Cooper Square Committee's Organizing Department

Summary of Work Accomplished in 2015

Just a very quick summary of 2015 here (see the chronological breakdown below for all the details of the year). We had another incredibly productive year. We are very proud of the work we accomplished and very, very grateful to have collaborated with all the amazing community members and organizations in the work we did:

In 2015 we helped file 7 HP Actions in housing Court (an average of just over one every other month -- we did a couple HP Actions on our own, but typically had support from the Urban Justice Center (UJC) &/or MFY Legal Services); In conjunction with the citywide Stand for Tenant Safety (STS) coalition published a Data Summary collecting information about construction-as-harassment on a citywide basis; Again, in conjunction with STS, worked to get 12 bills (the STS Legislative platform) introduced into City Council; Partnered with the UJC to push for new laws to protect tenants from unscrupulous buyout offers - this work UJC and CSC ultimately resulted in three new laws being adopted by the City (Local Laws 81, 82, & 83); Through our work with the Mahfar Tenants Alliance forced the Dept of Health to adopt new regulations for notifying tenants when lead is found in their building; Brokered a sitdown meeting between tenant leaders and ICON Realty; Sat down with two major banks to discuss lending practices in regards to overleveraging and tenant harassment; Participated in two major mobilizations to strengthen NYS rent laws (one in Foley Square and one in Albany -- 35+ CSC members attended each). Supported tenants during horrific gas explosion on 2nd Ave (3/7/15); CSC organizers sat on four panels, were involved in numerous other presentations and trainings, and held two tenants’ rights walking tours; The work we did was mentioned in close to 3 dozen articles and other media, on various news outlets, including broadcast TV (PIX 11 - in conjunction with the amazing Stabilizing NYC coalition).

- January
  - Participated in large-scale Illegal Hotels rally; lead organizer Brandon Kielbasa spoke at press conference on the steps of City Hall as a part of this event – 1/20/15
  - Officially became part of the citywide Stabilizing NYC coalition
- February
  - Attended press conference to announce the new Anti-Harassment Task Force (invited by the NYS Attorney General's office)
- March
  - Went to Albany to lobby for funding and stronger rent laws – 3/9/15
  - Facilitated a Know Your Rights workshop (Tenants rights #1 -- Topics covered: What are the City and State agencies that have a place in protecting NYC tenants' rights? An overview of HPD, DOB, & HCR) for tenants throughout the Lower East Side [Partnered with the Urban Justice Center (UJC) and Association for Neighborhood & Housing Development (ANHD) for this training] – 3/24/15
  - Facilitated the first ICON coalition meeting (Bringing together dozens of tenants from ICON buildings). This powerful coalition would later decide to adopt the name: Icon Community United (ICU)

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CSC Staff, September 2015
(*) are members of the Organizing Department
- Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasa presented on the Stand for Tenant Safety (STS - DOB reform) coalition campaign at Housing Court Answers annual forum – 3/20/15
- Provided formal written comments on the lending of Signature Bank for their Community Reinvestment Act regulatory filing (this was in conjunction with ANHD’s campaign to hold banks accountable)
- Help the tenants of 128 2nd Ave. file an HP action in Housing Court for lack of services (CSC would later partner with UJC to litigate it fully) – 3/24/15
- Partnered with UJC to file the first of 4 Housing Court cases against Samy Mahfar for issues related to “construction as harassment”). The tenant coalition, the Mahfar Tenants Alliance, would file these cases as a unified front against their landlord. 113 Stanton St. was the first building to file and the next three buildings would file within several weeks.

- April
- Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasa wrote a short article on the STS campaign for Housing Court Answers’ monthly newsletter
- Partnered with University Settlement’s Project Home to do a training for their tenant leaders. Our lead organizer presented here – 4/8/15
- Along with the Directors of Organizing from CAAAV and GOLES, Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasa presented on the issue of tenant harassment at the Manhattan Community Board 3 meeting – 4/13/15
- Along with CAAAV, UJC, & NYLPI the Organizing Dept at CSC co-coordinated a powerful press conference for the filing of 3 more lawsuits against Samy Mahfar. Tenants of three more buildings of the Mahfar Tenants Alliance (210 Rivington, 102 Norfolk, 22 Spring) came together with the tenants of 113 Stanton to conduct this press conference and shine a light on their bad-acting landlord – 4/20/15
- With community partner GOLES, CSC co-coordinated a neighborhood-wide information session for buildings affected by the gas explosion on 2nd Avenue – 4/20/15
- Conducted a community information session/organizing meeting for all rent regulated tenants throughout EV/LES. This meeting was conducted to get folks ready to mobilize and fight for stronger rent laws on 2015 (a battle that would be waged for the next several months). Several dozen tenants attended. The Met Council on Housing partnered with CSC’s Organizing Dept. to facilitate this meeting – 4/21/15
- Testified at City Hall in support of three new laws that would inhibit the harassing behavior of tenant relocation specialists (a.k.a. tenant relocators). Tenant leaders and Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasa testified in front of the City Council’s Housing Committee in support of this vital legislation – 4/29/15

