Twice in the past 15 years, residents of a subsidized affordable housing building have had to fight to keep their rents affordable.

Baolian Kuang, who is now a Community Organizer for the Chinese Progressive Association, Boston, talks about the first time tenants had to fight to keep their rents affordable in their subsidized apartment building, “End of 2003, I moved to Chauncey House... and then we all got the notice from the landlord that they will increase rent by 25% for everyone.... A very big increase. Our building has total 88 units and in the 88 units, all the people are low income. Some work in restaurants, some elderly, some take care of baby at home. Like me at that time. I’m not working at that time. A 25% increase is hard for all the families in the building. I have some neighbors who knew CPA because they had a worker issue before. They asked CPA’s help...

“Chauncey House, before CPA’s help, we don’t have tenant association. But after we got CPA, they helped us hold a meeting and then we created a tenant association during that time. Each floor had a representative... one or two representatives because a lot of people work in restaurants. They have long hours. And then each floor, the representative can go back during the nighttime to do a door knock and tell the tenants who cannot attend the meeting... Like me, I go study English for 2-3 hours. But I can use my night time after the restaurant workers come home to talk to them about what we need to do right now. Like when we have a petition or something we ask them to sign. All the tenants stay involved in the campaign. Even if they can’t attend the meeting every time, they are still involved in the campaign.
“We wrote a letter to ask the landlord to sit down with us. We got Boston Legal Services to figure out with us the landlord, the notice, all the things. We talked to officials in the city and the state... We signed a lot of petitions about why we cannot afford a 25% rent increase. We use different tenants to speak out. Not only me. We have so many tenants who talk about their story in front of the landlord. We use the media. The Boston Globe and Chinatown media to make this campaign for the whole community to know what was happening. And we got community support.... We stopped the rent increase... After a few years, they still increased a little bit but the tenants are still organized. Because they still have the tenant association.”

And then, more recently, the tenants had to step up again for another major fight to preserve their homes. Baolian says, “Just 2-3 years ago, the 236 subsidies [Section 236 is a Federal affordable housing program] were expiring. It means no more money from the state, federal. The rents can become market rent. You know market rent is more than $2,000 each month. But the whole building of tenants mobilized again. They signed petitions to the landlord, to the state government, to the city government, to the federal government to keep it affordable.” And now, Chauncey House received additional funding for it to be affordable for 30 more years and Baolin has gone from a volunteer tenant organizer, active in her own building, to staff of CPA Boston, fighting for the entire community.

Other Wins & Lessons Learned

Speaking Up, Even if You are not Comfortable in English

Baolian says, “I try my best. My language is sometimes a little bit broken. But I hope you can understand what I say. Some tenants they say ‘I cannot speak English.’ That is not the point. We have interpreters. City Hall can provide interpreter. CPA can help you translate. The point is you need to stand up for yourself. If you don’t stand up, nobody can help you. But we must talk with the tenant. If you stand up. Even if you don’t know English. Even

“The point is you need to stand up for yourself. If you don’t stand up, nobody can help you.”
if you don’t know something. But you can tell about a little story about you. That is important.”

The Value of Building a Neighborhood Residents Association

Baolian says, “Before we had the Chinatown Resident Association, the city had meetings but not really listening to the resident voice. But now we have so many campaigns about affordable housing. We have so many tenants in Chinatown. And then the government officials ask we vote for them, we ask them do you support affordable housing. Do you support library come to Chinatown? …. And if they got the seat they need to do something for us. Like the Mayor right now the Mayor- before we asked for the Chinatown library to come. And he agree and sign petition for us. We must use the officials support, and we must bring tenants to all the hearings, to talk about their story, we use media and so many things to gather them.”

“The Chinese Progressive Association is a grassroots community organization which works for full equality and empowerment of the Chinese community in the Greater Boston area and beyond. Our activities seek to improve the living and working conditions of Chinese Americans and to involve ordinary community members in making decisions that affect our lives.”

URL: https://cpaboston.org/