RTC NYC Tool 2.1
The Problem Tree (used by permission from Joan Minieri)

*One of the first things CASA did as part of their campaign to reform the Bronx Housing Court was to identify the problems tenants were facing in their communities, their underlying causes, and potential solutions. CASA used the Problem Tree Exercise from **Tools for Radical Democracy: How to Organize for Power in Your Community** by Joan Minieri and Paul Gestos in order to have their members come together and decide how best to solve problems in housing court. This tool helps distinguish **problems** from **issues** and can inform which issues your organization/coalition will address in its campaign. Below, you'll see the facilitation guide from **Tools for Radical Democracy**, adapted for this toolkit.*

Materials
- *Butcher/chart paper with tree drawn on with branches, trunk and roots*
- *Markers*
- *Post-it notes in three different colors*

Roles
- Facilitator
- Timekeeper

Room Setup: Chairs in a circle, butcher paper with tree posted on a large wall space.

Part I: What are the problems we are facing? (Branches)

Facilitator: We are going to do an exercise to determine what problems we have been facing when it comes to housing in our community. Then, we are going to brainstorm about what we can do to solve those problems.

Facilitator should hand out post-it notes to participants.

Facilitator: Everyone should take a Post-it note and write down a problem they are facing or have faced in housing court. One problem per Post-it note. Try to think of problems you are facing personally. Take a few minutes now to write down a problem on the post-it note.

Facilitator waits for participants to write down problems on a Post-it note.

Facilitator: Great. In a few minutes, we are going to share some of the problems we wrote down with the whole group, and start taping them onto the branches of the tree.

I'll start with an example: [use an example that works for you] the problem that I wrote down is that people are being harassed by their landlord, and I am going to place this onto this branch. Before we share as a group, if you are comfortable, turn to the person next to you and talk for a few minutes about the problem you wrote down.

Facilitator waits and give participants a few minutes to talk.

Facilitator: Ok. What are some of the problems you all identified?

Participants will go around and say and post the problems they wrote down on the branches. You can see some of the examples we generated on the tree itself.

Part II: Issue Identification (Trunk)

Facilitator: Great! Now that we've explored some of these problems, I want us to start thinking about some solutions.

For example, [use an example from your tree] one of these problems is that there aren't enough posted signs in housing court, and they are all in English, and that makes it hard to navigate the area. Maybe a solution to that is that we can advocate for housing court to put more signs up and make them multilingual. I'm going to write "Language Access" on this new Post-it, and post it on the trunk of the tree. Let's think of some other possible solutions and write those down.

Facilitator will lead group discussion on generating solutions.

Part III: The Underlying Causes (Roots)

Facilitator: Now that we are starting to see how problems and solutions are connected, what about what's causing these problems we are facing?

For example, a problem is that landlords are charging too much for rent, and harassing our poorer tenants to bring in new tenants who can pay more for rent. An underlying cause of some of these problems is capitalism-- as landlords have a vested interest in maximizing their profits. I'm going to put capitalism on this new Post-it and put it down by the branches. What are some other things that might go in the roots?

Facilitator leads discussion on the root causes.

See the problem tree that CASA generated from their session on the next page!

This activity is adapted with permission Tools for Radical Democracy: How to Organize for Power in Your Community by Joan Minieri and Paul Getsos (Jossey-Bass/Wiley 2007)

Right to Counsel NYC COALITION

No food

No place to sit

Landlord attorneys hassle you in the hallway

Landlord attorney forces you to sign a stipulation

Landlords call the shots

You often never see the judge

Nasty attitudes of court staff

Landlords take you to court for no reason

Fines for landlords are really low

No help for people who don't understand

Structure of legal services doesn't work

Not enough interpreters

They take you to court when they aren't doing repairs

Not enough legal services

We need more signs

No connections between agencies

Judges favor landlords

Consequences for landlords aren't strong enough

Looking for interpretation

Not enough judges

No one ever explains what is happening

Don't know the process/ procedures

Waiting time for court

Consequences for landlords aren't strong enough

No respect

No childcare

Landlords influence who gets to be a judge

Judges don't let you talk

Security guards are "hateful"

Long lines

Overcrowding

Judges see multiple cases at one time

Lots of people are fearful

Lack of services

Access to information

Access to justice

Treatment + respect

class/ capitalism

Poverty & inequality

Private property

Racism/ white supremacy