

# JUSTFIX AND BUILDING A 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TENANT RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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## I. INTRODUCTION

JustFix is a non-profit organization that helps create technology to aid in the New York City (NYC) housing justice movement.<sup>1</sup> For the last five years, JustFix has worked with tenants and housing advocates to co-design data driven tools to fight harassment and displacement in the NYC housing market. These tools range from information disseminating phone apps for tenants to data dashboards that aggregate open data for advocates and policy makers. Throughout the evolution of our organization, the core values that guide our mission and process have remained unchanged: to build with, not for, the communities we support; to use technology to augment, not replace, existing support services; and to leverage data to fight laws that perpetuate housing inequality.

The JustFix team came together in the summer of 2015, when I met my co-founders Dan Kass, and Ashley Treni during our fellowship at the Robin Hood Foundation at Blue Ridge Labs.<sup>2</sup> Blue Ridge Labs specializes in supporting early-stage social technology ventures,<sup>3</sup> supporting technologists to explore and build new digital services that address issues faced by low-income New Yorkers. The early days of our research were devoted to information gathering and listening, simply seeking to understand how tenants encountered and understood issues of neglect and harassment. We conducted one-on-one interviews with tenants across New York City, shadowed community organizers, volunteered on tenants' rights hotlines—anything we could do to learn about their issues and the ecosystem of resources available to NYC tenants. We saw individuals and families across all five boroughs encountering similar challenges of housing disrepair. We also observed the challenging process of seeking repairs from a negligent landlord, the actions tenants took, and who they turned to for support.

Throughout this research, we engaged with the diverse NYC tenant advocacy infrastructure, which includes community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, non-profit legal services, City Council constituent services offices, and more. We observed how few tenants were connected with legal counsel, due to two factors: low representation levels due to insufficient funding for free legal services; and most tenants not viewing their issues to be legal in nature.

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<sup>1</sup> JUSTFIX.NYC, <https://www.justfix.nyc/en/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/5E8L-UU4H>].

<sup>2</sup> BLUE RIDGE LABS@ROBINHOOD, <https://labs.robinhood.org/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/AC4E-V97Y>].

<sup>3</sup> *About Us*, BLUE RIDGE LABS@ROBINHOOD, <https://labs.robinhood.org/about/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/SCQ4-ENX5>].

According to Rebecca Sandefur, sociologist and researcher at the University of Illinois, many individuals and families do not take their civil justice problems to lawyers because they do not understand their problems to be legal: “As we start to recognize that most legal activity isn’t in the legal system, you start to see that really there’s an enormous amount of stuff out there that really isn’t going as it should. And that’s a big crisis because it undermines the rule of law, and it also creates hardship for millions of people.”<sup>4</sup> Sandefur’s research reveals that for many, there is not always a clear path to understanding civil issues as legal issues; they are first and foremost human problems. Our firsthand observations of the difficulty tenants face in taking legal action led to the creation of JustFix’s mission to find ways technology could create the solutions necessary and bridge the gap in the access to justice that exists between those with privilege and those without.

Our products and services have evolved over the past few years in response to continuous engagement with our tenant and advocate users. JustFix initially provided self-help tools for tenants, but over time evolved into offering resources for communities and even collective action. In this article, I will discuss the major steps of how this evolution occurred through ongoing user research and deep knowledge of the systems that perpetuate housing inequality, a responsive and agile product development process, and an ecosystem of partners built through thoughtful engagements and community led development.

## II. DESIGN THINKING / HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

Throughout our research, we have employed many of the methodologies of design thinking and human-centered design. Human-centered design is a process that creates new solutions tailored to suit the particular needs of the designer’s target demographic.<sup>5</sup> At the core of human-centered design is the intention to let people, research, and insights inform solutions to ensure that we solve the right problems. This is different from other problem-solving approaches where you begin with a potential solution and build from there. Though the process and methods can vary, there are a few core principles that govern human-centered design:

- (1) Focus on the people that are directly affected by the issues you are working on;

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<sup>4</sup> Cristian Farias, *Everyone Needs Legal Help. That Doesn’t Mean Everyone Needs a Lawyer.*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 13, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/13/opinion/legal-issues.html> [<https://perma.cc/7327-TS3Y>].

