

ACLU of Ohio
Strategic Plan
(2021-2024)

Approved by the
Board of Directors:
July 10, 2021

ACLU
Ohio



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Thank you to members of the Strategic Planning Committee



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J. Bennett Guess
Executive Director



Jacqueline McLemore, Ph.D.
Process Consultant/Facilitator



Letter from Leadership

July 2021

Dear Friends:

In 2020, the ACLU celebrated 100 years of defending and advancing liberty, freedom, and justice for all. The ACLU of Ohio's storied history is just as long, as Youngstown was home to one of the original 15 ACLU chapters in the nation.

To mark the occasion, one year ago, we launched a four-month deep listening campaign to engage with hundreds of everyday Ohioans about the civil liberties, civil rights, and social justice concerns that most directly impact them, their neighbors, and their communities. That feedback then led into an eight-month strategic planning process, whereby dozens more conversations with board, staff, stakeholders, and committee members took place.

This document is the result of that 12-month intentional and inclusive effort, and we share it with you – our members, supporters, donors, funders, and partners – with great pride and determination. This plan articulates our vision and guides our focus for the next three years, as we explicitly center racial justice at the heart of our four identified issue priorities: political participation and voting rights; criminal legal system reform; personal autonomy and dignity; and outreach, inclusion, and belonging.

This plan is both honest and bold. It spells out clearly the many challenges before us, as well as the ACLU of Ohio we must become to lead most effectively toward creating a more inclusive, fair, and just Ohio. At the same time, we are committed to remaining nimble and responsive to unforeseen challenges and opportunities.

Your partnership in the ACLU of Ohio's mission is essential to our continued success, and we could not be more grateful for your friendship and generous support. We pledge to keep you updated along the way as we work to make this ambitious plan a reality. Thank you!



Dr. Ebony Speakes-Hall, LISW-S
President



Isabel Robertson
Chair, Strategic Planning Committee



J. Bennett Guess
Executive Director



Mission

To champion and expand constitutional and other fundamental rights and to pursue racial, economic, gender, and social equity for all Ohioans using all the tools of integrated advocacy without political partisanship; to fight in both principle and practice for the best ideals of fairness, freedom, and justice; and to advance our mission through an anti-racist, intersectional lens with determination, agility, practicality, and hope.

Vision

The ACLU of Ohio envisions a just and equitable Ohio where all people are fairly represented in a strong democracy, unoppressed by racism, and able to live their fullest lives.

We are anti-racist.

Recognizing the insidious legacy of structural racism and how it undermines freedom and equality for all, we explicitly center racial justice in all areas of our work, internal and external. We understand the Bill of Rights to contain living, evolving principles, which can and must be made applicable to every individual regardless of race. No freedom is mutually exclusive of any other.

We utilize integrated advocacy.

Integrated advocacy calls on us to approach our mission holistically – communicating, collaborating, and coalition-building across the organization and with community partners. All departments coordinate to deploy every intersecting and complementary tool available to us – research and analysis, litigation, advocacy, organizing, lobbying, public education, and more – to maximize the fullest impact of our day-to-day work.

We lead with integrity.

A highly principled organization, we act consistently with the ethical and moral values underlying the civil liberties we hold dear. We are committed to the thoughtful, honest assessment of our work through rigorous reflection and critique. We steward our resources efficiently and responsibly, and we are committed to innovation and experimentation.

We fight for fairness, freedom, and justice.

Regardless of popularity, we pursue civil liberties, civil rights, and social justice for all people. We are relentless in the pursuit of equity and equality, especially for those who are socially, politically, or economically oppressed or disenfranchised. We believe we can and must advance justice, while promoting the fair application of the rule of law, for all.

We have a non-partisan commitment to the Constitution.

We acknowledge our nation's founding documents are imperfect, bound to fixed historical contexts with inherent and explicit biases. Nonetheless, the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights contain core values worthy of upholding and expanding – that all people are created equal and endowed with unalienable rights, that all people have freedom of speech, and that all people can participate in our democracy. The ACLU of Ohio exists to enforce, defend, and expand these underlying values to make these documents – and our laws – more perfect for all, without political partisanship.

