



IN SOLIDARITY

Season 5, Episode 2: Tenants' rights: A matter of health

Transcript

[00:00:00.00] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:05.76] This is In Solidarity, a podcast where we draw connections between power, place, and health and discuss how our lives, our fates are all interconnected. Here are your hosts. Ericka Burroughs-Girardi and Beth silver.

[00:00:20.25] Hi, there. I'm Beth Silver and welcome to In Solidarity. I'm here with my co-host and colleague Ericka Burroughs-Girardi for the second of a four episode series on organizing for health.

[00:00:31.96] There are many just causes to organize around, causes that impact our health and the health of our communities. Take housing, we know from our own model of health that having access to safe affordable housing is critical to health. And the US has a history, one mired in racism, redlining, corporate greed, unequal balances of power.

[00:00:59.05] Yet despite it all, many have rallied around just causes like healthy and affordable housing and organize for a better future for themselves and for their neighbors.

[00:01:10.70] That's right, Ericka. That's why in this episode we're talking about the power of organizing, focusing on the tenants' rights movement, how these groups have protected renters from abuse and how they've improved living conditions.

[00:01:24.56] It's inspirational. An example of the power we have together to improve health and well-being for everyone. And research tells us that there's another benefit. Organizing to improve housing can also lead residents to become more politically engaged, a topic we've covered in previous seasons.

[00:01:45.13] And we know from our 2024 national findings report, when residents are more engaged in the decisions that impact them, communities are healthier.

[00:01:54.97] Ericka, I'm so excited to hear from our guest for the episode, Dr. Jamila Michener. She's a Professor of Government and Public policy at Cornell University, specializing in racial inequality, health, and housing. She's the author of the book *Fragmented Democracy, Medicaid, Federalism and Unequal Politics*, and she's authored numerous studies, including *Racism, Power, and Health Equity*, *The Case of Tenant Organizing*.



[00:02:21.39] The study was recently featured in Health Affairs. So with that, let's get into it.

[00:02:26.35] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:02:30.31] Dr. Michener, it's great to have you on our podcast. So thank you so much for joining us.

[00:02:36.33] Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited for this conversation.

[00:02:40.24] Can you explain the connection between organizing around housing and tenants' rights and our health?

[00:02:48.33] When I first started to study tenant organizing, I had already been for a long time a scholar focused on health and health equity. But I came to these things in separate spaces, I came to my work on tenant organizing, and I wasn't initially thinking about it through the lens of health. And then I started to talk to tenants and I started to talk to people about what drove them to participate in tenant organizing processes.

[00:03:17.14] And what I realized was a lot of what they were experiencing that motivated them to collectively organize and to try to work to change and improve their living conditions were things that were threatening and imperiling their health and the health of their families. So everything from lead poisoning and asbestos in the home to mold and insect infestations to overheating or under heating to over cooling or under cooling, these are all things that affect people's health and the health of their families.

[00:03:53.66] And our homes are really the locus in many ways of our lives, and that makes them the center of our well-being. And so when something is going wrong in your home because you have a landlord that won't fix a problem or because you live somewhere that hasn't been properly maintained, so on and so forth, that has a direct connection to your physical well-being and also your mental health.

[00:04:19.41] It's hard not just in terms of the physical conditions, but it's hard mentally and emotionally to live in a place that people feel is hurting them and harming them. So many connections between health and housing. And then tenant organizing is how you go from the conditions to how to change them.

[00:04:41.44] So those things are linked to, if you want to think about health in terms of health equity, you want to think about how to make things better for people, then you need processes of change. And organizing is most fundamentally an effort to make transformational change.

[00:04:58.89] What are the successes we see when residents organize?

[00:05:03.72] This has been one of the most enjoyable parts of my work as I've been studying tenant organizing is to see the possibilities in people and in communities when they work together collectively towards shared ends and based on shared needs and values. I do think it's a little challenging these days.



[00:05:29.12] If you watch the news, it feels like there are all of these problems and there really are and there are staggering astounding problems, economic inequality and poverty and climate change, and so on and so forth. The global markets and housing and employment and a lot of these things feel like they're way far out of our control. When you start to focus on tenant organizing, you see what people can do when they organize and when they believe in their ability to change the circumstances of their lives.

