



# Community Alliance of Tenants Strategic Plan

*2022-2025*

Developed by



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# Introduction

Oregon renters face unprecedented challenges. Over the past two years, a global pandemic disproportionately impacted low-income communities and renters' financial, physical, and emotional security. Ongoing racial violence and police brutality, as well as the uncertainty in the aftermath, further encroached on this sense of security. At the same time, a historic heatwave hit the state, threatening the lives of low-income tenants without access to cooling, and wildfires displaced hundreds of Oregonians.

The pandemic continues to have an impact on CAT members, whether they are dealing with rent debt or ongoing struggles as new variants are on the rise. While some localities took action early on, both state and local protections for renters are quickly ending and the Oregon Emergency Rental Assistance Program is closing its application period once again. It is critical that CAT and other like-minded organizations fill this gap in pushing for sustained assistance for those facing housing insecurity.

The 2022 Oregon Legislative Session did little if anything to renew temporary renter protections and renters are feeling increasingly unheard by their leaders. As Oregon tenants face overwhelming anxiety and uncertainty over their future, the Community Alliance of Tenants is ready to chart a path forward.

Between October and December of 2021, Praxis conducted or helped to organize 21 virtual focus groups for Oregon tenants on behalf of CAT. The focus groups consisted of anywhere from 3-24 tenants each, with a total of over 150 tenant participants. The focus groups included county-specific groups across seven major Oregon counties. We also held five culturally-specific focus groups for Black Tenants, Asian Tenants, Latinx Tenants, Pacific Islander Tenants, and Indigenous Tenants. The majority of the focus groups took place in English, but there were language-specific focus groups offered in Spanish, Vietnamese, Swahili, Amharic, Tigrinya, and Oromo. Additionally, we held a focus group for student tenants, public housing tenants, CAT members only, and any Oregon tenants.

Tenants were asked about their previous involvement with CAT, their needs as well as the needs of their communities, the impact the pandemic had on their lives and living situations, and specific policy priorities for CAT's focus. Additionally, the non-English focus groups were asked specific questions about their experiences, the adequacy of resources available in their languages, and what additional barriers they face or needs they may have. The responses we heard informed the work of this strategic plan and the data is available at the end of this document.

Over the past three years, the Community Alliance of Tenants has undergone significant changes as an organization. The 2018-2021 Strategic Plan emphasized a focus on infrastructure that would allow the organization to serve more tenants, grow as a statewide

organization, and be seen as the face of tenant power. This plan built the Tenant Power House, held up by the pillars of tenant education and tenant power, and topped off by tenant organizing and tenant advocacy. The goals and objectives outlined three years ago largely focus on sustaining services and responding to a crisis. Taking into account the several setbacks and transition periods the organization has undergone in the past three years, CAT has made significant progress towards the goals previously outlined.

As CAT looks ahead to the next three years, it has become clear that the focus going forward should be growth, in every sense of the word. While the number of staff has grown significantly over the past year, the organizational structure that guides the work they do has room for development. The membership has increased in certain target areas, but growing the voice they have and the statewide reach of the organization is vital to ensuring that membership is well served. The existing programs have been well-developed. Now it's time to grow the capacity and service areas to ensure tenants who need the resources CAT provides understand they exist and are able to access them. The policies and laws that dictate tenant/landlord relations and quality of life are being written without tenants in the room. That must change in order to achieve a housing policy that is human-centered, not merely sustaining a system of profit.

In short, this next phase of CAT's existence is about a transition from sustaining services, hiring staff, and responding to the effects of one housing crisis after another, into an organization that is growing program services, reaching and actively engaging members in regions that are currently underrepresented in the organization, and seeking to reshape the housing policy landscape.

This growth is not represented by a structure or building. It is better understood as a tree - longstanding and deeply rooted, but still attempting to branch out and grow even taller. It's rooted in the experiences of Oregon tenants, everything stemming from their needs and direction. Through those roots, tenants find resources and power in education, engaging them further as members as they branch off to receive services, engage with organizers, participate in advocacy, and volunteer themselves. Just as the water in the soil eventually turns into the oxygen a tree creates, so do the members themselves truly become the organization that works for them.

## Overall Goals & Objectives

Tenants who participated in the CAT Focus Groups expressed a wide range of needs and goals, most of which were about making tenant education materials more widely available and accessible in a number of ways and advocating for major systemic changes in housing policy. Meeting the needs expressed requires **a broad, statewide, public profile** to build publicity around these programs and grow the organization's membership. It also means **expanding the reach and capacity of the existing Tenant Education programs** to accommodate a growing need across the state. Finally, it means advocating for statewide, systemic changes to housing policy, which will require a clear **internal structure for statewide policy advocacy**.

### *Main Goals*

- Broadening the public profile and reach of the organization
- Expanding CAT Membership and Tenant Power through Tenant education programs
- Building a clear structure within the organization for tenant organizing and policy advocacy
- Demonstrate our commitment to race, gender and language justice.

### **Broadening Public Profile**

It is clear that the organization must expand its public profile over the next three years to ensure tenants are not only aware of the organization but are actively engaging in the programs that exist. In order to reach a broader audience of tenants for education and mobilization purposes, CAT itself must have a stronger emphasis on building a public profile. This means specifically targeting counties with low membership and low member engagement for public relations opportunities, community outreach, and partnerships. In order to accomplish this goal, we have outlined a few specific objectives:

1. Taking a **proactive approach to Public Relations**, whether that means creating a dedicated position for public relations or making it a top priority of current communications staff, CAT must present itself as a source through which reporters directly communicate with tenants. This means proactively pitching stories to reporters, maintaining relationships, and recruiting and training tenants to share their stories.
2. Creating and maintaining **relationships with local publications in targeted regions outside the Portland Metro area** to increase the visibility of the organization.
3. **Participating in and hosting local events** (fairs, expos, college events, etc.) in targeted regions to distribute educational materials and build membership in those regions.

4. Identifying regions with low membership engagement and **building partnerships with local community organizations** (housing authorities, culturally specific organizations, local high schools, block parties, local governments, etc.) to host Renters Rights Workshops and advertise the hotline on partner websites and social media channels.

### **Expanding the Reach & Capacity of Tenant Education**

Given the overwhelming need expressed for tenant education resources, it is clear that the primary way new tenants will get involved with CAT is through education programs and resources they are able to access. As we work to publicize the organization and the resources it offers, a key priority will be to expand the reach of these programs and increase capacity to accommodate a higher volume of tenants utilizing them. As more tenants become involved with CAT through the education department, systems must be put into place to help these tenants easily become members, such as a new staffer whose responsibility it is to be a liaison between the two departments. With such a process, the expansion of Tenant Education will contribute to the overall goal of increasing membership and active member participation in CAT.

Most of the tenant participants in the CAT Focus Groups, especially outside Portland, had little or no previous interaction with CAT before the focus groups. Even among those who had interacted with CAT previously or had heard of CAT and what they do, **suggestions for educating and empowering tenants were describing programs that already exist within CAT.**

Specifically, the Renters Rights Workshops and Renters Rights Hotline were praised by those in groups that had used them, even describing the profound impact they had on the renter's situation. However, the need to promote and expand these programs is evident in the responses from tenants who were asking for resources or programs that already exist. The organization has made statewide expansion a priority in the last three years, which included hiring more organizers in regions outside the Portland Metro area. The next step in this statewide expansion needs to be expanding the reach and capacity of CAT's strongest education programs for tenants. This includes:

- **Expanding the hotline hours**, especially live hours, with the use of a switchboard, and advertising the hotline across platforms and through partners.
- **Increasing the frequency and regularity of Renters Rights Workshops**, both virtual and in-person as is possible according to public health guidelines.
- **Improving CAT's status as a source** of reliable and up-to-date materials about tenant rights.
- **Coordinating with regional partners** to hold Renters Rights Workshop in regions with low membership or low involvement.
- Developing **additional programs** to expand tenant access to legal resources and printed materials.

## **A Structure for Policy Advocacy**

There was no limit on the ideas for systemic widespread changes needed for housing policy on a statewide level expressed by tenants we spoke to as part of the Focus Groups. Whether it was about habitability requirements, accountability for landlords, rent control, affordable housing options, or even requirements on education tenants receive about their rights prior to signing a lease, participants made it clear that they are looking to CAT to be a leader in advocating for tenants rights, especially on the state level.