Strategic Issue Priorities:

Political Participation and Voting Rights



The ACLU of Ohio is committed to a strong democracy through fair representation and equal participation. This priority is aligned with every other ACLU commitment, as it provides the foundation from which all other rights originate and depend. Fair districts, which we will work to ensure, are vital to true democracy. Full participation in elections, including accessible registration, will require reforming and expanding the ways we register and vote as well as fighting efforts – often racist in origin – to suppress voting. We will educate all Ohioans about the mechanics and importance of participating in our democracy.

Criminal Legal System Reform



The ACLU of Ohio works to end racial disparities in the criminal legal system and to dismantle systems of racial injustice that built our current structures of mass incarceration. The entire legal system provides a continuum of opportunities for abuse of power. It criminalizes poverty and devastates Black and Brown communities. In our efforts to confront this broken system, we will prioritize ending Ohio's overreliance on cash bail, abolishing the death penalty, reducing prison populations, decriminalizing poverty and drug use, ending abusive police practices, and holding law enforcement accountable.

Personal Autonomy and Dignity



The ACLU of Ohio believes that all people deserve autonomy over their bodies and the right to live their fullest lives. We will fight for reproductive freedom, ensuring that all people have both the right and access to abortion, birth control, sex education and accurate health information, and control over their reproductive lives. We will continue to fight against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression and to advance legal rights and protections for LGBTQ+ individuals, especially the rights to healthcare and full inclusion for transgender individuals. We will advocate for the rights of people with disabilities to have equal access and agency. We will protect privacy, personal information, and the right to be free from intrusive surveillance. Ohioans should live without constant fear of police harassment, brutality, or other abuses of power.



The ACLU of Ohio is working to expand outreach, inclusion, and belonging. We will build power with and among the communities most impacted by the issues we prioritize. We will improve outreach to communities of color, people with disabilities, trans and non-binary people, immigrants and refugees, indigenous populations, and young people – especially Gen Z – and those living outside of Ohio's three largest metropolitan areas. We will build power in smaller cities and rural areas with the goal of having Action Team members in all 88 counties by 2031. We will listen to communities and their needs, and collaborate by either taking the lead or following when appropriate. Achieving inclusion and belonging internally is required to successfully prioritize these commitments externally.

Strategic Organizational Advancements: (by 2024)

- We will center anti-racism in our organization's work and culture, seeing it as imperative to achieving our vision of a just and equitable Ohio.
- We will ensure all board and staff members share a base of knowledge on race-class narrative messaging by providing training on core principles and tactics. This frame will be critical to shaping our work going forward.
- We will develop a Campaign Selection Policy that provides guidance on how we identify, incubate, select, and authorize priority campaigns and projects to advance our objectives.
- We will grow and diversify our donor-member base, in line with our outreach, inclusion, and belonging issue priority.
- Using our Strategic Affiliate Initiative (SAI) Business Plan as foundational, we will continue to build upon our financial position and revenue expansion, as the SAI funding stream concludes in 2024.
- We will assess our real estate needs based on finances, remote work efficiencies and preferences, and emerging work habits post-COVID, and also consider the importance of our physical presence and placemaking needs to advance our mission.
- We will develop and execute succession plans to ensure smooth transitions and continuity of operations as Leadership Team changes occur.



Inherited Realities: The Civil Liberties Landscape in Ohio

Ohio's civil liberties landscape remains bleak, given that all three of our state's governmental branches are resistant, sometimes hostile, to safeguarding and advancing civil liberties. This leaves the ACLU of Ohio in a precarious position to dismantle systemic racism and advance fundamental rights.

Ohio ranks 45th in the nation for extreme economic and racial disparities. Our overcrowded prisons are at 118 percent capacity, yet legislators continue to exacerbate Ohio's bloated statehouse-to-prison pipeline. In the last session of the General Assembly, over nine percent of all proposed legislation sought to create new criminal laws, enhance existing punishments, and incarcerate more people.