<sup>5</sup> *What is Human-Centered Design?*, DESIGN KIT, <https://www.designkit.org/human-centered-design> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/JSM5-MSCA>].

- (2) Find the right problem (seek the root problems and not just the symptoms);
- (3) Everything is part of a system (always think about the big picture); and
- (4) Always validate your design decisions (test your solution with real people).<sup>6</sup>

In the spirit of human-centered design, we initially had a few ideas and assumptions about what to create, but the first step was to gain a deeper understanding of the problem we were trying to solve. To do this, we conducted generative design research—bringing the people we are designing for directly into the design process in order to ensure that we can meet their needs—by speaking with over fifty New Yorkers to understand their lived experiences as renters in NYC. The tenants emphasized how housing issues affected other aspects of daily life. For example, the difficulties of maintaining a job and raising a family could be compounded by having to lobby a landlord to remove black mold from the bathroom or ensure basic utilities like gas and heat operated properly. We also listened to ways that people searched for information about their rights, turned to neighbors or community organizations for support, and took actions to secure a safe and healthy home.

During several months of interviewing tenants, we conducted additional interviews with organizers, legal services, City Council members, and even landlords. We also performed observations, shadowed building superintendents during their daily routine, and pursued further ecosystem research. Once this research was complete, we were ready to synthesize our findings. We had a wealth of information to distill and organize and needed to start making sense of the patterns and themes our research had revealed.

We utilized exercises like affinity mapping and journey mapping to identify the most critical pain points. Affinity mapping is a process of transcribing insights or takeaways on post-it notes and grouping similar insights together to create clusters of themes.<sup>7</sup> Journey mapping is “a visualization of the process that a person goes through in order to accomplish a goal. In its most basic form, journey mapping starts by compiling a series of user actions into a timeline.”<sup>8</sup> Affinity mapping and journey mapping unveiled

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<sup>6</sup> Nick Babich, *Top 4 Principles of Human-Centered Design*, UX PLANET (Sept. 11, 2018), <https://uxplanet.org/top-4-principles-of-human-centered-design-5e02751e65b1> [https://perma.cc/F6P8-4ZAC].

<sup>7</sup> Rikke Friis Dam & Teo Yu Siang, *Affinity Diagrams – Learn How to Cluster and Bundle Ideas Fast*, INTERACTION DESIGN FOUND, <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/affinity-diagrams-learn-how-to-cluster-and-bundle-ideas-and-facts> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [https://perma.cc/G6BZ-KWDC].

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Gibbons, *Journey Mapping 101*, NIELSEN NORMAN GRP. (Dec. 9, 2018), <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/journey-mapping->

major pain points felt by tenants and advocates. We found that while tenants were taking photos of the repair issues in their apartments, their lack of representation and experience in Housing Court made it very difficult to present the photos in the formal procedure that was required in a court hearing. Advocates' daily schedules included a mixture of desk research and onsite meetings with tenants and tenant associations. The desk research included a significant amount of time spent on manual searches on slow government websites and databases, resulting in time being taken away from direct tenant outreach and interactions.

Having a clear vision of the pain points (as visualized through affinity and journey maps) can often reveal product ideas and solutions. Grounding solutions in what the research has revealed is an important part of the human-centered design process, to ensure we are solving the root problems tenants face.

There is often a temptation to jump right to a technical solution, however, much insight can be gained from starting with analog (non-technical) experiments rather than computer code. For all the tools we have designed, we have started with a manual solution or intervention first, to 'prototype' and test the solution before investing time writing code. Prototypes can help simplify and focus on the most critical aspect of the solution and what it hopes to accomplish for the end user.