[00:06:00.98] And so I have seen tenants that have organized across the scale for small things that aren't really small. Like, we don't have any heat in our building and we live someplace where it gets really cold in the winter and we're going on two or three years without having heat. People are getting sick. They're having asthma attacks, they're suffering in all kinds of ways.

[00:06:24.30] Depending on your landlord, you might have a corporate landlord that's super far away. It might feel like there's not much you can do. I've seen tenants organize, put pressure on corporate landlords, launch media campaigns through direct tactics like protests and rallies and direct action, but also through engaging legislators and policymakers and officials.

[00:06:46.25] I've seen them go from, we have no heat in our building and this landlord doesn't care to now the landlord having to change that circumstance, even though it cost them because of the actions that tenants have taken. And there are so many examples like that. Even outside of the scope of housing, when tenants decide that they want to participate in change processes, they can.

[00:07:10.07] One example is in Kansas City, Missouri. The tenants union there, they were part of an effort to organize to block the process of a stadium that was being built, a sports stadium and complex that was going to drive gentrification and was going to create the broader conditions that often lead to the harms that, that tenants face.

[00:07:37.41] And how do you make sure that when things are being built in your neighborhood that are ultimately going to lead to potentially displacement or harm, that you have a voice in, that you have a say in that, whether it's stopping it from happening, ensuring that the benefits of that end up coming back to the community or what have you. And we'd be here all day, I could go on all day with examples of tenants powerfully changing the circumstances of their communities.

[00:08:02.28] And these are low income folks, these are not people who have a lot of resources often, but power resources come through people. When we have a David-Goliath situation and there are many of these in the housing space, people working together can do incredible things.

[00:08:21.85] Your research underscores the relationship between racism, power, health, and equity. How do you define power and how does power play into organizing and health equity?

[00:08:37.03] Power is in the research academic realm. It's something that we theorize about. There are faces of power and there are different power. And so there's a way you could be super theoretical and abstract and nuanced in defining power, but as a starting point, because so much of what I'm talking



about when I'm talking about tenant organizing is about people and communities, I always start with the most straightforward and simple definition.

[00:09:07.67] And that is power is the ability, the capacity that people have to affect the circumstances and conditions that shape their lives. If something's happening to you and it's harmful, do you have any ability to influence the processes that can change that or the processes that determine that? It doesn't mean that you have a determinative influence, like for sure can change whatever you want to change.

[00:09:38.45] Very few people have that power, the power to unilaterally or always inevitably make the changes that they want in the world. But do you have influence over those processes that's substantial, that's systematic and that's meaningful, meaningful influence over the conditions that shape your life. That is power, and it can be something that people exercise on an individual level.

[00:10:08.58] But when you think about it in terms of broader social processes and organizing, that's about exercising power through collective action and collective efforts to work together to change circumstances that affect the lives of many people. I think it's common to think about power in terms of elites. When we think about power, we might think about elected officials, we might think about the president, we might think about somebody who heads an agency in the government.

[00:10:40.41] And those folks, they do have power. They're making decisions that shape the conditions of people's lives all the time. But what I think is important not to miss are the power resources that exist on the ground, in the grassroots in people's communities. And those take some effort to channel and to build.

[00:11:02.36] But when we invest that effort into building and channeling power in communities, it is incredible what's possible. And we can be cynical about that. I mean, as a political scientist, have spent a lot of time being cynical about what's possible. You look at outcomes in the world and you see challenging things and it feels like, where really are the possibilities for something being truly different?

[00:11:32.54] One of the things I've enjoyed the most about really spending time with tenant organizers and with tenants who are fighting for change is watching what power looks like on the ground in communities. Where it comes from when you're intentional about building and expanding it and then deploying it strategically toward shared ends.

[00:11:54.43] That is just something that has honestly rebuilt my faith in democracy, not democracy in terms of the hallowed halls of our political institutions in a proper sense, but democracy in terms of what people when they're engaged and involved can do, what they're capable of.

[00:12:18.85] That's beautiful. Let's talk a little bit more about what you said, what it looks like, because I want to get into that a little bit and talk about why is power necessary for building healthy communities? So what does it look like and why is it necessary?



[00:12:37.83] There's this quote by Frederick Douglass that I always offer anyone who ever hears this and they're like, gosh, she's saying this again, but I think it's so critical. Douglass said, "Power concedes nothing without demand. It never has. It never will."