Police brutality and unaccountability in law enforcement result in more state-sponsored violence against people of color. Franklin County has one of the nation's highest rates of fatal police shootings, sadly undeterred by the Black Lives Matter mass protest movement of 2020.

Ohio has the most egregiously gerrymandered legislative and Congressional districts in the nation. The 2021 redistricting processes, while new, still allow for ultimate majority-party control, leaving Ohioans with little hope for significantly fairer maps in 2022. When politicians choose their voters, instead of the other way around, serious negative long-term consequences on voter participation, and on all our priorities, inevitably follow.

Ohio's restrictive voting laws suppress participation in democracy. Despite being increasingly common practices in red and blue states alike, Ohio denies automatic and year-round voter registration to its citizens. In fact, the state's 30-day pre-election registration cutoff is the most restrictive allowed by federal law. Directives that prohibit more than one ballot dropbox per county and online requests for absentee ballots further limit voter participation. Ohio needs significant election reform and modernization to ensure that democracy works for all.

Abortion access and reproductive rights are constantly under attack. Legislative harassment of individuals seeking abortion-related healthcare, their physicians, and clinics continues. Nonetheless, a strong coalition of reproductive justice advocacy organizations, including the ACLU of Ohio, remains undeterred in preserving Ohioans' access to abortion services.

Ohio law still does not protect its LGBTQ+ residents, workers, and visitors from discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations. The Ohio Fairness Act, which would right this wrong, now enjoys increasing bipartisan support and is in its strongest position for passage in decades. Though we have a long way to go to ensure the lived equality of LGBTQ+ people, we are cautiously optimistic that Ohio's laws could soon become more inclusive.

At the national level, the Biden-Harris administration has proposed some policies that are more sensitive to civil liberties concerns. However, repairing harm from the prior presidential administration and pursuing progress will require engagement and vigilance. We must not be complacent.



The Ohio We Envision

We envision an Ohio where we have each other's backs, and where our collective focus is on maximizing fairness, freedom, and justice for all.

We yearn for an Ohio where inherent biases – especially denial of, and defensiveness about, racial injustice – are replaced with awareness and action.

We believe Ohio must recognize its historic role in perpetuating racism. We seek to interrupt and overcome that history by dismantling systems of oppression in our elections and our criminal legal system and by safeguarding personal autonomy and dignity. Ohio must put the needs of underrepresented people at the center of every decision.

We insist on an inclusive democracy that ensures every voter has unencumbered access to the ballot in fair, representative districts.

We seek a criminal legal system in Ohio where fairness and justice apply equally to all – regardless of wealth, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, zip code, or any other factor. This means ending the statehouse-to-prison pipeline, private prisons, the death penalty, overreliance on cash bail, and abusive police practices.

We strive for an Ohio in which LGBTQ+ people have full legal equality, starting with passage of the Ohio Fairness Act, and the ability to live their fullest lives in safe, supportive communities.

We envision an Ohio where individuals are empowered to make their own reproductive decisions without government interference.

We work towards an Ohio that honors the constitutional right to demonstrate and protest without fear of suppression or retribution.

We believe in an Ohio that bridges urban, suburban, and rural divides and where governmental policies are used to unify people from all walks of life, across racial backgrounds and socioeconomic status.

Ohio's best values call on us to always consider the intent, impact, application, and consequences of laws and policies on our communities.





The ACLU of Ohio We Must Become

In order to advance the fairer, more just, and more inclusive Ohio we envision, the ACLU of Ohio itself must evolve.

Because racial justice and equity are critical to our success, we must make our anti-racism commitment explicit and hold ourselves accountable. To do so, we must align the race-class narrative with our vocabulary, training, programs, and culture.

Mindful that we are new to the explicit prioritization of racial equity, we must be intentional about changes in our organizational culture, honoring the lived experiences of our board, staff, and broader communities, and working to strengthen our understanding of how white supremacy works and implicit biases manifest. We must call on one another, with compassion and love, to live our highest ideals.