Mahfar Tenant Alliance leader Seth Wandersman in a hazmat suit, illustrating the toxicity of construction in his building, speaking at press conference calling attention to lawsuits against Mahfar, on 4/20/15.

Tenant Relocation Specialist hearing at City Hall; pictured L-R: Harvey Epstein (Urban Justice Center’s Community Development Project), CSC organizers Yonatan Tadele and Brandon Kielbasa, and tenant leader Shawn Dahl, 4/29/15

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• May
  o Coordinated a building walk-through for tenants of 41 E. 7th St. (building affected by gas explosion on Second Avenue) with HPD to get services restored – 5/6/15
  o Mobilized 40+ tenants for rally in Foley Square to strengthen rent laws. After the rally, tenants marched across the Manhattan Bridge – 5/14/15
  o Participated in a panel discussion run by the Interference Archive. Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasaba and tenant leader and CSC board member Ted Osborne were amongst 10 other panelists in attendance discussing the fight for stronger rents and methods for curbing gentrification – 5/16/15
  o Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasaba presented at the New School's student housing forum in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. The presentation centered on how a student can become more engaged in NYC’s housing movement – 5/23/15
  o Our Lead Organizer and his creative partner Emily Gallagher conducted another rendition of their Tenants Rights Walking Tour – 5/30/15

• June
  o 222 E 12th beginning their Housing Court case
  o With the help of staff organizer Yonatan Tadele, and legal assistance from MFY Legal Services, residents of 222 E 12th St. - an Icon Realty-owned SRO building and member of Icon Community United (ICU) - began a tandem HP & Harassment Action against their landlord. - 6/4/15
  o Mobilized 30+ tenants to attend major housing rally in Albany. The Organizing Department captained one bus which included tenants mobilized by Cooper Square and Met Council on Housing – 6/9/15
  o Major Stabilizing NYC press conference on the steps of City Hall. The Organizing Department worked with ICU (ICON tenants) to have one of their tenant leaders, Chris Dombrowski, speak at this press conference. Chris did a great job & we had a major presence at this large press conference – 6/11/15
  o 128 2nd Ave. tenants association, the tenants of a ICON building, held a press conference outside of Manhattan Housing Court to call attention to their “contempt of court” filing against their landlord. CSC's Organizing Dept helped coordinate the press conference. UJC was our legal partner on this case. Both the tenants and the attorneys did amazing work here – 6/18/15
  o Attended Rent Guidelines Board rally at Cooper Union. Mobilized tenants from the neighborhood to attend the rally. The RGB eventually enacted their first-ever 0% rent increase! – 6/24/15