[00:12:53.14] So the thing about power is that you need it in order to get the things that are good for you in your life. And part of what our country looks like just thinking about our political economy, the US political economy, it's really characterized by some pretty striking things. One is dramatic inequality, economic inequality, racial inequality, gendered inequality, and more.

[00:13:27.70] That is, at this point it's a part of our lives. It's undeniable to anyone who is attentive to not just the historical record, but the contemporary empirical reality of life in the US. And in that context, people face all really challenging circumstances. What do you do if there's asbestos in your apartment and it gets identified or lead in your apartment or your home?

[00:13:57.50] It gets identified, I mean, I give an example in some of my research of a woman who finds out that there's lead in her home because her son goes to the doctor, her toddler goes to the doctor, and they run some tests and they find out he has dangerously high levels of lead in his blood. That's how she finds out there's lead in her home.

[00:14:18.88] And when she goes to her landlord and says there's lead in the home, the landlord does nothing. It's in his best interest to do nothing because guess what, it's really expensive to abate lead. And guess what, there's not much she can do to him. Oh, she can go to the health department and they can fine him. That fine is cheaper than what it costs to abate the lead.

[00:14:42.55] So you eat the fine and you leave the lead and here is somebody who continues to live in a home with them and their children are being poisoned. And if you don't have the resources to get out, what happens? You're stuck. And this is just one example, there are so many situations like this happening in people's lives. And when it's just versus that landlord, you really are stuck and you may end up living for a prolonged period of time in a situation that is directly harming the health of you and your family.

[00:15:14.36] But when it's not just and the landlord, when that power imbalance gets turned on its head because you are accompanied by a whole group of people in your tenant union who are willing to stand with you and fight that landlord, and then also who are willing to think about why landlords like that can exist, what are laws and policies are like that facilitate and perpetuate that so that it's not just your landlord that gets dealt with, but it's the larger community that benefits from consistent efforts to change these things.

[00:15:45.28] Well, on the ground, even once you have that group of people behind you, what do you do? And that's where you start to see power at work. First of all, you let your landlord know I'm organized, I'm not alone. And then you start to figure out what channels, what levers you could pull. You think strategically about the levers available to you.



[00:16:06.11] And depending on your political context, that lever might be your local elected representative. It might be your state representative, it might be your mayor. It might be your city council. It may be some combination thereof. But if you're somewhere where you can't, you find it difficult for those folks to be responsive, then you look for other levers to pull.

[00:16:28.28] Can you directly target that landlord as a part of a larger corporate entity that you can target, that you can embarrass in the media, that you can make what's happening salient so that there's a response to it? And if that doesn't work, you keep thinking strategically about what you can do to address the conditions that are facing you and people like you, the people that you're organized with. And that process as it unfolds, it's really multifaceted, it crosses different political institutions.

[00:16:59.81] Maybe you're going to target code enforcement. Why is this being allowed? Why don't we have more ways of holding people accountable? There's so many options, we have a complex, multifaceted, multilevel political system. There are a lot of ways that people can intervene in that system.

[00:17:16.61] But when they're alone and they're unorganized, that's hard to do. When they're acting collectively and they're organized so that they can make choices strategically about where the proper levers of power are in relation to the problems they're facing, well, that opens up a whole new world of possibilities.

[00:17:36.83] In your article, Racism, Power, and Health Equity, you talk about tenants who live in unsafe and unhealthy conditions across the US. I mean, Sheila's story was heartbreaking. What are some of the themes that you heard across those interviews?

[00:17:55.16] We can underestimate how much people are suffering when they're in their homes. Even if you're not being displaced, even if you're not being evicted in your home, you're suffering and there's so much health harm that comes from that. Because if you don't have the resources to do something about it or the ability to make sure that whomever you're renting your home from does something about it, you really are exposed and vulnerable in pretty profound ways.

[00:18:25.20] And so that was the vulnerability of being negatively affected by housing conditions was something that came up again and again. And one theme that really stuck with me was how those things are layered on. So Sheila, who I talk about at the beginning of the paper that you mentioned, it's not just that there's one thing happening.

[00:18:49.92] It's that she has an infant with severe health problems and multiple things are happening. There's a broken window that won't get fixed, and there are issues with leaks, and so there are things leaking on you. There are issues with insect infestations. I mean, it's one thing after another after another.