This clarity is helpful for an iterative product development process, where you add in features over time. It is advantageous to start with the minimum viable product (MVP)—"the version of a new product which allows a team to collect the maximum amount of validated learning about customers with the least effort"<sup>9</sup>. Instead of designing a full system with robust features all at once, practical innovators first create an MVP and then make refinements accordingly. By learning how people use the MVP you can discover what else is needed and can use that insight to inform the product direction. For example, the MVP of JustFix's Tenant App was a digital room-by-room issue checklist with the ability for tenants to upload photos of the issues reported. This was identified as the core 'value proposition' based on our research insights that determined documentation was key to each step of the landlord-tenant dispute resolution process.

### III. COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT

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101/#::~:~:text=Definition%3A%20A%20journey%20map%20is,order%20to%20create%20a%20narrative [https://perma.cc/VDW9-SSM4].

<sup>9</sup> Eric Ries, *[Day 3/30] What is an MVP?*, LEAN STARTUP CO. (Aug. 3, 2009), <https://leanstartup.co/what-is-an-mvp/> [https://perma.cc/JM29-2L6W].

As our partnerships deepened, so did the way we practiced design. We worked closely with the Center for Court Innovation’s Legal Hand offices in Brownsville, Brooklyn and the tenant organizing group CASA in the South Bronx. At the core of our process was and is an acknowledgment of how we engage with communities through our work. We continue to be deeply appreciative of the spaces we have been welcomed into and the time that individuals and organizations have taken to teach and share with us. Our process is not just about developing and implementing technology but also is about the sustainability of these tools and creating inclusive spaces for making useful applications.

The civic technology framework of “build with, not for” from Laurenellen McCann<sup>10</sup> has inspired much of our work and has been central to our practice, expanding beyond a product development process and making our process transparent through co-design. We have come to call this process “community-led development,” which for us employs a few key principles: (1) equity throughout the process of making to realize a collaborative vision, (2) creating two-way educational environments, and (3) sustainability through empowering others to continue the work. As McCann shares, “Adding new technology into the infrastructure of a community is more complicated than simply teaching community members how to use the new tech. For the skills and tech-use to stick, communities have to have the opportunity to integrate the new tools and new skills into their lives on their own terms—to play and feel ownership and figure out how they relate to the tech (or don’t).”

One example of our community-led development process is our work with the Right to Counsel Coalition (the Coalition) in NYC.<sup>11</sup> The Coalition was developed to support the growing movement around “right to counsel” in housing court, guaranteeing free legal representation to low-income tenants facing eviction. It was also presented in national access to justice circles as a form of “Civil Gideon,”<sup>12</sup>—the idea that those involved with the civil justice system should have access to counsel just as the Sixth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution requires the provision of an attorney to defendants in criminal cases who are unable to afford their own attorneys. This policy proposal made its way into the NYC City Council and gained momentum because of the

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<sup>10</sup> Laurenellen McCann, *Building Technology With, Not for Communities: An Engagement Guide for Civic Tech*, MEDIUM: ORGANIZER SANDBOX (Mar. 30, 2015), <https://medium.com/organizer-sandbox/building-technology-with-not-for-communities-an-engagement-guide-for-civic-tech-b8880982e65a> [<https://perma.cc/7BNG-ZFGR>].

<sup>11</sup> RIGHT TO COUNS. NYC COAL., <https://www.righttocounselnyc.org/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/S4DQ-HR4X>].

<sup>12</sup> Robert Derocher, *Access to Justice: Is Civil Gideon a Piece of the Puzzle?*, B. LEADER, (Jul.–Aug. 2008), [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar\\_services/publications/bar\\_leader/2007\\_08/3206/gideon/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar_services/publications/bar_leader/2007_08/3206/gideon/) [<https://perma.cc/FA2N-9G5X>].

formation and organizing of the coalition. After more than four years of grassroots advocacy, Right to Counsel legislation was passed by the NYC City Council and signed into law by Mayor de Blasio, guaranteeing access to a free attorney for all low-income New Yorkers facing eviction in housing court.