• July
  o Coordinated meeting with M&T Bank to discuss ICON Realty – 7/15/15
  o In conjunction with ANHD, coordinated meeting with BankUnited to discuss ICON Realty – 7/24/15
• August
  o Did extensive work to prepare for September's introduction of bills for the Stand for Tenant Safety campaign
  o Brian Marko talking on PIX11 about Icon & predatory equity
  o Brian Marko, a resident of 222 E 12th St., appeared on PIX11 with Kerri White - an organizer at the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board (UHAB) - to discuss predatory equity and his experiences with his landlord, Icon Realty - 8/18/15
• September
  o Mayor de Blasio signs the three new tenant relocation specialist (a.k.a. tenant relocators) bills into law!!! CSC and UJC played a big role in calling for these new laws. There is no question that Councilmembers Mark-Viverito, Williams, and Garodnick deserve a huge amount of credit here too – 9/1/15
  o Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasa spoke at the Tenants of 90 Elizabeth Street press conference (1 of 2 in 2015). He focused his speech on the need for DOB reform as the tenants here have faced very intense "construction as harassment." – 9/10/15
  o CSC organizers Yonatan Tadele and Brandon Kielbasa presented for students of the School for International Training (SIT) Graduate Institute. The presentation focused on CSC's approach to organizing tenants around affordable housing issues (especially anti-displacement organizing) – 9/10/15
  o Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasa presented for the Emergency Rent Arrears Coalition. The presentation focused on the three new tenant relocation specialist laws and the STS (DOB reform) campaign – 9/16/15
  o CSC's organizing dept. facilitated a large community education session to prepare tenants for the upcoming introduction of eleven STS bills. The event pulled together 40+ LES'ers and was an in-depth explanation of the STS campaign – 9/17/15
  o Big, fun sign-making party hosted by CSC's Organizing Dept to create artwork for the upcoming introduction of the STS bills – (Saturday) 9/17/15
  o Settlement agreement was reached for the tenants of 128 2nd Ave. UJC and CSC partnered on this and were able to hammer out a very solid settlement agreement with ICON Realty. The tenants repeatedly mobilized and spoke at press conference to describe what they had been through and call for a fair deal – 9/27/15
  o MAJOR press conference on the steps of City Hall for the introduction of the STS Legislative Package. CSC mobilized 40+ community members and Robert Pinter (CSC board member and tenant leader extraordinaire) was a key tenant speaker at the press conference. CSC landed multiple press mentions. Broadcast and print journalists covered the event extensively – 9/30/15
• October
  o CSC annual gala which celebrated the Organizing Dept's great work. Awards were given to the Mahfar Tenants Alliance & the Icon Community United tenants coalitions for the amazing work at pushing back against two of the neighborhood’s most aggressive landlords – 10/1/15
- Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasa presented for the Tenement Museum educators. The presentation focused on contemporary housing issues in the EV/LES and how the educators can raise consciousness about these issues – 10/29/15

- November
  - The LEAP panel presentation
  - Staff organizer Yonatan Tadele, along with housing attorneys from UJC, NYLPI, and the Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation (NMIC), gave a presentation to other legal aid professionals on the STS Coalition. The group highlighted cases involving construction and health risks caused by dangerous construction practices, and discussed the STS campaign’s goals and legislative aims - 11/13/15
  - Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasa presented at the Manhattan Community Board 3 Housing and Land Use Sub-Committee meeting with the citywide Right to Council coalition. The presentation focused on the need for fair representation in Housing Court – 11/18/15
  - Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasa was on a panel for students of the Baruch College regarding healthy housing. The panel included scientists and NYC agency administrators who focused on topics related to healthy housing. Brandon mainly focused his comments on CSC’s approach to organizing tenants around housing issues (especially those related to unsafe housing conditions) – 11/19/15
  - CSC’s Organizing Dept. facilitated a major meeting between ICU tenant leaders, elected officials, and ICON Realty principals. Lots of work went into this event from all involved. Lead Organizer Brandon Kielbasa emceed the meeting. ICU tenant leaders prepared and presented strong statements and a list of demands to ICON Reality – 11/30/15

- December
  - Facilitated a Know Your Rights workshop (Tenants Rights #2 -- Topics covered: Housing Court, utilizing the Attorney General’s Anti-Harassment Taskforce, and the importance of organizing) for tenants throughout the Lower East Side. Partnered with Housing Court Answers for this training – 12/2/15
  - CSC Organizing Dept. hosted a training for colleagues from throughout the City. This training (for other organizers in the Stabilizing NYC coalition) focused on how to combat tenant harassment and how to use Housing Court in organizing strategies. We facilitated the training with fellow Manhattan groups CAAA, GOLES, & Mirabal Sisters – 12/8/15
  - We participated in the press conference at 90 Elizabeth St and then marched to City Hall with dozens of tenants to show that we need DOB reform now! For the march we partnered with both the Citywide STS coalition and the Stabilizing NYC coalition. We also had the Rude Mechanical Orchestra join us for the march! CSC’s organizing Dept testified at the hearing in support for the bills. This was a big day!! – 12/10/15
  - CSC’s Organizing Dept. presented at CSC’s end of year membership meeting on all the work they’ve done this year – 12/16/15

(top) NYC Councilmember Margaret Chin speaking in front of 90 Elizabeth St at press conference
(bottom) March to City Hall for rally for STS bills 12/10/15