Additionally, CAT's advocacy efforts during the pandemic have indicated member interest in continued efforts for change among current members. Over the past two years, CAT has started to build out a structure for grassroots advocacy, mobilizing tenants to contact their representatives or the Governor, signing petitions, and showing support at press conferences. Most of these actions have been in reaction to proposals put forward by others. In order to proactively advocate for legislation that helps to change the housing system in Oregon, CAT needs to solidify an internal structure that facilitates that process and allows the organization to be a leader in these efforts. This means:

- **Hiring a lobbyist** to advocate for pro-active legislation in the legislature, convene coalition partners, and secure legislative sponsors.
- **Restructuring the Advocacy department** to primarily focus on policy advocacy while clarifying the role of the Organizing department for tenant advocate work.
- Formalizing and expanding the role of the **Policy Committee** lead person to work in tandem with a lobbyist.
- Complementing the work of the **CAT Action Fund** as it grows and works towards supporting renters running for office.

## Recommended changes to the Housing and Organizing department.

Advocacy cannot happen without a strongly coordinated organizing effort but the skill set for these objectives is not always in the same person. For that reason, CAT will seek both staff members with expertise in housing policy and advocacy strategies and staff members with expertise in organizing and movement building.

### **The Challenge: Political Dynamics vs. Tenant Realities**

CAT leadership, staff, and members have all expressed frustration at times with incremental or piecemeal approaches to housing policy and tenant protections in Oregon. Even as the recent years have seen significant policy reforms including an annual cap on rent increases, eviction moratoriums and/or rent relief for those impacted by COVID-19, and hundreds of millions of dollars invested in housing solutions, CAT has faced pushback from members and Oregon tenants about the inadequacy or shortcomings of these approaches. As the only statewide advocacy organization that provides a direct voice for tenants, CAT faces the unique challenge of pursuing achievable policy victories, while also remaining authentic to the desires and perspectives of the people it works to represent in the policymaking process.

Recent successes in tenant protection and housing policies have been driven by a political dynamic of engaged leadership in the legislature and Governor's office. This has created space for priorities and initiatives that had languished for years but has also placed CAT in a challenging dynamic. With policies being driven by these elected leaders and key political allies, they are always predetermined by what those leaders and allies consider to be politically viable. Efforts at more dramatic or transformative reforms have little currency when the key champions for tenant and housing policies dictate the terms of what is possible in the legislature.

For instance, when the Oregon Legislature passed an extension of the eviction moratorium during the regular 2021 legislative session, CAT leaders were informed this was the last action the Legislature would take to help those facing back rent and evictions. Recognizing that many tenants were facing delays in receiving rental assistance and that others had not applied for assistance, CAT led the conversation about how these reforms were inadequate to address the needs of renters. Using strategically positioned public pressure, CAT was able to force open a conversation about an additional special session to extend the moratorium and provide additional assistance resources. That resulted in the December 2021 special session to do just that: something CAT had been told was not possible just six months earlier.

### **Tenant-Centered Housing Policy**

CAT's position as an authentically engaged grassroots organization working with and on behalf of tenants provides it a unique vantage point to seek out transformative change for tenants in



housing policy. Housing policy at the state and local level continues to be dominated by a focus on creating the right profit incentives to spur housing development. In contrast to framing housing policy around the right to a return on investment, CAT is well-positioned to frame policy on ensuring adequate and affordable housing for everyone.

A human-centered framing of housing policy, though aspirational, can offer CAT a critical and distinct position in state advocacy conversations. It allows CAT and its members to bring conversations back to those most impacted by decisions and the real human cost of inadequate housing policies. It also opens the door to new conversations and new possibilities that are unseen when policymaking is rooted in what is the politically palatable or expedient solution. Keeping this frame, while also working on tactical gains presented by legislative champions and allies, will take intentionality and effort. But it also offers the potential for transformative change for the betterment of CAT's membership and the state as a whole.

To support a new framing of housing policy, CAT should explore specific initiatives through a community-based policy-making framework to provide an authentic representation of the perspectives and priorities of its members. Areas that were frequently identified by tenants during the CAT Focus Groups include:

- The rising prices of rental housing and lack of affordable housing.
- Perceptions that landlords regularly violate the rights of tenants.
- A greater range of subsidized housing options for tenants.
- Formalizing and strengthening the powers and protections for Tenant Unions

Based on the information gleaned in this strategic planning process and an initial review of human-centered housing policies, potential areas worth exploring include:

- Policies and metrics that enshrine a basic right to housing for all Oregonians. This should contest framing housing as a matter primarily of market profitability or economic activity.
- Policies to provide rent debt relief and end the cycle of economic insecurity that leads to eviction and other forms of housing instability.
- Policies that create stronger rental and eviction protections, as well as longer-term leasing agreements, to prevent new tenancies from being used to increase rental rates.
- Policies that increase inspections, habitability standards, and other ways for tenants to ensure safe and amenable living conditions.
- Policies that increase housing inventory, including public and nonprofit ownership, to decrease housing scarcity and associated rises in rental prices.

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- Aligning tax and fiscal incentives to encourage homeowners to place housing into long-term, affordable rental agreements.
- Policies that provide for housing dignity.
- Policies that ensure that publicly subsidized affordable housing is truly affordable.

## Existing & Potential Areas of Program Service

The primary way a tenant is likely to engage with the Community Alliance of Tenants for the first time is through a service program, particularly an education program, that helps them in some way better understand or defend their rights. From that point, they may be referred to a Tenant Organizer or asked to participate in grassroots advocacy efforts. This makes them active members of the organization and allows them to be activated for further purposes, including advocacy or organizational decision making. Expanding membership overall means expanding existing programs, creating new programs to meet the needs of tenants, and even clarifying the roles of the different departments to ensure they are working in tandem to meet those goals.

### Expansion of Existing Program Service Areas

At this point, CAT has several programs running through the Education Department, both independent and in partnership with other community organizations. However, many of these programs are informal and are not as well understood outside of the Education Department. Given that educational programs are likely to be the pipeline through which new members enter the organization, these programs need to be solidified and expanded to reach tenants statewide.

The primary programs for expansion include the **Renters Rights Hotline** and Renters Rights Workshops. Right now, the hotline hours are limited and the process usually involves referring callers from volunteers manning the lines to Tenant Education Specialists. Live hotline hours are rare due to the current capacity of the program. In order to advertise this service statewide, we need to expand both the volunteer capacity and the number of hotline specialists answering questions.

There is a potential opportunity to **partner with local governments to acquire additional funding needed to expand the program**. If this capacity is broadly expanded, the service can be advertised widely as a process for tenants to get instant answers to questions, connected with a program within CAT (like TPT or Rent Assistance) or connected with a local Tenant Organizer to work with them directly. Volunteers would be trained to answer basic questions and refer to a specialist or organizer for more complicated situations, and all callers would be placed in an automated email list to receive updates from CAT asking them to become members. This expansion could be through the implementation of a new process using a switchboard to reach volunteers or Tenant Organizers on call.

**Renters' Rights Workshops** are also in need of expansion and formalization. Currently, these have happened based on partner availability or community need. Advertising a regular time where tenants can get answers to their questions, both online and in person, may even alleviate some of the more basic traffic to the hotline. These workshops should also be targeted towards regions where CAT is currently lacking a significant presence and attendees should also be placed in an automated email list to receive updates from CAT asking them to sign up as members.

### *Objectives for the Education Department*

Over the next three years, CAT should work towards expanding hotline hours to be available 7 days a week, at least 12 hours a day, and build out an ongoing statewide advertising program for this service. This process will be intentionally slow to give the organization time to work out new systems so that it may be that only by the end of the three year period has the program reached this capacity. It is critical that the organization not advertise the service overwhelmingly until it is at a point where it can sustain an increased volume of calls.

Additionally, over the next three years, Renters Rights Workshops should be scheduled for three times a month, including regional-specific, renter-specific, and general renters introductory workshops. A secondary goal of these programs, after getting renters connected to the information and resources they need is to get them signed up as members so they are able to access future resources and engage in advocacy efforts.

### **Potential Additional Program Service**

While the Education Department increases capacity to bring tenants into the organization as they learn their rights, Tenant Organizing needs formal programs for tenants to defend their rights. While organizers currently provide resources and help to tenants in an informal way, there are several needs expressed during the focus groups that can become formal programs.

While the Tenant Protection Talks (TPT) program currently does include funding for legal help for tenants, it is rarely utilized and meant for a subset of renters. Tenants identified legal help as a major need, however, the majority of issues were minor infractions that tenants were unable to hold the landlord accountable for. Even a simple letter on official letterhead from a law office can help to hold landlords accountable to legal provisions and usually stop these infractions and ensuing harassment. CAT already has resources to help draft letters to landlords, but applying this concept, these letters could come on either CAT letterhead or the official letterhead of a lawyer volunteering their time.