In partnership with the Coalition, we co-designed Eviction Free NYC,<sup>13</sup> a website for tenants facing eviction to determine whether they are eligible for right to counsel. A simple screener determines eligibility, but all users regardless of eligibility are provided with information about their borough's housing court (based on their address) and the steps to respond to an eviction notice. Users also have the ability to save those results in offline mode since housing courts have notoriously bad WiFi.

Our early design process consisted of meeting with various stakeholders, including the Coalition's Steering Committee (consisting of tenants, organizers, attorneys, and academics), to understand their vision of what this resource might include. We also conducted research with tenants in housing court to learn how they responded to receiving an eviction notice and learn which information they found valuable or lacked during the process. We gained significant insight into the search inputs tenants used to research and find information, who they turned to for support, and some of the challenges of physically navigating housing court.

Through our co-design process, we created decision trees and simple prototypes to share with both the Coalition and with tenants. Tenants participated in ongoing usability testing with different iterations of the prototype. Our process made the research, feedback, and iterations transparent, leading to a final version of the website that was inclusive of the different perspectives and needs we heard.

The way in which we built the tool was also extremely crucial because it was a resource the Coalition would maintain moving forward. While designs were being created, we researched different technologies to leverage that the Coalition could feasibly maintain. Based on our research, Eviction Free NYC was built on top of a content management system (CMS) platform called Contentful,<sup>14</sup> a technology that allows Steering Committee members to easily update and change information displayed on the website. Easy modification of information was essential in order to provide timely resources online that respond to the rapidly changing legislation around right to counsel.

The art of leading a collaborative process is the art of getting out of the way. Eviction Free NYC will continue to grow and evolve as a resource for

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<sup>13</sup> EVICTION FREE NYC, <https://www.evictionfreenyc.org> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/9KNU-TT2T>].

<sup>14</sup> Dan Kass, *Launching Eviction Free NYC using GatsbyJS, GraphQL, and Contentful*, CONTENTFUL (Jan. 31, 2019), <https://www.contentful.com/blog/2019/01/31/launch-eviction-free-nyc-gatsbyjs-graphql-contentful/> [<https://perma.cc/A689-7RU2>].

tenants, designed with and maintained by the Coalition. Our goal is to ensure that we empower others by bringing sustainable tools and processes to the community. We continue to see our organization as one that augments existing services and practices community-led development to ensure our tools are defined by those who actively need and use these resources.

#### IV. SYSTEMS CHANGE

Having practiced human-centered design and community-led development with low-income, at-risk communities over many years, it has become increasingly apparent how significant the structural barriers to change are. For social workers, schoolteachers, community organizers, or even city officials, the more proximate they are to the problems faced by marginalized communities, the more frustrated and disillusioned they may become with the state of society and the possibility for economic mobility. It can feel like the gap between the rich and the poor is insurmountable. In fact, economic inequality in the United States and many of the world's most developed economies is at its worst level in many decades.

Legal aid attorneys and tenant organizers are at the forefront of addressing acute issues faced by the most vulnerable people in society. Too many of these valuable legal and community advocates, after a few years of intensive work supporting individuals and families in times of crisis, become so exhausted and dejected by the seemingly endless number of new cases that they quit and move on to less emotionally draining roles.

Although not traditional direct service providers, technologists and innovators can suffer similarly depressing realizations about the seemingly insurmountable scale and systemic nature of the problems at hand, as well as the day-to-day burnout that results from social-service-oriented work. As an innovator in this space, it can be difficult not to have existential dread that making incremental improvements—or as Ralph Waldo Emerson called it, “build[ing] a better mousetrap,” will never make a dent in the grand scheme of these problems.”<sup>15</sup> After all, these are not legal or process problems, but rather social, racial, and political problems centuries in the making.

This moment of crisis gives innovators two options: (1) accept that incremental process improvement “widgets” are not worth developing, or (2) identify the larger structural, policy, or social elements of the issue areas and work to address them head on. There are many examples of organizations choosing option one and folding, and many more that simply ignore this

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<sup>15</sup> Gary Martin, *The meaning and origin of the expression: Build a better mousetrap*, THE PHRASE FINDER, <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/build-a-better-mousetrap.html> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/LH9Z-TXYL>].

moment of crisis by implementing incremental improvements on a broken system for many years—themselves becoming part of the status quo that they once sought to disrupt.