[00:19:09.13] So those cumulative harmful housing conditions, the number of people that are facing appalling housing conditions in this country, with all of the wealth and abundance that we have is something that will never be normalized for me, and it certainly came out in this research. Another thing



that came out that was really striking is there are many people who don't do anything about that because they don't feel they can and they don't know what to do.

[00:19:39.88] And so when I interview ordinary tenants who are not connected to organizations or organizing in any way, their sense of powerlessness, their profound sense of powerlessness really strikes me because that really ties in to people's civic and political health and their mental and emotional health. When you feel like you can't take care of your children, you can't protect them from obvious harm, you can't stop them from being poisoned. There's nothing that will make you feel more terrible and like less than, than being in a situation like that.

[00:20:16.42] So the element of powerlessness and how much powerlessness fuels health disparities in terms of mental health and other things, that is a theme that came up a lot. And then the final thing I would say is just what can happen when people do decide to do something, when they do decide that they want to address these conditions and not alone, but by organizing, by joining tenant organizations.

[00:20:46.47] I've been telling people I'm doing research on tenant organizations, most people don't know what that is. They don't know what's really possible through an institution like that. And so being able to talk to people who have taken that step and who do know what's possible and seeing what comes up again and again is that these institutions, tenant organizations, can address that powerlessness. They can address that, and they can bring people out of a space of powerlessness and into a space of exercising power.

[00:21:16.92] And that theme of that transition from powerlessness that is harming your health to exercising power that not only can benefit your health, but that of your whole community. That really is at the crux of what I wanted to convey in that piece.

[00:21:31.59] Walk us through a brief history of tenant organizing in this country and what does tenant organizing look like today?

[00:21:40.67] I love to think about tenant organizing in historical perspective, and I'd love to tell people there's actually a long history of tenant organizing in this country and across the world. It's not actually a phenomenon that is at all limited to the US, but even in the context of the US. In the early 1900s, we saw tenant organizing. New York City was really a hotbed of this at the beginning of the 20th century.

[00:22:12.18] And it was in many ways like more revolutionary then. We had tenant organizations in New York City that had thousands and thousands of members. And that were really pushing back against pretty unregulated slumlords at the time. So many of us, even if we live in a place where we have a landlord that's quite terrible, there are going to be some regulations that we can turn to and call on. It really depends on where you live, on what state you live in.

[00:22:45.51] But wherever you are, if there are regulations that you can benefit from as a tenant, it's likely that you can trace that back to tenant organizing on a historical scale. And so the organizing that was going on in places like New York City in the early 1900s is really incredible, if we could resurrect some of that. And it's always, I want to say, important to recognize.



[00:23:12.38] They did not have cell phones, they did not have television, they didn't have everyone watching the news or reading the news. They didn't have social media and they were able to organize tens of thousands of people, why? Because those people were living in desperate conditions and were willing to do something about it. And so we have all of these additional tools today and are even more, I think, in many ways capable of taking action.

[00:23:40.81] And so long, long history in this country of tenant organizing, but also a history of repression of tenant organizing. So that tenant organizing that we saw flourished in many ways and start to really grow and have influence in the early 1900s was also tamped down. And one of the ways that, that was done early on was by the anticommunism, antisocialism movements that emerge.

[00:24:12.93] McCarthyism and forms versions of it historically that labeled tenant organizers who were saying things like, we want opportunities for tenants to be owners, who are thinking critically about ownership and commodification of housing and things like this. And I will say in the early 1900s, many of these folks, they did identify as and were communists or socialists or what have you. And so that was something that opened them up to targeting, and we saw that kind of wide scale targeting.

[00:24:49.62] And since then, we've seen really ebbs and flows. There was an ebb in tenant organizing in the 1960s through the early 1980s. And not surprising, that was when there were a lot of movements that were afoot, the Civil Rights movement and so on and so forth.

[00:25:05.93] What can the public health field learn from the successes and failures too of tenant organizing?

[00:25:16.00] I think that public health is often disconnected from politics and power and not intentionally. But in part when people come into the space of public health, they're not always thinking about things in terms of politics and power, they're thinking about social needs and how to meet those needs. And that is an emphasis that sometimes is really like it cuts against the grain of power.

[00:25:44.91] You're looking at people who are vulnerable and you're thinking about how to meet their needs. And it's often the need meeting is coming from either public health agencies and officials or social service agencies and other agencies that are working with folks who are vulnerable, folks who have needs, and all of that is important, it's really important.