### *Objectives for the Organizing Department*

Over the next three years, CAT should work to recruit a base of law offices willing to volunteer their time simply to put cease and desist letters on official letterhead. CAT should also work to secure broader funding to pay for additional legal consultation these tenants may need, whether that is through a hired in-house lawyer or through more local partnerships. This should ideally include 2-3 law firms per major county or region. During this time, CAT should also test a pilot program that allows Tenant Organizers to work with tenants to draft letters to their landlords about minor infractions and put them on CAT letterhead in an effort to produce a similar result.

The leadership development program started in the last strategic plan should be offered regularly and the content enhanced. Additionally the organizing team should grow when there is potential for new regions to serve with tenant education contracts.

### **Tenant Organizing versus Policy Advocacy**

The lines separating the Organizing and Advocacy departments have been incredibly blurred and for understandable reasons. Tenant Organizers are advocates for tenants individually and a resource for tenant unions. They are also regional representatives of CAT in a way that no other department currently has, meaning they are often involved in grassroots advocacy and organizing, which is where the lines begin to blur. In order to clarify these roles, the Advocacy Department should be solidified as the primary means through which policy advocacy is handled, with Tenant Organizers primarily serving to reach current members and tenants in need while also building relationships that can help them to recruit advocates for the Advocacy Department. Tenant Organizers will focus on building organizing and regional leadership development, empowering tenant members to join advocacy efforts on state and local levels and take active leadership roles within the organization.

The Advocacy Department will be primarily driven by the Policy Committee's recommendations (as approved by the board) and will be headed by the Advocacy Director who should ideally work with a contract lobbyist on legislative priorities as needed. The Advocacy Department should be primarily responsible for tracking policy decisions on a regional and statewide level and working to organize a response from the organization. This includes working with partners to form coalitions and strategic partnerships. The overarching goal should be to grow the advocacy department into a statewide leader in housing policy advocacy, with expertise in statewide and metro-specific issues. To accomplish this over the next three years, a Director, Lobbyist, and at least two coordinators are advised for this department.

#### *Objectives for the Advocacy Department*

Over the next three years, the Advocacy Department should work with the Policy Committee and a contract lobbyist to give tenants a more substantial voice in the legislature and solidify a position of leadership among coalition partners to advance policy for renters. Given the volume of stakeholders currently advocating in the housing space, increasing CAT's presence in these conversations and building stronger relationships with legislators will help CAT better achieve the goals of its membership.

# Organizational Development Recommendations

The success of a strategic plan depends on the ability of an organization to execute it. For the past several years, CAT, like most organizations, has struggled to meet the dramatically escalating needs of its members and renters across the state under very difficult conditions. Transitioning from seeking to sustain services and respond to a crisis into an organization that is growing its program services and seeking to reshape the housing policy space will require dedication and focused attention on implementation. Although it is beyond the scope of this plan to create detailed operational plans for its executions, the planning process did identify several areas for prioritization in the coming years.

## **Organizational Restructuring**

As the organization works to increase program areas in Tenant Education, clarify roles for Tenant and Policy Advocacy, and increase active tenant Membership, it will be necessary to reorganize the departments and possibly the leadership structure. These departments will need increased staff capacity and liaisons that work directly with each other to create a feedback loop between departments. Tenant Organizers will need to work with the Education department to reach tenants through the Renters Rights Hotline. Organizers will need to be skilled in landlord tenant education to provide workshops, advice and referrals. Membership will need to work with organizers, Education and Communications to bring new tenants who call for hotline advice or attend a workshop in as active members. And Membership will need to add tools and structures for a regular recruitment of new members and volunteers that are oriented and engaged. **The first step of implementing this strategic plan will need to be restructuring the organization in a way that allows these goals to be accomplished.**

## **Membership and Staff Collaboration**

CAT is a member-focused organization and as such primarily relies on tenant leaders to help as volunteers and set priorities and goals for advocacy. The growing size of the staff has created opportunities and challenges in building effective collaboration with membership. Identifying clear responsibilities for staff and membership, including how staff can structure and support the activities of members is a vital step in leveraging the added capacity necessary to implement the vision offered in this plan.

## **Board Development**

To reflect its values of a member-led organization, CAT continues to seek active representation for the diversity of renters across Oregon. In addition to ensuring demographic representation,

particularly from historically underserved communities, CAT will also endeavor to increase geographic representation to include board members from outside of the Portland metropolitan area. Areas to prioritize in recruitment include:

- Central Oregon/Deschutes County
- Lane County
- Coastal Oregon
- Southern Oregon

Knowing that local market factors are a major driver of housing insecurity, the organization may over the period of this strategic planning process identify other communities and regions with specific housing challenges that warrant additional recruitment and representation for the board.

# Enhanced Organizational Communications Program

Supporting the expansion of the organization means enhancing the current Communications Department to include Public Relations as a core tenant of the program. The communications department currently focuses on internal communications to members with the primary external communication method being social media. While direct press relations have become more prominent during the pandemic, the Communications Department needs to be built out enough to manage both **internal and external communications** with internal being focused on member relations and external building up the profile of the organization to both increase its membership and expand its influence.

External communications refers to advertising efforts to reach new tenants, especially outside the Portland Metro area, using both digital and print advertising. Expanding **external communications** includes training tenants to speak to the press, testify in the legislature, and tell their stories effectively. CAT should continue to develop the **Speakers Bureau program** to support a hub of tenants for the press to contact and for direct outreach for advocacy purposes. This program will consist of regular trainings for general speaker development, but will also include trainings to give testimony on specific policy objectives as needed.

Internal communications refers to the regular communications and information sent to members, including calls to actions, event reminders, membership meetings, etc. Internal communications need a simple process by which new members are sent an automated set of emails welcoming them and inviting them to get involved in different ways. As workshops and hotline hours become more regular, these internal communications can be more scheduled as well, allowing staff more time focus on external communications.

The website is currently primarily used for internal communications, working to get educational information and general statements to members. As the organization has grown significantly and plans to expand its reach even further in the next three years, it needs a website that allows **members to access resources** in one area by advanced AI search while external audiences – including members of the media and legislative stakeholders – are able to learn more and connect with the organization quickly and effectively.

## *Objectives for the Communications Department*

Over the next three years, CAT should work to create a Communications Department made up of at least 2, but preferably 3 staff members to enhance external communications. These staff members should have skills in public and press relations, campaign coordination, website management, graphic design, and expertise in translating public policy into easily digestible documents for members and staff. As these needs grow the public profile of the organization, a new website should be built to accommodate the needs of both internal and external audiences. The department should have an in-house translator and lists of members specific to the



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language they prefer to receive materials in to make information as accessible as possible. The website should include information in a variety of audio/visual formats to that end as well.

# Additional Recommendations

## **Partner 501 c(4) Organization**

As CAT has expanded program service from education and service delivery in recent years to include advocacy on behalf of tenants, the organization has taken initial steps to add a partner 501c(4). C(4) organizations have greater freedom in the tax code to directly engage in lobbying and other forms of activity, as well as take other steps to hold elected officials and government bodies accountable. Given CAT's vision of being the primary organizational voice for Oregon tenants, expanding the c(4) organization would provide the proper structure and capacity for housing advocacy work related to electoral or direct advocacy work. Currently, that ability is limited by a lack of c(4) staff and a need for greater funding to expand that infrastructure. If the c(4) is able to grow as a separate organization, more of that advocacy work could be housed there. Many other successful organizations in Oregon use companion c(3) and c(4) organizations to structure their work. As CAT looks to grow its c(4), it should do so in a way that supports the continued work of the c(3) organization and provides clear operational and legal delineations in how that will occur.

## **Gaining a Better Understanding of Renters' Attitudes**

The outreach and engagement work that went into the development of this strategic plan is substantial. The conversations provided a rich inventory of attitudes and perspectives from tenants across Oregon with intentional dives into specific communities and stakeholders. But that data does not provide a quantitative basis for understanding overall attitudes towards CAT and rental housing among renters. As CAT proceeds with the implementation of this strategic plan, it should consider the value of engaging in opinion survey research to better understand renters' attitudes and the impact of CAT's work. With multiple recent public polls conveying homelessness as Oregonians' primary concern, understanding how renters' rights, protections, and housing instability fit into solutions in people's minds could be critical for CAT to make public relations and legislative gains on their priorities.

A market research study provides a sufficient sample of renters' opinions to ensure a representative assessment of tenants across the state. It will correct for sample bias and other factors that limit the value of qualitative research like focus groups. It will also allow the organization to establish a baseline for public perceptions to evaluate how they move over time, as well as awareness of CAT and the support services available to renters (a key area of need identified in focus group work for this plan). Although market research can be costly, it may also provide valuable insights and support other areas of organizational work including program design and development.