Currently, only a handful of organizations are speaking about innovation and technology product development in service of building large, transformative systems change. The organizations that are making these efforts are tremendous examples of committed teams coming together to extend the typical mandate of “tech for social good” or “civic tech” organizations.

Each member of the JustFix team has had the realization that while helping people navigate bureaucratic processes, fill out and submit legal notices, and document their issues is a useful technical fix, there are much larger forces at play in the NYC housing ecosystem that create the day-to-day issues that tenants are living through. After two to three years of building the original suite of JustFix tools that were responsive to the needs of tenants, advocates, and the broader housing justice community, we naturally came to a moment of feeling an obligation to do more to shift the underlying power dynamics in the housing ecosystem.

This shift in thinking at JustFix was also spurred by the right to counsel movement and our partnership with the Coalition. Becoming embedded with the Coalition over the course of the advocacy campaign showed our team the true power of the tenant movement and the possibility of changing long-standing systems. It has inspired numerous initiatives across JustFix in the past few years, two of which are outlined below.

### A. Housing Data Coalition

“The Housing Data Coalition (HDC)<sup>16</sup> is a group of individuals and organizations who collaborate on the use of public data to further housing justice in New York City. In the face of the real estate industry’s escalating exploitation of housing data to drive speculation and displacement, HDC seeks to make public data more accessible and actionable for housing justice groups. Through a structure of working groups and monthly meetings, HDC provides opportunities for members to connect, learn, and give mutual support to a variety of projects involving housing data.”

HDC came together in 2017 to address common issues in using public data to support housing justice and tenant organizing in NYC. Any individual or representative of a nonprofit or grassroots organization who is aligned with

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<sup>16</sup> HOUS. DATA COAL., <https://www.housingdatanyc.org/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/L8GS-EWZJ>].

HDC's mission and values is welcome to join as a member. All members share a commitment to furthering housing justice in New York City.

Data on housing in New York City is relatively abundant but is spread across many separate sources and is somewhat inaccessible. This makes it difficult to connect information and draw conclusions. We were aware of some of the housing data projects that were happening in the city but found them to be primarily neighborhood-specific projects with a few notable exceptions. The Northwest Bushwick Community Map<sup>17</sup>, for example, is an incredibly valuable tool for tenant organizers but was only created to include data for the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. Extensive neighborhood-specific work had to be replicated over and over in different neighborhoods, which is unduly burdensome. HDC members began convening to address this problem, creating several new tools that make housing data more accessible for organizers, community members, researchers, and advocates. Current work by HDC members includes:

- (1) Maintaining and expanding a central database for public data related to housing in New York City called NYCdb;
- (2) Creating digital tools that make important housing data accessible for nonprofits, tenant organizers, researchers, and tenants/members of the public;
- (3) Advocating city and state agencies to improve the quality of public data; and
- (4) Sharing best practices for common problems in housing research.

## B. Who Owns What

JustFix's "Who Owns What"<sup>18</sup> website is a resource for community organizers, tenant leaders, legal aid attorneys, journalists, and city officials to demystify property ownership and shell company networks across New York City. The insight for the tool came directly from the practice of human-centered and community-led development, where we heard tenant organizers and tenants asking questions like "I pay rent to an LLC but who really owns my building?" and "if my landlord is treating our building like this, what other buildings do they own?"

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<sup>17</sup> NW. BUSHWICK CMTY. MAP, <http://clhenrick.github.io/BushwickCommunityMap/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/SP66-4SB3>].

<sup>18</sup> JustFix, Inc., *Who owns what in nyc? About this project*, JUSTFIX.NYC, <https://whoownswhat.justfix.nyc/en/about> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/LXK2-EKUS>].

