."

Michener, who has spent years researching tenant organizing, asserts that tenants acting collectively can wield power in "Racism, Power, And Health Equity: The Case Of Tenant Organizing," which [published](#) Oct. 2 in *Health Affairs*.

In her paper, Michener—recently named the inaugural director of Cornell's Center for Racial Justice and Equitable Futures—examines health through the lens of housing, and demonstrates how people within racially and economically marginalized communities can, through

organizing, build [political power](#) in response to poor and dangerous living conditions.

"It can feel like these families are so helpless and we need [government agencies](#) and [political leaders](#) to intervene in order for anything to be changed," Michener said. "That's not untrue, but one thing that was striking to me was that tenants, when they work collectively, can actually get an immediate resolution to a direct problem."

Michener's research is at the intersection of health, housing and politics—which are all related, she said.

"Housing and health are what I call 'least common denominators,'" she said. "Because if we don't have someplace to live that doesn't make us sick, there's very little else that we can sustain."

While sitting in on housing court proceedings several years ago, conducting research on civil legal inequality, Michener's interest in the power of tenant organizing was piqued.

She had spent weeks watching well-lawyered landlords win case after case over tenants—overwhelmingly people of color. One day outside of a New York City courtroom, she came across a tenant organization that had set up a table in the hallway.

"They were handing out information and inviting people to come and learn more about how they could fight for their rights," Michener said. "They're coming into these places where people are experiencing a lot of pain and injustice, and they're trying to turn that pain into power. And I was intrigued by that."

Michener interviewed 79 tenants for her research, which appears in *Health Affairs'* October issue, dedicated to "Tackling Structural Racism

in Health." Michener is also scheduled to participate in *Health Affairs'* online panel discussion devoted to racism and health, on Oct. 3.

She chose tenants across two critical dimensions: geography and race. Interviewees hailed from 25 states, from large metro areas and rural farm country. Interviewees were 50% white, 40% Black, 6% Asian, 3% Latino and 1% mixed race.

Michener used information gleaned from the interviewees to illustrate that it's possible for organized tenants to wield power in ways that help advance [health equity](#) in the face of structural racism.

"One of the things I've really enjoyed about studying tenant organizing is that it helps me to see the way that people are pushing back against otherwise daunting systems," said Michener, the author of "Fragmented Democracy: Medicaid, Federalism, and Unequal Politics," winner of the 2019 Virginia Gray Best Book Award from the American Political Science Association.

"It gives me hope," she said. "When you focus on how people can build and exercise power, that's part of the path to solutions."

More information: Jamila Michener, Racism, Power, And Health Equity: The Case Of Tenant Organizing, *Health Affairs* (2023). [DOI: 10.1377/hlthaff.2023.00509](https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2023.00509)

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