[00:26:07.72] But you can end up in a scenario where you're not recognizing that people don't just have needs, they also have capacities, they have ability, and they have power that can be grown and channeled. And that hasn't always been salient in the public health context, hasn't often been salient. I teach a class on campus on health equity, politics, and power.

[00:26:35.20] And I get a lot of students who are interested in public health who come to that class because it has health equity in the title. And they're like, wow, health equity is political, public health is political. And that means as much as sometimes we want to be politically neutral because we don't want to get caught in the crosshairs of anything, and I can understand that and some of this work, it doesn't



have to be and it's not always best positioned as being partisan or there could be a division of labor. Some people are doing that more partisan super political work.

[00:27:07.50] But power, whether you think about it in partisan terms or just in terms of what ability the people who are most affected have to influence change? That has to be at the center always. And I think that's a major lesson that I try to bring to folks in the health and public health fields that we don't want to just chart all the disparities. There are so many health disparities related to housing, related to racism, and so on and so forth.

[00:27:36.40] And we have built a lot of knowledge about them as scholars of health, public health, social science, and we should continue building and deepening that knowledge. But we can build all the knowledge about the disparities that we want and they will not go anywhere as a result. Not unless someone has the power to make sure that the harms we're identifying through our research are actually addressed.

[00:28:02.53] And so how do you get from the knowledge to the change? Well, that requires power. And so as the ones producing the knowledge, we have to think about how to catalyze the change. And to do that, we have to pay attention to who has power and who doesn't. We have to study that so we can understand how to change power processes in ways that can really seed social change.

[00:28:29.18] And if there's something that I want my folks who care a lot about health to think about is to think about making sure that health and power are integrated in our minds so that we don't end up producing research that does not ultimately bear fruit in the world.

[00:28:48.84] You highlight two ways that tenants can fight against unhealthy housing conditions, direct action and local policy change. Can you say more about these two strategies?

[00:29:03.67] There are other strategies, I will say, but you don't want to overwhelm people. So I decided to focus on two strategies in part because they're very different and they reflect the vast array of political contexts that tenants are operating in. And not every tenant has every strategy open to them as a possibility at any given point in time, really depends on where you are.

[00:29:27.85] And so one of the reasons that I focus on direct action is because direct action can be targeted in a very local and specific way. Direct action might be, we are going to show up at the offices of this corporate landlord and we're going to make noise. We're going to embarrass them, we're going to make it difficult for them to do business as usual until they come to the table and they bargain with us.

[00:29:55.03] And so if you want to be able to develop processes of collective bargaining, tenant unions, they look at labor unions, they look at what are the institutions that can help us to negotiate for and demand what we want. And unions and collective bargaining in particular, is such a historically important institution for getting people who have the numbers, but maybe who don't have the elite forms of power to pressure the folks who do have the financial resources and power to come to the table.



[00:30:30.05] And how do you pressure them to come to the table? Direct action is often a part of that. Think about rent strikes, just like labor strikes. You know what, you're not going to pay attention to us, but when you stop getting your money, you will. Now, if I stop paying my landlord all on my own, I'm just going to get evicted. But if the whole building organizes and if we find the other buildings you own in the city and we all organize, now there's 50 of us, there's hundreds of us, there's 1,000 of us.

[00:30:59.30] Now we're not paying our rent, not because we can't pay our rent, although maybe some of us can't, but because we need you to come to the table to pay attention to us, to listen to us, to bargain with us. And so we rent strike and we rally and we show up places and we make your life difficult and we disrupt. And at the same time, we reach out to you and say, you want this to stop? Work with us.

[00:31:24.59] Another example of direct action is eviction blockade. So someone's going to be evicted, everyone in the tenant organization shows up and surrounds their house. And when the sheriff comes to evict them, you can't get through. And every time they're going to be evicted because lots of states require that you give people notice of this, we're going to show up.

[00:31:48.92] And eventually the thing is, I can't get this person, OK, let's negotiate. What's happened that has led to this, every eviction represents a failure of the state and a failure of whatever entity is perpetuating that eviction because everyone should have access to and a right to a roof over their head. And so what is the failure been and how can we create a different outcome?

[00:32:14.21] Often you cannot motivate that negotiation, that bargaining, unless you make life difficult for people. You make it not easy for them to go about business as usual and direct action can really facilitate that. It can also facilitate just drawing attention to an issue. In political science we call this expanding the scope of the conflict when it's just me and my merry band.