The site utilizes a database of 170,000 building registrations<sup>19</sup> and a proprietary algorithm to connect the dots and discover other properties that a landlord owns or is associated with. Tenants and professionals working in affordable housing (especially legal aid attorneys and tenant organizers) across NYC use this tool to discover which buildings in a neighborhood to conduct outreach with, which communities are most at risk of displacement, and how a building might be losing affordable units. There were over 200,000 unique users of “Who Owns What” in 2020. Many users are tenants learning more about their building, property owner, and management company. However, the types of users and use cases are much more varied than we initially thought, with city officials, journalists, affordable housing finance analysts, tenant organizers, and attorneys visiting the site on a daily or weekly basis as part of their workflow in analyzing buildings and landlord track records.

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<sup>19</sup> JustFix, Inc., *Who owns what in nyc? Who Owns What Data Methodology*, JUSTFIX.NYC, <https://whoownswhat.justfix.nyc/en/how-it-works> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/3CXV-CZYL>].

## VI. POLICY AND DATA INITIATIVES

We have continued to grow our policy initiatives over the past couple of years, building on top of the foundational work of Who Owns What and the Housing Data Coalition. Below are snapshots of some of JustFix’s most impactful recent work.

### A. Citywide Worst Evictors List

In partnership with the Right to Counsel Coalition, we have released an annual list of the top 20 landlords who evicted the most tenants in New York City in 2018<sup>20</sup> and 2019.<sup>21</sup> We put this list together to show how these landlords use both eviction and the threat of eviction to displace tenants. The release of the list was coordinated with rallies and organizing campaigns across the city to bring attention to the actions of the individuals and corporations on the list.

### B. Landlord Size Report

We released a report featuring our data analysis that shows the consolidation of property ownership among fewer and larger corporate entities in New York City.<sup>22</sup> The report data was used in nationwide stories, most prominently in *Pacific Standard*<sup>23</sup> and the *Daily News*.<sup>24</sup> The analysis was conducted in conjunction with the rent reform debates in Albany in the summer of 2019, in order to add data to the conversation around who the reforms would affect most acutely.

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<sup>20</sup> Right to Counsel NYC Coalition, *The 2018 Worst Evictors across New York City*, RIGHT TO COUNS. (Oct. 22, 2019), <https://stopcromancoalition.org/articles/WorstEvictors.pdf> [https://perma.cc/6MQV-UVVC].

<sup>21</sup> Right to Counsel NYC Coalition, *The 2019 Worst Evictors in New York City*, RIGHT TO COUNS. (Oct. 22, 2019), <https://www.worstevictorsnyc.org/evictors-list/citywidez> [https://perma.cc/R56T-CW5M].

<sup>22</sup> Sam Rabiya, *Examining the Myth of the “Mom-and-Pop” Landlord*, MEDIUM (Mar. 4, 2020), <https://medium.com/justfixnyc/examining-the-myth-of-the-mom-and-pop-landlord-6f9f252a09c> [https://perma.cc/27V5-5UZQ].

<sup>23</sup> Sophie Kasakove, *Big Real Estate Peddles the Myth that New York Rent Control Mainly Targets Small Landlords*, PAC. STANDARD (Jun. 19, 2019), <https://psmag.com/social-justice/big-real-estate-peddles-the-myth-that-ny-rent-control-mainly-targets-small-landlords> [https://perma.cc/J8YT-SDKZ].

<sup>24</sup> Michael Gartland, *Housing advocates say there’s ‘good cause’ to give Been heave-ho from City Hall*, N.Y. DAILY NEWS (Sept. 16, 2019), <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/ny-metro-good-cause-vicki-been-rent-regulation-20190916-avsdcq2yy5e4fc36custcz67yu-story.html> [https://perma.cc/FS96-NR5D?type=image].