## **A Sustainable Development Model**

Like most nonprofits, CAT has suffered from significant disruption in recent years. Organizations were asked to do more at the same time that many development models became unstable or difficult to execute. The fiscal health of the organization provides the foundation from which all the work envisioned in this plan flows. A development model that diversifies revenue streams allows for contingencies, capacity building, and other areas of organizational evolution is a critical component for the implementation of this strategic plan.

## Conclusion

*“I hope CAT begins planning for Long Term REAL Change. a new model that works for low-income people. System Change.” - Oregon Tenants Focus Group Participant*

*“CAT has the potential to create a grassroots movement for real change by continuing to combine tangible support, advocacy, and political strategies.” - Black Tenants Focus Group Participant*

Over the past three years, CAT has worked tirelessly to advocate for tenants during a time when their rights, housing, and lives were threatened by unprecedented challenges. Looking ahead, there are clear opportunities for growth. The organization has an opportunity now to broaden its public profile, becoming a statewide leader in the housing policy landscape. Using that platform, CAT can also reach tenants in regions of the state that are currently underrepresented in its membership, expanding programs that serve tenants to be truly statewide.

If the organization is a tree, with deep roots in the communities it serves and a nearly 20 year history of advocacy and service, then the growing branches of that tree need to reach new heights to entangle with those around it, securing partnerships, growing membership, and even sprouting a c(4) organization with those same roots and values.

The focus group participants, representing tenant voices across the state, have asked for more - more education, more help, more of a voice in policy, and for a housing system that is more rooted in the needs of people than in profit. The next three years are about growing an organization prepared to proactively answer that call.

# Appendix: Focus Group Report

## Community Alliance of Tenants Focus Groups

October 2021 - December 2021

Initial Report from Praxis Political



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## Overall Summary

Between October and December of 2021, Praxis conducted or helped to organize 21 virtual focus groups for Oregon tenants. The focus groups consisted of anywhere from 3-24 tenants each, with a total of over 150 tenant participants. The focus groups included county-specific groups across seven major Oregon counties. We also held five culturally-specific focus groups for Black Tenants, Asian Tenants, Latinx Tenants, Pacific Islander Tenants, and Indigenous Tenants. The majority of the focus groups took place in English, but there were language-specific focus groups offered in Spanish, Vietnamese, Swahili, Amharic, Tigrinya, and Oromo. Additionally, we held a focus group for student tenants, public housing tenants, CAT members only, and any Oregon tenants.

Each focus group was asked six questions, listed below. The non-English speaking tenants were also asked a seventh question specific to their experience with translations and other barriers.

1. What has been your previous involvement with the Community Alliance of Tenants? Current member? Utilized Resources? Attended an event? What was your experience?
2. As a tenant in your community, what resources do you/your community need?
3. In your opinion, what is the most pressing problem tenants are facing today? Based on your knowledge of CAT, what do you think the organization could accomplish in the next three years?
4. What would it mean to you to have the rights and interests of tenants protected? How would that look different from how things are today?
5. Since COVID started, do you feel your rights as a tenant have been violated, if so how?
6. CAT currently does advocacy work for tenant issues including rental assistance, tenants' rights, etc. What issues do you think CAT should make a priority in their advocacy efforts?
7. (Non-English Focus Groups Only) What barriers do you face as a renter in this community who does not speak or primarily speak English? Is it helpful to have materials translated? What would be the best way to get the information you need?

Below is a summary, organized by question, with a few key statistics, trending ideas, and the general feelings expressed during the focus groups. The entire response data is available upon request, organized by focus group and by question.

## Question 1: Previous Involvement with CAT

### Summary

The first question we asked, as a warm-up and to get an idea of who we were talking to, was about participants' previous involvement or experiences with CAT. Since we ran a focus group at the CAT member meeting, there were obviously a significant number of participants that were either new members or long-time members. In the other focus groups, the majority of tenants were not members but had heard of CAT or had previously been involved with CAT in some way. There were a significant number of tenants who had never heard of CAT before their focus group or had only had brief interactions with the organization in the past.

At the beginning of each focus group, the facilitator or a Tenant Education Specialist from CAT gave a brief, general Renters Rights Presentation. Whether they had been involved with CAT previously or not, basic renters' rights were new to most participants, and some even went on to suggest further presentations. This led us to believe tenants are not aware of all the resources CAT offers, whether they had previous knowledge of CAT or not.

### Overall Response Data

Summary/Response	# of Responses	% of Responses
First Involvement	53	30.6%
Received Resources	38	22.0%
Longtime Member	28	16.2%
1-3 year member	20	11.6%
Volunteer	11	6.4%
Attended Event	19	11.0%
Referred Others	3	1.7%
Donor	1	0.6%
Total	173	100%

### Overall Response Data Summarized

Overall Responses	# of Responses	% of Responses
Been involved in some way before (member, volunteer, donor, attended an event, received resources, volunteered)	116	67.05%
No previous involvement (First involvement or referred others but didn't have any other involvement)	57	32.95%

**Breakdown by Culturally Specific Groups**

<b>Question 1: Previous Involvement with CAT</b>	Asian Tenants	Black Tenants	Indigenous Tenants	Pacific Islander Tenants	Latinx Tenants
Some Involvement	57%	36%	50%	33%	0%
No Previous Involvement	43%	64%	50%	67%	100%
First Involvement	43%	64%	50%	67%	100%
Recieved Resources	14%	9%	33%	33%	0%
Longtime Member	21%	18%	0%	0%	0%
1-3 year member	14%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Attended Event	0%	0%	17%	0%	0%
Volunteer	7%	9%	0%	0%	0%
Referred Others	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Donor	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

**Breakdown by County Specific Groups**

<b>Question 1: Previous Involvement with CAT</b>	Clackamas County Tenants	Deschutes County Tenants	Jackson County Tenants	Lane County Tenants	Multnomah County Tenants	Marion County Tenants	Washington County Tenants
Some Involvement	0%	50%	70%	50%	71%	25%	N/A
No Previous Involvement	100%	50%	30%	50%	29%	75%	N/A
First Involvement	100%	50%	30%	50%	0%	75%	N/A
Recieved Resources	0%	25%	20%	50%	21%	0%	N/A
Longtime Member	0%	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%	N/A
1-3 year member	0%	25%	10%	0%	36%	0%	N/A
Attended Event	0%	0%	30%	0%	7%	0%	N/A
Volunteer	0%	0%	0%	0%	7%	25%	N/A
Referred Others	0%	0%	0%	0%	21%	0%	N/A
Donor	0%	0%	0%	0%	7%	0%	N/A

## Question 1: Example Responses

*What is your previous involvement with CAT?*

“I called the hotline after becoming a member when I needed a repair demand letter to get a window fixed in my bedroom. Ostin helped me write a letter and referred me to an attorney.”

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“I joined when my landlord wanted me to self-evict. I think there needs to be more outreach and visibility so that everyone can easily find out about CAT.”

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“I haven't been involved with CAT much. I've only donated to CAT a couple of times. I have referred a couple of participants seeking housing rights to CAT.”

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“I don't have any, just saw it online while doing research for housing regulations.”

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“Never heard of CAT before. I heard about it from a friend who works for the Center for Hope and Safety and a social worker they know there. I used to be a specialist/coordinator for runaway youth. My coworker referred me to look into it and I wanted to know more about my rights as a tenant.”

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“I have been a member of CAT for 3+ years. I am a tenant leader in Gresham and I have started training for the Renters Rights Hotline. I attend meetings when I can and participate in the Gresham Strategy group as well.”

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“I've only been to the US for 2 years. Now I know that I can ask the owner to fix things and I do not have to pay for the repairs. Now that I know the law, I am confident to ask the landlord to fix it without fear of being evicted.”

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“We were getting charged for a lot of things that our landlords weren't supposed to charge us for, but I learned from CAT that I had rights and they couldn't charge us for everything, like carpets and appliances, and now I can fight for my rights.”



## Question 2: What resources do you/your community need?

### Summary

This was the first substantive question that started to get at the heart of what tenants were needing and what obstacles they confronted in their daily lives. Immediate trends developed as renters discussed not understanding what rights they had, asking for more Renters Rights Presentations. Below we categorize them with the important acknowledgment that while responses followed similar trends, we had a great diversity of responses. The top trending response categories are explained in a bit more detail below.