We must center people in our work. We must strive to make our base of donors, members, board, and volunteers more reflective of the people we serve and the issues we advance. We must become more engaged across the breadth of Ohio, including with people who live in areas beyond our three largest cities. When we build power with and for everyday Ohioans, we build ACLU power.

Our values must guide our decision-making and strategies. Successful integrated advocacy requires us to sharpen our communication and clarify staff team roles and methodologies across departments.

We must develop a campaign selection policy – comparable to our case selection policy – that defines lanes of decision-making and responsibility and outlines how best to nurture the ideation and incubation of our priorities. We must be transparent in sharing these processes both internally and externally.

We are always stronger when working in coalition, but we must be clear about our proper role, especially when to lead, support, or follow. We must refrain from overtaking any work that is more appropriate for others.

When our ways of being and relating, our language, and our organizational culture are aligned with our values and are evident in the quality and impact of our work, we will know that we are becoming the ACLU that Ohio needs.



Our Process

The Strategic Planning Committee was appointed by Board President Hasan Kwame Jeffries on November 13, 2020. The committee consisted of Isabel Robertson (Chair), Matthew Besser, Laurie Briggs, Darlene English, Erik Meinhardt, Ebony Speakes-Hall, and Executive Director J. Bennett Guess (ex officio). The committee met 26 times over the course of eight months.

The Executive Committee retained Jacqueline McLemore, Ph.D., as a process consultant and facilitator. Dr. McLemore has more than three decades of experience working with diverse groups on strategic questioning, planning, and visioning with a strong focus on equity and inclusion. Her passion for social justice and civil rights are at the core of her life's work. Dr. McLemore, Chair Isabel Robertson, and Executive Director J. Bennett Guess met 11 times to design and reflect on the process.

COVID-19 figured prominently into our strategic planning process. While the pandemic prevented in-person gatherings, online formats created more opportunity for collaboration among our board, staff, partners, and supporters, without regard to time constraints and physical location.

Twelve 75-minute interactive sessions were held over a six-week period. Participants worked in small groups and plenary sessions to surface issues, concerns, and priorities through guided facilitation. Over 15 hours of conversations included 61 unique participants. Attendance stayed constant at around 50 people at each week's two sessions combined. The Zoom chat feature provided for additional interaction during online sessions.

At the urging of the committee, many participants anonymously contributed comments and reflections in an interactive Google document throughout the process. Participants were also encouraged to email thoughts to the committee chair. Additionally, the committee conducted two anonymous surveys to assess participant engagement and gather convergence data on values and issues.

An online Miro Board, compiled and regularly edited by Chair Robertson, documented key takeaways and emerging consensus as the process unfolded.

The first session on January 12, 2021, contained an extensive report on our Listening Campaign, conducted by our organizing team in Summer and Fall 2020. This four-month initiative engaged more than 300 people statewide in 35 virtual community-focused conversations, with the goal of gaining input and insight on our supporters' needs, concerns, and passions.

Additional strategic planning sessions focused on Ohio's political and civil liberties landscape; the Ohio we envision; the ACLU of Ohio we must become; and the strategies, tactics, priorities, and advancements needed to achieve our mission.

The Committee provided guidance and key provisions to staff leadership, who drafted sections of this plan in two-person teams. The Committee then reviewed, edited, and further developed the plan.

This strategic plan includes the first substantive revisions of our Mission, Vision, and Value statements since 2003, which the Committee spent several sessions reconsidering and revising after receiving input from the 12 interactive sessions.

The Committee presented the draft to the Board of Directors at a special work session on May 22, 2021. The Committee voted on June 11, 2021, to bring the plan to the Board for a final vote on July 10, 2021, and it was affirmed unanimously.

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The logo consists of a blue circle with a white border. Inside the circle, the word "ACLU" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. Below "ACLU", the word "Ohio" is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

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Ohio