### C. Design Advisory Council

Over the past few years, we have continued to develop our model of community-led development to ensure that the tools we build solve real pain points experienced by our end users. This is done through our ongoing design research and co-design methods with community experts and tenants who use our services. The creation of the JustFix Design Advisory Council serves to organize and formalize the relationship between JustFix and our tenant organizing partners. The Council regularly convenes as a group, holding co-creation sessions with JustFix staff. Participants are organizers and tenant leaders from longstanding partner organizations including, Carroll Gardens Association, Chhaya CDC, Community Actions for Safe Apartments (CASA), Flatbush Tenants Coalition (FTC), and IMPACCT Brooklyn.

## VII. WHERE WE ARE HEADED

Since the launch of our tenant platform, legal aid organizations, city governments, and tenant organizations in over a dozen major cities across the United States have reached out to bring these tenant-facing tools to their communities. In 2019, JustFix kicked off a research and design phase in Los Angeles with Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE)<sup>25</sup>, a leading tenant rights advocacy organization embedded in the housing rights movement. Through this process of discovery, we have identified and scoped new opportunities to develop and adapt existing products to meet local needs, including recent efforts to win and implement a local Right to Counsel.

In 2021, we will continue the pilot program and implement a standardized process for replication of our approach in up to two additional cities. This partnership-driven pilot model reflects our learning in New York City by centering tenants and grassroots advocacy groups in the planning process. It also allows us to lean on the expertise of local partners to lead tenant engagement, local context analysis, insight development, and product distribution. Meanwhile, we will continue to do what we do best: provide technology design and development in-house in order to ensure consistency, quality, and reusability across services. We believe building partnerships to co-design and develop tools for tenants will augment the housing movement and equip tenants and advocates with the tools they need to fight back against displacement.

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<sup>25</sup> STRATEGIC ACTIONS FOR A JUST ECON., <https://www.saje.net/> [<https://perma.cc/53CD-YEBX>].

### A. National Project: NoRent

We launched a new website to support tenants across the country struggling to pay rent during COVID-19: NoRent.org.<sup>26</sup> Starting on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, we launched the site with SAJE (Strategic Actions for a Just Economy) to support tenants in the Los Angeles County area to enforce the eviction moratorium. Tenants can use this letter portal to inform their landlord of the right to nonpayment of rent due to impacts related to COVID-19. Emergency orders passed by elected officials, including the Governor of California, allowed tenants to request an extension on their rent due dates from their landlords if tenants provide proof that their ability to pay rent is affected by COVID-19.<sup>27</sup> While this tool has been supporting the enforcement of tenant protections in the short term, it is also distributed with an eye towards empowering tenants to get involved with tenant organizing efforts and a rent forgiveness campaign coordinated by SAJE and statewide coalitions in California. Since the eviction moratorium doesn't address the financial aspect of the housing instability currently faced by millions of renters in California, this campaign continues to be critical.

On May 1<sup>st</sup>, the website was expanded to help tenants create a formal letter to notify a landlord of nonpayment of rent, customized by state, and mail it via USPS Certified Mail for free. It also offers an array of localized community resources, and shares updates about the national #CancelRent<sup>28</sup> campaign, uniting tenants to build power together and protect each other beyond just policy. It was built in partnership with Right to the City Alliance,<sup>29</sup> Movement Law Lab,<sup>30</sup> Tenants Together,<sup>31</sup> and MH Action.<sup>32</sup>

As of November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, NoRent.org was adapted to support California tenants sending declaration letters to enforce their right against eviction according to new law AB-3088. This was built in collaboration with SAJE and the LA Right to Counsel Coalition, including the principal legal services providers in Los Angeles.

### B. NYC Project: Emergency HP Action

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<sup>26</sup> NO RENT, <https://www.norent.org/en/> [<https://perma.cc/XJ9D-8UF9>].

<sup>27</sup> Assem. Bill 3088, 2019-2020 Reg. Sess. (Cal. 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Haag & Conor Dougherty, *#CancelRent Is New Rallying Cry for Tenants. Landlords are Alarmed.*, N.Y. TIMES (May 1, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/nyregion/rent-strike-coronavirus.html> [<https://perma.cc/WP8N-E8GQ>].

<sup>29</sup> RIGHT TO THE CITY ALL., <https://righttothecity.org/> [<https://perma.cc/Z7KL-R226>].