Responses categorized under “Tenant Education” below asked for more information about their rights. Facilitators passed along specific questions to the Tenant Education team at CAT, but overall, these tenants asked how their community as a whole can get access to more information about their rights. One tenant at the Asian Tenants Focus Group suggested having a representative from CAT do a presentation at their local community church because it consisted of many low-income renters and was a place their community came together. There were several requests for more information to be distributed widely as printed materials (because a digital format was a barrier to senior tenants). The suggestion that a pamphlet of common renter’s rights information or FAQ would be distributed at localities was very popular. Tenants repeatedly suggested it was necessary for legislation to be passed requiring landlords to give tenants more detailed information about their rights upon signing a lease.

Almost as many people asking for tenant education noted a need for more affordable rent. In every single focus group, among multiple participants, tenants expressed a need for rent control or caps. While we categorized rent control under “rent affordability,” this category also includes responses that called for rental, utility, or deposit/application fee assistance. This category is separate from requests relating to affordable housing options, because those requests specifically asked for help with public housing issues, for more information about how to access affordable housing options, or the need to build more. The rent affordability responses, in contrast, generally came from those who would not qualify for affordable housing options, but still could not afford constant rent increases.

Tenants are growing increasingly frustrated by consistent violations of their rights. Most frustrating was a lack of recourse when something went wrong. When the locality does not provide inspection services, when the tenant can’t afford a lawyer, when the waiting list for Legal Aid is a mile long, or when the living space is completely uninhabitable but they have nowhere else to go, tenants often expressed a wish for systems in place to hold landlords accountable. Others, particularly those in public housing, noted that the oversight from HUD was insufficient because it often resulted in retaliation from the landlord. Legal aid and security were resources also expressed, primarily stemming from a situation in which the landlord was not held accountable or the existing systems failed them. Tenants overwhelmingly expressed fear of retaliation. Many described an ideal system that could work with checks and balances without requiring a tenant confrontation to solve issues.

Other concerns expressed less frequently, although no less fiercely, were for free or accessible legal help, support for relation or eviction when it happened, landlords that had cultural sensitivity training (or at least discrimination laws that actually prevented discrimination), and for materials (including rental agreements) to be translated or to have an interpreter work with a tenant before an agreement was signed. **Tenants wanted resources that would help them feel secure in their housing, lessen the fear they lived with, and that would keep their rent from increasing faster than their income.**

### Overall Response Data

Summary/Topic	# of Responses	% of Responses
Rent Affordability/Control	51	25.2%
Landlord Accountability	26	12.9%
Affordable Housing Options	18	8.9%
Safety/Security	17	8.4%
Legal Aid	14	6.9%
Misc.	15	7.4%
Advocacy	16	7.9%
Basic Amenities	12	5.9%
Eviction/Relocation Support	12	5.9%
Translation	9	4.5%
Cultural sensitivity/resources	7	3.5%
Mental Health Aid	4	2.0%
Homelessness Support	1	0.5%
Tenant Education	61	30.2%
Total	202	100%

### Breakdown by Culturally Specific Groups

Question 2: Resources Needed for Your Community	Asian Tenants	Black Tenants	Indigenous Tenants	Pacific Islander Tenants	Latinx Tenants
Tenant Education	77%	23%	9%	14%	17%
Rent Affordability/Control	0%	38%	0%	0%	0%
Landlord Accountability	0%	8%	18%	14%	17%
Affordable Housing Options	0%	0%	0%	29%	33%
Safety/Security	0%	0%	27%	0%	0%
Miscellaneous	8%	0%	9%	0%	17%
Advocacy	0%	8%	0%	0%	0%

Legal Aid	0%	8%	9%	0%	0%
Eviction/Relocation Support	0%	8%	0%	0%	0%
Basic Amenities	0%	0%	9%	29%	0%
Translation	8%	0%	0%	14%	17%
Cultural sensitivity/resources	0%	8%	18%	0%	0%
Mental Health Aid	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Homelessness Support	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

**Breakdown by County Specific Groups**

<b>Question 2: Resources Needed for Your Community</b>	Clackamas County Tenants	Deschutes County Tenants	Jackson County Tenants	Lane County Tenants	Multnomah County Tenants	Marion County Tenants	Washington County Tenants
Tenant Education	67%	17%	20%	0%	47%	0%	27%
Rent Affordability/Control	0%	17%	10%	33%	20%	64%	0%
Landlord Accountability	0%	17%	10%	33%	0%	18%	0%
Affordable Housing Options	17%	0%	30%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Safety/Security	0%	0%	0%	0%	13%	0%	9%
Misc.	17%	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%	9%
Advocacy	0%	0%	10%	0%	13%	0%	0%
Legal Aid	0%	0%	10%	33%	7%	9%	18%
Eviction/Relocation Support	0%	17%	0%	0%	0%	0%	18%
Basic Amenities	0%	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Translation	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%
Cultural sensitivity/resources	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Mental Health Aid	0%	33%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Homelessness Support	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%

## Question 2: Example Responses

*As a tenant in your community, what resources do you/your community need?*

“I think my community needs more tenant advocates, it's often frustrating dealing with landlords. There have been times where I have felt bullied and have not known where to turn to for assistance.”

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“Tenants in Jackson County need affordable housing. There needs to be a way to not have to just work with the Monopoly of rental management companies. Currently, hundreds of people are still living in hotels.”

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“Backup plans if you are evicted or removed from housing”

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“They're LEGALLY supposed to refund it if they don't process, but I've also seen companies processing multiple applications at the same time.”

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“Landlords are not being accountable. If you complain, they evict, so if you're a new tenant you have to suck up a lot just so they won't pull the rug from you.”

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“Landlord oversight that isn't a lawyer (most of us can't afford one, and Legal Aid has limited capability of what they can do for us”

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“Mandatory tenant education materials given by landlords, non-lawyer oversight on landlords with consequences, more legal protections for renters, economic renter equity, cancel the rent during the pandemic, rent control.”

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“Mostly I believe mental health assistance and basically more help with getting good jobs, you know basically a supportive community”

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“Landlords should only be allowed to raise rent if one's income goes up-- that's only fair if they require 2.5x income to rent”

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“I think it's a good idea to educate community leaders and church elders about CAT, so they know to refer. Maybe ask that CAT be mentioned at church gatherings and community gatherings, even festive ones.”

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“I didn't realize how starved I was for information when it came to things like renter's rights until the pandemic happened. So access to information is a big one. Connection to other resources like SNAP and OHP can be helpful for students, too. I'd also like for there to be more funding to help students get through school and be able to pay rent.”

### Question 3: What is the most pressing problem tenants are facing today?

#### Summary

Again, affordability and rent increases were overwhelmingly the most pressing problems tenants expressed. Tenants also expressed similar issues of renters' rights violations; concerns about dealing with landlords are categorized here as "Landlord Relations." This category encompasses not only landlords who engaged in harassment or negligence, but also tenants who felt that they had trouble communicating with their landlords and even expressed a desire to have a better relationship with their landlord. Calls for tenant education and more widely distributed information are categorized under the problem of "Don't Know/Understand Rights."

Several safety concerns were again expressed, as well as the lack of available housing in general, affordable or not, and the barriers tenants faced accessing legal resources. Lower on the list were issues stemming directly from the pandemic, although this comes into play more with question five. This suggests that while the pandemic certainly exacerbated it, the underlying issue of a broken housing system was pre-existing.

#### Overall Response Data

Summary/Topic	# of Responses	% of Responses
Affordability/Rent Increases	87	37.0%
Renters Rights Violations	33	14.0%
Landlord Relations	29	12.3%
Don't Know/Understand Rights	22	9.4%
Misc.	16	6.8%
Lack of Legal Help/Resources	14	6.0%
Safety/Security	13	5.5%
Housing Availability	13	5.5%
Home Ownership Accessibility	3	1.3%
Cultural Understanding	3	1.3%
Homelessness	2	0.9%
Total	235	100%

**Breakdown by Culturally Specific Groups**

<b>Question 3: Most Pressing Problems Facing Tenants</b>	Asian Tenants	Black Tenants	Indigenous Tenants	Pacific Islander Tenants	Latinx Tenants
Affordability/Rent Increases	57%	29%	9%	17%	27%
Renters Rights Violations	0%	0%	36%	50%	9%
Landlord Relations	0%	29%	0%	0%	18%
Don't Know/Understand Rights	14%	29%	9%	0%	18%
Miscellaneous	7%	14%	9%	17%	18%
Lack of Legal Help/Resources	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Safety/Security	7%	0%	9%	17%	0%
Housing Availability	0%	0%	18%	0%	9%
Home Ownership Accessibility	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Cultural Understanding	0%	0%	9%	0%	0%
Homelessness	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%

**Breakdown by County Specific Groups**

<b>Question 3: Most Pressing Problems Facing Tenants</b>	Clackamas County Tenants	Deschutes County Tenants	Jackson County Tenants	Lane County Tenants	Multnomah County Tenants	Marion County Tenants	Washington County Tenants
Affordability/Rent Increases	25%	50%	27%	0%	63%	38%	20%
Renters Rights Violations	25%	7%	7%	0%	6%	8%	40%
Landlord Relations	17%	21%	7%	0%	13%	8%	20%
Don't Know/Understand Rights	8%	0%	13%	75%	0%	8%	10%
Miscellaneous	0%	0%	7%	0%	6%	0%	0%
Lack of Legal Help/Resources	0%	0%	33%	0%	13%	8%	0%
Safety/Security	8%	0%	7%	0%	0%	31%	10%
Housing Availability	17%	21%	0%	25%	0%	0%	0%
Home Ownership Accessibility	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Cultural Understanding	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Homelessness	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

### Question 3: Example Responses

*In your opinion, what is the most pressing problem tenants are facing today?*

“Rent is too expensive. Portland should not allow 15% increases every year.”