[00:32:39.14] This corporate landlord with offices all over the world, they can ignore me. But if we make enough noise by acting collectively to draw attention to this issue, those very local forms of direct action can have reverberating effects. But often direct action, it doesn't always lead to policy change. Sometimes mostly is about getting immediate needs met.

[00:33:04.98] We want this landlord or this property manager to come to the table and to work with us to improve conditions. And while that's important, it's limited because another building across the city, they may not benefit from that collective bargaining. Someone else in a different part of the state may not benefit from it, and people around the country may not benefit from it.

[00:33:26.43] Now, sometimes direct action is all you have. If you live in a state that is a really difficult place to organize around these things where landlords, apartment associations, realtors have a tremendous amount of power and influence in the political sphere, they're lining the pockets of politicians across the parties, and it's going to be really difficult for you to make any headway in the policy space. At the very least, you can still do these forms of localized direct action that get you some material relief from the conditions that are harming you.



[00:33:58.36] And so sometimes that's necessary, and sometimes it's the only path. And then in other places, there's a path to wider, more transformative change. You're not just getting a landlord or a property management company to come to the table and stop doing harmful predatory things, you're getting a policy maker to sit down with you and think about how to create policy that stops any landlord in your city or any landlord in your state from doing that to anybody.

[00:34:26.98] That's a different level, and it's a challenging level because it requires even more power. But it also is where you get opportunities for real transformation. So the policy change pathway, that creates opportunities for broader transformation. And I guess the last thing I'd say about this is that these pathways are connected. When you get those wins on a local level, you can then build the power that you need to get broader wins.

[00:34:57.10] And so I'm thinking about a tenant union in particular that I talk about in some of my work and I know that people know about them. Anyone who's listening to this podcast, who's really familiar with the work of different tenant unions will know exactly who I'm talking about. And they started with a very local campaign to remove a property management company that was just really harmful and really terrible to people in their city.

[00:35:24.94] And at the beginning of this tenant union developing, that was what the people in the union really wanted, it was where they were feeling the most pain. And so you want to go to where the pain is and you want to try to address that. And it also was what was possible. You could target through your city council, through the housing authorities.

[00:35:44.26] You could really put pressure on them, you could create the circumstances that would make it difficult for them to keep retaining this property manager to manage the city's public housing properties when they were a known bad actor. And when they won that campaign through a pursuing and winning that campaign, they further built the power of the tenant union.

[00:36:05.11] And when they got that local win that was really focused just on the particular property manager, you might be like, great, got your property manager changed. This isn't the transformative change that we think is going to make things truly better. But they built power through that. They showed people, you can win, we can help you to win, we can do something.

[00:36:29.53] And then once they had more power, they could do more. And so they set their sights on a different ordinance, on a displacement ordinance that would say, you know what, you can't fund development that's going to lead to displacement in Black communities. That was a much more challenging political lift, but they were able to get there. They were able to get to the policy change by starting with the direct action.

[00:36:52.69] And so these things are connected and you got to think about strategy and sequencing. And that's what's beautiful about organizing. It's not like just throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what sticks. Let's just have a bunch of rallies and hopefully someone will pay attention. It's strategic collective action. There's a plan, there's an understanding of politics and of power and how they operate and attempt to leverage that understanding for the good of the people who are suffering the most.



[00:37:21.31] Well, how can public health organizations support organizers and community power building organizations?

[00:37:29.57] I think this is a great question. I think the first thing I would say to public health organizations is to really look for where this is happening in the communities that you are operating within. I'm trying to build a database right now of tenant associations, organizations, and unions across the country. And the most frustrating part of this database is that it's constantly changing.

[00:37:54.20] We think we got all the tenant organizations in California, let me go back to do one last quick check, and there are more that have popped up. And so it really is a moving target and I think public health organizations have to remain aware of when these formations are emerging in their context. And then think about if and how they can build bridges and relationships with tenant organizations.

[00:38:16.76] What they can learn from them about what the needs are and what if and how they can support them. One of the things that a lot of public health organizations have is access to people, access to the very people who are facing the social conditions the tenant organizers are trying to address. They can facilitate connections.