<sup>30</sup> MOVEMENT L. LAB, <https://movementlawlab.org/> [<https://perma.cc/Q4SQ-7BMQ>].

<sup>31</sup> TENANTS TOGETHER, <https://www.tenants-together.org/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/9KZ5-GN3W>].

<sup>32</sup> MH ACTION, <https://mhaction.org/> [<https://perma.cc/R65S-PF5D>].

With New York City's Housing Court system pausing all eviction proceedings and limited to virtual-only emergency repair and illegal lockout cases during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>33</sup> JustFix quickly adapted its suite of tools to the new environment. Working in collaboration with the New York State Court System, Housing Court Answers, and members of the Right to Counsel Coalition, the new Emergency HP Action Tool<sup>34</sup> streamlines the emergency filing process for tenants.

We launched the adapted online tool that lets tenants virtually sue errant landlords without having to physically appear in court. The free Emergency HP Action Tool enables the 5.4 million renters<sup>35</sup> across New York City to resolve urgent and dangerous maintenance issues in their apartments and buildings that threaten their safety and health. Currently, one in five families in the city is currently living in a home with one or more property maintenance violations. More than 135,000 properties in New York City have reported violations, including hazardous conditions such as lead paint, water leaks, black mold, lack of heat or hot water, and pest infestations.<sup>36</sup> This project has been especially critical as New Yorkers continue to abide by shelter-in-place orders or work from home, both of which leave many more exposed to hazards in their homes.

The Emergency HP tool reduces the time tenants had to spend in Housing Court to file a case and cuts down the total time to file from one day to ten minutes on average. Tenants avoid the harmful elements of a Housing Court visit, including time missed off work, crowded courthouses, long lines at Clerk and Cashier windows, long wait times for judge decisions, unsanitary bathrooms, and more. Attending Housing Court was also a multi-step process that included going to the physical Courthouse, getting the HP Action forms from the Clerk window, filling out the forms by hand, going back to the Clerk to sign and notarize, waiting for a judge's approval and signature, and going to the cashier with payment or a fee waiver and get Index Number. Instead, the JustFix EHPA process takes ten minutes, requires answers to twelve questions online, and asks for an electronic signature—that's it.

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<sup>33</sup> Press Release, Governor Cuomo Signs Covid-19 Emergency Eviction and Foreclosure Prevention Act of 2020 (Dec. 28, 2020) <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-signs-covid-19-emergency-eviction-and-foreclosure-prevention-act-2020> [<https://perma.cc/2ZVJ-7AJ3>].

<sup>34</sup> JUSTFIX.NYC, <https://app.justfix.nyc/en/ehp/splash> [<https://perma.cc/8BRY-7CNX>].

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Haag, *40% of N.Y. Tenants May Not Pay Rent This Month. What Happens Then?*, N.Y. TIMES (June 22, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/nyregion/coronavirus-landlords-eviction-tenants.html> [<https://perma.cc/UX7Q-KDKQ>].

<sup>36</sup> Jason Cohen, *Nonprofit Launches New Online Tool to Sue Negligent Landlords in NYC*, BRONX TIMES (May 20, 2020), <https://www.bxtimes.com/nonprofit-launches-new-online-tool-to-sue-negligent-landlords-in-nyc/> [<https://perma.cc/X3CX-8CS9>].

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Over the past five years, JustFix has grown from a simple product with a few basic features to an organization that is a critical stakeholder in the housing justice ecosystem in New York City. Our approach to designing and developing products by partnering directly with tenants and grassroots organizers has led us to evolve our work from a single app to a robust suite of digital services and data-driven policy advocacy. During COVID, we were uniquely positioned to support tenants fighting for safe and decent housing during a public health crisis that required a greater emphasis on remote digital services, leading to over 500,000 unique visitors to our services. The increased attention to both the need and the solutions has helped to ensure that JustFix is well-positioned to continue to be an effective advocate and resource for individual tenants and advocacy groups that seek long-term and systemic change.