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“Most pressing problem is renters' rights education and concrete assistance to getting legal help.”

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“CAT has done great work with eviction bans. Thank you, please keep advocating for us in government.”

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“Affordability and lack of stable housing for low-income folks. We need to design a community-based housing system that works for us. In alignment with wages, long term sustainability, non -investment/speculative system that put people first.”

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“Vouchers are just temporary bandages. Very limited where low-income people can use them.”

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“We need to address the fact that the housing for-profit system has failed us and we must fight to provide a workable alternative.”

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“Instead of subsidies in investors' pockets, we need to empower renters to be in a position of power and choice. I need an answer as to why Oregonians are being priced out of any decent housing option. Housing should not be a \$\$\$\$ wealth builder for those whose interests lie other than community ab”

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“Impact of evictions on finding future housing.”

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“Extreme weather and lack of AC & other amenities to make it livable, spoils medications and food.”

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“Lack of available family-sized housing accommodations.”

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“Having to choose between affordability and safety”

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“A legal system specifically for just tenants and landlords to mediate issues would be extremely helpful.”

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“For me the biggest challenge in the amount of rent I pay, I have lived in the same apartment for 4 years and my rent increases yearly. It is getting too expensive for me to rent.”

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“The stigma of being a renter, of not being able to make rent, of getting evicted as if you are the one to blame”

## Question 4: What would it mean for your rights to be protected?

### Summary

Responses to this question reflected a lack of clarity in the wording, with most tenants answering, “it would mean a lot.” Facilitators had to push a little further and rephrase the question as “What would a world look like in which those rights were protected? How would that look different than your world today?” When phrased like this, tenants overwhelmingly expressed a level of peace they would have that does not exist for them today. Many related this to a better sense of community they could have if their energy didn’t have to go into worrying about their housing security. The word that came up the most in these answers was “protected.”

The desire to feel protected was clear among participants. The largest category of responses described some level of further tenant protection —enforceable protection— they do not have now, enumerating additional tenant rights that either do not exist today or that only exist on paper. This category is also where we decided to place answers describing a world where education and information would be readily available. “Housing Security” includes responses about living in a safer neighborhood if it were affordable and responses about improved physical and mental security.

### **Overall Response Data**

<b>Topic/Summary</b>	<b># of Responses</b>	<b>% of Responses</b>
More Tenants Rights	53	29.0%
Better Mental Health	34	18.6%
Fair Treatment from Landlords	20	10.9%
Affordable Housing Reform	13	7.1%
Fair Cost of Housing	9	4.9%
Housing Security	9	4.9%
Equal Treatment/Equity	10	5.5%
Rent Caps	7	3.8%
Low Income ≠ Lower Standard of Living	7	3.8%
Eviction Reform	6	3.3%
Housing as a Human Right	6	3.3%
Easily Available Legal Resources	6	3.3%
Accessibility	3	1.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>100%</b>



**Breakdown by Culturally Specific Groups**

<b>Question 4: Tenant Needs to Feel Protected/Secure</b>	Asian Tenants	Black Tenants	Indigenous Tenants	Pacific Islander Tenants	Latinx Tenants
More Tenants Rights	31%	40%	30%	0%	56%
Better Mental Health	0%	0%	30%	0%	33%
Fair Treatment from Landlords	13%	0%	20%	67%	11%
Affordable Housing Reform	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Fair Cost of Housing	19%	0%	10%	0%	0%
Housing Security	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Equal Treatment/Equity	6%	40%	0%	0%	0%
Rent Caps	13%	20%	0%	0%	0%
Low Income ≠ Lower Standard of Living	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Eviction Reform	0%	0%	0%	33%	0%
Housing as a Human Right	6%	0%	10%	0%	0%
Easily Available Legal Resources	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Accessibility	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

**Breakdown by County Specific Groups**

<b>Question 4: Tenant Needs to Feel Protected/Secure</b>	Clackamas County Tenants	Deschutes County Tenants	Jackson County Tenants	Lane County Tenants	Multnomah County Tenants	Marion County Tenants	Washington County Tenants
More Tenants Rights	0%	0%	0%	60%	36%	43%	0%
Better Mental Health	100%	22%	29%	0%	0%	14%	0%
Fair Treatment from Landlords	0%	11%	12%	20%	9%	7%	0%
Affordable Housing Reform	0%	11%	12%	0%	0%	0%	20%
Fair Cost of Housing	0%	22%	0%	0%	0%	0%	20%
Housing Security	0%	22%	0%	0%	0%	7%	0%
Equal Treatment/Equity	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	60%
Rent Caps	0%	0%	6%	0%	18%	0%	0%
Low Income ≠ Lower Standard of Living	0%	11%	6%	20%	0%	14%	0%
Eviction Reform	0%	0%	18%	0%	9%	0%	0%
Housing as a Human Right	0%	0%	0%	0%	18%	0%	0%
Easily Available Legal Resources	0%	0%	6%	0%	9%	14%	0%
Accessibility	0%	0%	12%	0%	0%	0%	0%

## Question 4: Example Responses

*What would it mean to you to have the rights and interests of tenants protected? How would that look different from how things are today?*

“CAT has the potential to create a grassroots movement for real change by continuing to combine tangible support, advocacy, and political strategies.”

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“Peace of mind, which goes to mental health. Moving is so stressful and having an acrimony-free living sit-in would be amazing. Just waiting for the ball to drop is stressful.”

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“The cost of rent would be in accordance with the local min wage. People should not have to be worried from paycheck to paycheck if they can afford to have a roof over their heads or have to choose between paying for medical care or groceries because they can't afford to pay all of them and their rent.”

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“As a renter, have my rights protected would give me a sense of security, I often feel vulnerable as a tenant.”

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“Folks with bad credit, criminal histories would have a chance at getting housed”

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“We should not have to be on a waiting list that has ranking for assistance. If we need help, we need help.”

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“Everything. With the cost to buy ever increasing, some of us will be renters forever. Landlords/ owners have a lobby and we need one, too.”

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“It would mean that evictions would no longer exist, every tenant has access to rental assistance options when needed, and a right to counsel. Rent control implementation (not sb 608), less landlords and more corporate or tenant-run housing.”

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“Healthier communication relationship between tenant and landlord. Being more expressive and confident that your landlord knows where you're coming from.”

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“Tenants could simply report genuine real safety concerns to management and TRUST that the issues would be resolved discretely - and when optimal: include the housing community in resolving concerns.”

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## Question 5: Since COVID, do you feel your rights as a tenant have been violated?

### Summary

Among our participants, tenants reported not feeling like their rights had been violated since the onset of the pandemic. Most, however, did note they felt lucky not to have had a negative experience because a friend or family member had. We separated the “Yes” responses into issue-specific responses (there were also general “yes” responses that did not cite a particular issue).

The primary issues expressed were in regards to upkeep — landlords refusing to complete repairs or keep up general common areas, citing COVID as the reason why. Tenants also noted feeling unsafe in their living space because either their landlord refused to wear a mask or repairmen did not follow COVID precautions.

Unfortunately, tenants also told stories of landlords demanding tenants pay rent during the eviction moratorium and threatening tenants who did not. Some tenants had experienced an eviction during COVID (some were likely illegal, although it seems many landlords used existing workarounds to get past the eviction moratorium).

Several tenants cited issues with OERAP and of the responses that mentioned either OERAP or other pandemic protections, the majority had negative experiences, saying that the protections or assistance were unhelpful or never came to fruition. Below is an overall breakdown of categories, including tenants who cited rent increases or accrued rent debt. We also included a general breakdown of “yes” versus “no” responses and comparisons of those who mentioned OERAP or pandemic protections.