[00:38:36.78] They can facilitate the power building efforts that are happening within tenant organizations by directing people to tenant organizations, sometimes by partnering with them. I mean, one challenge that tenant organizations face is that they're really trying to think strategically about how to build power. But the people that they're engaging, as they do so have real material needs that cannot be ignored.

[00:39:00.93] And so yeah, you want to show up at the direct action, but your kid is breathing in asbestos day in and day out. And tenant organizations have to square that circle and often the way they do it is by being able to point people towards the places that will provide them with resources. And it's easier to organize someone when that lead is being taken care of.

[00:39:23.39] When there's food in their belly, when they have some of their material needs met. So the organizations that are meeting the material needs, partnering with the organizations that are building the power resources because people need both in their lives. They need their basic needs met and they need power so that they're not just living from basic need to basic need, that they're not just subsisting so that they can thrive.

[00:39:49.34] And so those partnerships, they don't occur magically. You have to be open to them, you have to be looking for them. There's lots of challenges to them. Many public health organizations that have federal funding, you can't get involved in political campaigns, but that doesn't mean that you can't get involved in something. That may not be in a formal sense of political campaign.

[00:40:11.13] And so really looking for opportunities and finding ways to overcome what might be barriers and believing that the people that you're helping don't just have deficits that need to be addressed by you, but have assets, have capacities that you can help to cultivate.



[00:40:30.50] And sometimes community members are just not aware of how they can even build this power. So where can community members find information about their rights to organize?

[00:40:43.74] Well, I mentioned this earlier, but I will mention it again. We now have Tenant Union Federation. And so literally the name is Tenant Union Federation, the acronym is TUF. I encourage anybody to look this up and TUF allows you on their website, you can reach out to them. You can say, I'm a tenant and I want to organize, tell me what to do.

[00:41:06.67] You can get information directly from an organization that's trying to seed this work all over the country. And then in a lot of places there are local tenant organizations. And if you look up your city and then tenant union or tenant association, just a very basic Google search, there are places where these don't exist, but there are more places than you know where they do exist.

[00:41:28.27] And if you can find other tenants in your city that are looking to do this work, even in rural areas, there are more and more tenant organizations emerging. And if you can find that, then what you can do is find pointers from organizations like TUF and others about how you start one. Because it sounds daunting, but most tenant organizations are started by ordinary people who want to tackle the problems that are affecting them.

[00:41:55.45] You can do this even if it seems difficult, even if you have no experience. There are resources out there that can be brought to bear to support people in their work. We need more people building more effective formations like this so that we can get to the power that allows for transformative change.

[00:42:17.12] Dr. Michener, that was amazing. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with our listeners today.

[00:42:23.15] I'm grateful to have been able to do so, thank you.

[00:42:26.41] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:42:32.72] So interesting to hear Dr. Michener's insights into the tenants' rights movement. I loved what she said, the importance for public health in recognizing that power is necessary for change, that public health can't be afraid to engage in using power to improve health outcomes. The clear connection she made between power, racism, and health, and the inspiring stories she shared on how renters are organizing for their rights and ultimately for their health.

[00:43:00.63] Right Beth. We know that unhealthy living conditions are more than being unable to afford a nicer place to live. Even if you do stretch to obtain that nicer, safer place to live, you may then have to forego other things like healthy food for your family or necessary medical treatments. These things also take a toll on your health.



[00:43:23.94] There are so many other compounding conditions and historical factors, and they play into how well and how long we live, which is why I really appreciated how Dr. Michener emphasized that while tenants in her research were able to achieve a lot, the reality is organizing is challenging. It takes time and resources from people who are already carrying a lot on their shoulders.

[00:43:49.95] So true, Ericka. Organizing is a strategy that has worked for centuries, but it's hard work. The onus to change conditions should not be on the community members alone, that idea is central to this series. How can public health share some of this burden? Our conversation with Dr. Michener reminds us that while we're focused on pressing issues, public health also needs to address the root causes, the power dynamics that prop up a system that can harm so many.

[00:44:18.10] Absolutely, Beth. I'm looking forward to our next episode in this series. We're interviewing Dr. Paul Lee, a Professor Emeritus at UC Davis. We'll ask him about how labor unions improve health outcomes. And we'll ask Dr. Lee, is organizing inherently political? Until then, I'm Ericka.

[00:44:40.15] And I'm Beth.

[00:44:41.35] And we're In Solidarity, connecting power, place, and health.

[00:44:45.49] [MUSIC PLAYING]

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