### Overall Response Data

Responses	# of Responses	% of Responses
No	45	35.4%
Yes - Upkeep Issues	16	12.6%
Yes	17	13.4%
Yes - Eviction	12	9.4%
Yes - Landlord Harassment	11	8.7%
Yes - COVID Precautions Ignored	9	7.1%
No Help from OERAP	9	7.1%
Rent Debt/Increase	4	3.1%
OERAP/COVID Protections Helped	4	3.1%
Total	127	100%

**Overall Response Data Summarized**

Yes/No Breakdown	# of Responses	% of Responses
Yes	78	61.4%
No	45	35.4%
Rent Increase	4	3.1%

**Overall Response Data on COVID Protections**

COVID Protections Helped?		
No Help from OERAP	9	69.2%
OERAP/COVID Protections Helped	4	30.8%
Total	13	100%

**Breakdown by Culturally Specific Groups**

Question 5: Rights Violated Since COVID	Asian Tenants	Black Tenants	Indigenous Tenants	Pacific Islander Tenants	Latinx Tenants
Overall - Yes my rights were violated during COVID	83%	46%	75%	75%	0%
Overall - No my rights were not violated during COVID	17%	54%	25%	25%	100%
Overall - Pandemic protections/OERAP did not help me	N/A	100%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Overall - Pandemic protections/OERAP did help me	N/A	0%	N/A	N/A	N/A
No, I don't feel my rights have been violated since COVID	17%	54%	25%	25%	100%
Yes, I have had issues with upkeep of my living space	33%	8%	13%	0%	0%
Yes, I feel my rights have been violated in one or more ways since COVID	33%	8%	25%	0%	0%
Yes, I was evicted during the moratorium or during COVID	0%	15%	0%	50%	0%
Yes, my landlord harrassed me during COVID	8%	8%	0%	25%	0%

Yes, COVID precautions were ignored in my living space or by my landlord	8%	0%	38%	0%	0%
No, I was unable to receive help from OERAP	0%	8%	0%	0%	0%
I had a rent or debt increase due to COVID	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
The COVID protections or OERAP helped me during the pandemic	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

**Breakdown by County Specific Groups**

<b>Question 5: Rights Violated Since COVID</b>	Clackamas County Tenants	Deschutes County Tenants	Jackson County Tenants	Lane County Tenants	Multnomah County Tenants	Marion County Tenants	Washington County Tenants
Overall - Yes my rights were violated during COVID	0%	29%	56%	60%	67%	25%	100%
Overall - No my rights were not violated during COVID	100%	71%	22%	40%	25%	75%	0%
Overall - Pandemic protections/OERAP did not help me	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0%	100%
Overall - Pandemic protections/OERAP did help me	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	100%	0%
No, I don't feel my rights have been violated since COVID	100%	71%	22%	40%	25%	75%	0%
Yes, I have had issues with upkeep of my living space	0%	14%	0%	40%	17%	0%	0%
Yes, I feel my rights have been violated in one or more ways since COVID	0%	0%	44%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Yes, I was evicted during the moratorium or during COVID	0%	14%	0%	0%	17%	0%	0%
Yes, my landlord harrassed me during COVID	0%	0%	11%	0%	17%	13%	0%
Yes, COVID precautions were ignored in my living space or by my landlord	0%	0%	0%	20%	17%	0%	0%
No, I was unable to receive help from OERAP	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
I had a rent or debt increase due to COVID	0%	0%	22%	0%	8%	0%	0%
The COVID protections or OERAP helped me during the pandemic	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	13%	0%

## Question 5: Example Responses

*Since COVID, do you feel your rights as a tenant have been violated?*

“Mostly about housing shortage: I am not able to move to another apartment in my complex, I cannot rent month to month and have to sign a lease to stay here. I feel really trapped in that I am not given a chance to move to a better apartment.”

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“My rent also went up almost \$100 during COVID, with no discernible reason as they don’t do any repairs or renovation on my 100yr old cottage”

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“With the OERAP we had a lot of problems getting our payment. And still have no answers about where our payment is after landlord got it and sold the property.”

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“We try to find rental assistance program, but can’t get a hold of a staff to call us back, only able to leave voice messages.”

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“I am depressed due to COVID-19 and I am not able to leave my house and it is a struggle to find rental assistance. Especially when I need to raise my child.”

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“Since the pandemic and since the police brutality protests/riots . . . security has been practically non-existent. People know that (even if the cops are called) nothing is going to happen - they won’t be held accountable, they can’t be evicted.”

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“Discriminated against and harassed for asking for disability accommodations around COVID safety.”

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“Yes I was evicted because of lack of rent, I had lost my job.”

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“Harassment about rent payments during the moratorium, despite citing the law preventing that”

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“Repairs were withheld when new construction on the property caused structural damage, seemingly in retaliation for asking for accommodations”

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“Yes. My LL has said they are not familiar with ORS 90 and the notification requirements for landlord entry. They have shown up unannounced at my doorstep several times and said it is too difficult to formally schedule maintenance visits in light of COVID.”

## Question 6: What issues should CAT focus advocacy efforts on?

### Summary

Answers to this question generally expanded upon answers given to questions two, three and four. Tenants focused on their rights being protected in ways they aren't now or in ways that held landlords accountable to existing protections. Affordability and rent control were top concerns for tenants, with suggestions ranging from a cap on rent increases to correlating rent with affordability.

Directly discussing advocacy issues clarified a larger trend that had been mentioned steadily throughout the focus group, but had been difficult for tenants to articulate. The suggestion that rent should correlate with tenant income suggests a system in which housing exists to house people rather than to provide a profit for landowners. This idea, that housing should not be a profitable system but rather treated as a human right was mentioned outright several times, but was often suggested by ideas about a change in culture or system.

Specific policies or resources tenants asked CAT to advocate for were protection from harassment, a system of oversight for landlords, rent control or caps that are statewide and go further than what is currently in place, and widespread education (even mandatory for landlords themselves to distribute). Members and tenants alike described an ideal situation in which CAT representatives routinely go to apartment complexes or local establishments to give regular presentations for tenants (especially in multiple languages), offering one-on-one help as needed.

Specifically, seniors and those with disabilities expressed frustration that legally required accommodations have not been made, and again, there was no recourse for them to hold landlords accountable. Tenants mentioned advocating for regularly available financial assistance for those who are sometimes just a bit behind, along with the overall affordability of housing (including utilities).

Specifically, multiple tenants had been victims of the wildfires and ice storms. Many faced heat waves during which they did not have access to air conditioning, and they were told they could not have AC units at all. Winter conditions brought the same situation, where landlords told tenants they could not have portable heaters. With Oregon's extreme weather conditions continuing throughout the year, Oregon tenants need policies in place that require landlords to ensure livability during extreme weather events.

Facilitators asked tenants about tenant issues that were not directly about housing (healthcare, houselessness, mental health, drug overdose prevention, etc.). For the most part, tenants expressed a preference for focusing on tenant rights, citing the number of existing issues that are directly related to housing. However, among the other issues we discussed, the most common answers concerned preventing homelessness and mental health support programs. Compared to tenant-specific policies, other issues accounted for only a handful of answers.

As tenants continually pointed out during each focus group, no amount of protection will be sufficient if a system of oversight and accountability is not in place.

### Overall Response Data

Responses	# of Responses	% of Responses
Tenant Protections	31	12.6%
Gov Oversight/Enforcement	31	12.6%
Rent Control	26	10.5%
Education	24	9.7%
Financial Assistance	23	9.3%
Disability/Senior Support	16	6.5%
Housing as a Human Right	16	6.5%
Overall Affordability	15	6.1%
Quality/Safety	13	5.3%
Legal Representation	12	4.9%
Community Investment	11	4.5%
Misc.	11	4.5%
Supply	8	3.2%
Mental Health Support	5	2.0%
Houseless Support	5	2.0%
Vacancy Rules	0	0.00%
Total	247	100%

### Breakdown by Culturally Specific Groups

Question 6: Advocacy Priorities for CAT Focus	Asian Tenants	Black Tenants	Indigenous Tenants	Pacific Islander Tenants	Latinx Tenants
Tenant Protections	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Gov Oversight/Enforcement	17%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Rent Control	17%	0%	0%	0%	14%
Education	0%	44%	38%	40%	14%
Financial Assistance	8%	11%	13%	0%	14%
Disability/Senior Support	25%	0%	25%	0%	0%
Housing as a Human Right	8%	0%	0%	20%	0%
Overall Affordability	17%	0%	13%	0%	0%
Quality/Safety	0%	0%	0%	0%	14%



Legal Representation	0%	11%	13%	20%	14%
Community Investment	0%	0%	0%	0%	14%
Miscellaneous (general suggestions for more or less advocacy)	0%	22%	0%	0%	0%
Supply	0%	11%	0%	0%	14%
Mental Health Support	0%	0%	0%	20%	0%
Houseless Support	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

### Breakdown by County Specific Groups

<b>Question 6: Advocacy Priorities for CAT Focus</b>	Clackamas County Tenants	Deschutes County Tenants	Jackson County Tenants	Lane County Tenants	Multnomah County Tenants	Marion County Tenants	Washington County Tenants
Tenant Protections	44%	29%	0%	7%	8%	7%	75%
Gov Oversight/Enforcement	22%	0%	0%	7%	8%	0%	0%
Rent Control	0%	0%	0%	7%	8%	33%	0%
Education	0%	0%	0%	29%	8%	0%	0%
Financial Assistance	0%	0%	18%	14%	8%	13%	0%
Disability/Senior Support	0%	14%	0%	7%	0%	0%	0%
Housing as a Human Right	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	7%	0%
Overall Affordability	11%	14%	18%	0%	0%	13%	0%
Quality/Safety	11%	0%	18%	0%	0%	13%	0%
Legal Representation	0%	14%	0%	0%	8%	0%	0%
Community Investment	0%	0%	9%	7%	17%	13%	0%
Miscellaneous (general suggestions for more or less advocacy)	0%	0%	18%	0%	8%	0%	25%
Supply	11%	0%	9%	21%	0%	0%	0%
Mental Health Support	0%	29%	0%	0%	8%	0%	0%
Houseless Support	0%	0%	9%	0%	17%	0%	0%

## Question 6: Example Responses

*CAT currently does advocacy work for tenant issues including rental assistance, tenants' rights, etc. What issues do you think CAT should make a priority in their advocacy efforts?*

“Young adults like 18-year-olds don't truly know their rights as a tenant. I have a daughter who is an adult who lives with me and is not comfortable moving out because she does not know her rights. Including young adults in specific outreach.”

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“I believe a focus on reasonable accommodations as well as modifications should be more of a knowledge base to current and prospective tenants so that everyone has equal access to enjoy their living spaces.”

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“It would be helpful to understand if things change while we are living there – like we adopt a pet or our family gets larger (and then there are more than 2 people per bedroom), then what are our rights.”

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“Tenants' rights and rental assistance should be a priority.”

---

“I am depressed due to COVID-19 and I am not able to leave my house and it is a struggle to find rental assistance. Especially when I need to raise my child.”

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“Additional resources for those who are in danger of becoming homeless? Financial assistance and literacy for housing and relocation?”

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“Partner with OHCS for income-restricted properties. OHCS has given green light to landlords on compliance issues that conflict with tenant law.”

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“Stop tenant harrassement . Stop tenant intimidation.”

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“I hope CAT begins planning for Long Term REAL Change. a new model that works for low-income people. System Change.”

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“Definitely connecting people to resources regarding landlord-tenant and roommate-roommate issues. Resources for legal assistance would be helpful too, especially if it's affordable to those who need it.”

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“I'm less interested in CAT (the nonprofit) advocating on my behalf, I'm more interested in refocusing so that the organization is a place for tenants to collaborate, build, and advocate for ourselves with the support of the staff”

## Question 7: Language Barriers/Translated Materials

### Summary

The language-specific focus groups were held either by CAT staff fluent in the language and interpreted afterward, or in partnership with a community-based organization like HAKI or the Ethiopian and Eritrean Cultural and Resource Center (EECRC). Reflected below are responses from the Vietnamese, Swahili, and Amharic, Tigrinya, and Oromo focus groups.

Please note, the number of responses below may not reflect the number of participants responding. During the translation process from HAKI and the EECRC, many responses that were similar were summarized or grouped into one response by translators instead of directly reported, so below is an approximate representation of the responses categorized in those two groups.

Additionally, while the Spanish language group included the largest number of participants of any group, engaging those participants proved to be difficult. It had very little recordable data and a low response rate among group participants. We feel this reflects a very real need for more group type sessions to present information, as that was primarily the topic participants engaged in. Unfortunately, that means most did not answer many of the questions posed to other groups, so the data from this group in particular is limited.

Overall, both the groups from HAKI and the EECRC expressed significant language barriers, not only relating to materials produced by CAT, rental agreements, and other materials from their landlord, but also a general literacy barrier so that translated documents, in general, might not meet the needs of the community.

Most of these groups had interacted with CAT previously and expressed great satisfaction with the resources and help they'd received so far. Both groups told stories of discrimination and expressed frustration over the application process and the difficulty in understanding legal language used in rental agreements (even when translated).

Their responses to the other six questions were well in line with that of the other focus groups, with more focus on frustration with the application process (especially discrimination due to several cultural differences like the number of children in a family or attire). The issues expressed further highlighted the larger call for landlord accountability, a way to truly report and enforce discrimination laws and to keep the application fees and process fair.

Of the response below, all of the language-specific groups represented here expressed gratitude for the translated materials already provided, especially the Vietnamese participants. They also asked for further collaboration with community-based organizations, like HAKI, for translation and interpretation. The Spanish group in particular expressed not only a significant language barrier in communicating with their landlords, but also in receiving information about their rights from any third party.

However, many in these communities are not literate and therefore need more one-on-one interpretation, particularly in scenarios where they are signing rental agreements or communicating with a landlord.

### Overall Response Data

Responses	# of Responses	% of Responses
CAT Provides Good Translated Materials	4	12.5%
I work with CBOs/Have other help	3	9.4%
Need more - Literacy Issues	3	9.4%
Need more in Vietnamese	1	3.1%
Need more in other dialects	1	3.1%
I face a significant language barrier	5	15.6%
Total	15	100%%

### Breakdown by Language-Specific Groups

Question 7: Barriers Faced as Non-English Speaking Tenant (Language-Specific Groups Only)	Amharic, Tigrinya, and Oromo Language Group	Swahili Language Group	Vietnamese Language Group	Spanish Language
CAT Provides Good Translated Materials	0%	0%	50%	0%
I work with CBOs/Have other help	50%	0%	13%	0%
Need more - Literacy Issues	0%	33%	25%	0%
Need more in Vietnamese	0%	0%	13%	0%
Need more in other dialects	25%	0%	0%	0%
I face a significant language barrier	25%	67%	0%	100%

## Question 7: Example Responses

*What barriers do you face as a renter in this community who does not speak or primarily speak English? Is it helpful to have materials translated? What would be the best way to get the information you need?*

“Documents should be sent to us in both English and Vietnamese since my kids don’t really understand Vietnamese so they can read and help me, and I can read and understand the Vietnamese one because sometimes translated materials are hard to understand in Vietnamese”

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“I clearly understand, any questions with translated housing-related documents provided by CAT, state, county.”

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“Please translate information in our main three languages (Amharic, Tygrina, and Oromo).”

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“Please continue to work with CBOs (ex.EECRC) so we are able to find out about what is going on with CAT and any new laws or policies we can support alongside.”

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“For written materials like rental agreements – it would be helpful if there was a shorter version because the agreements are very long, many pages.”

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“Sometimes when landlords know that you have a language barrier, they will discriminate against us – but if we have an English-speaking person come with us to sign the rental agreements and translate for us in spoken word, not written.”

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“For translated materials – sometimes a lot of people in our community don’t necessarily read in their primary language (Swahili or Somali), but they have younger family members who can read in English. So we don’t need everything translated.”

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“I don't know how to read or write so I need help a lot from family members and Thuy”

## Conclusion

It is clear Oregon tenants have serious concerns about housing affordability and poor treatment from landlords, exacerbated as renters continue to bear the brunt of an economic downturn caused by the pandemic. From harassment to rent increases to deposit withholding and discrimination, tenants have a number of concerns about being protected. Most recognize and have brought up that even existing laws do not fully protect tenants without oversight and accountability measures. Tenants are frustrated by the lack of legal resources available to them and called for a new system of checks and balances for landlords on the state level.

A clear takeaway from these conversations is that tenants, whether they are members of CAT or had no previous involvement, are not aware of the rights they have and want more education and information available to them. Tenants had several ideas about ways CAT could more widely distribute information about renters' rights and programs offered. Participants were very clear about wanting to make sure tenants across the state were more aware of their rights and CAT as a resource.

These responses and takeaways will serve as the cornerstone of CAT's strategic goals and plans for the next three years. Praxis welcomes any input or feedback CAT has based on this report.