

ACLU MAGAZINE

FOR PASSIONATE GUARDIANS OF CIVIL LIBERTIES
SPRING 2026 | ACLU.ORG



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LANDMARK
CASE AT THE
SUPREME COURT**

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TRUTH SEEKER

The government is silencing artists and censoring scientists. Marta V. Martínez went to court—and won.

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CONTRIBUTORS



Anita Little is a writer and editor in Los Angeles. She has spent the past decade creating meaningful storytelling for outlets such as *Playboy*, *Ms.*, *Elle*, and *The Guardian*.



Robyn Twomey is a photographer in Oak Bluffs, Mass., whose work has been shown at the Patricia Sweetow Gallery and the Luggage Store Gallery, as well as the international Photoville exhibit.

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This issue of *ACLU Magazine* chronicles the force of our collective defiance. Throughout the first year of his second term, President Trump has weakened our democratic norms and degraded our core freedoms. The ACLU has fought back with vigor.

With our millions of supporters, we have declared loudly that we will not give up or give in. After all, the ACLU was born in times like these: More than a century ago, when thousands of so-called radicals were arrested and deported without regard to constitutional protections (see *ACLU Moment*, p. 36), the ACLU emerged from that crisis to boldly resist abuse of power.

Today, litigation remains one of our most effective weapons for defeating the administration's authoritarian impulses. We have taken more than 220 legal actions, and we are prevailing more

often than not in the lower courts. Every action matters; each lawsuit is resistance. This spring, ACLU National Legal Director Cecillia Wang will argue a historic case before the Supreme Court, challenging the Trump administration's efforts to eliminate birthright citizenship (see *Priorities*, p. 4).

Our successes have taken many forms, and they provide a road map for what the struggle will look like in the coming months. We have freed activists arrested and detained for their political

“What we do will decide the trajectory of our democracy for generations to come.”

speech so they can return to their families. Our 501(c)(4) advocacy arm has secured more than 85 policy wins in states and cities to protect privacy, immigrants' rights, and reproductive freedom. We have opposed the administration's assault on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the federal workplace. And we have fought to protect the academic and creative freedom of scientists, artists, and public health researchers.

As you'll read in this issue, we're fighting back with everything we have—in the courts, in legislatures, and in communities across the country. “Ministry of Truth” (p. 10) outlines our legal efforts to counter the administration's discriminatory crackdown on academic and artistic freedom based on the phantom threat of “gender ideology extremism.” In “Rapid Response” (p. 24), we highlight the many municipal policy wins for immigrants' rights that ACLU affiliates have achieved since the launch of our Firewall for Freedom campaign a year ago. And “Power to the People” (p. 18) spotlights the ACLU's organizing program through the stories of volunteers turned community leaders in Colorado, one state of many where activism has accelerated since Inauguration Day.

The Trump administration's attacks on our rights and liberties are likely to escalate in the coming months as the administration focuses on the 2026 midterm elections. What stands in their way is us: The ACLU community is a formidable foe. What we do will decide the trajectory of our democracy for generations to come. The stories in this magazine are ones of hope and progress. I hope you are encouraged by these stories and join us as we fight for our civil liberties and civil rights. Failure isn't an option.



Anthony D. Romero
Executive Director



ACLU

125 Broad Street, 18th Floor
New York, NY 10004
212-549-2500
aclu.org/contact-us

Editorial Director
Marie-Adele Moniot

Managing Director
Genie Cortez

Editorial Manager
Tom Vellner

Editorial Adviser
William Eisenman

Creative Direction and Design
Pentagram

Production and Printing
**MSPC, a division of
MSP Communications**

ACLU Magazine (ISSN 2640-3560) is a publication for members and supporters of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Send changes of address and questions about your ACLU membership to membership@aclu.org; mail them to ACLU, 125 Broad Street, 18th Floor, New York, NY 10004; or call 212-549-2500. Send editorial correspondence to ACLUmagazine@aclu.org. This is not a subscription publication, and we do not accept unsolicited manuscripts or advertisements. ©2026 American Civil Liberties Union Foundation. All rights reserved. Contents may not be reproduced without the express written consent of the ACLU. Published by ACLU, 125 Broad Street, 18th Floor, New York, NY 10004. Printed in the USA. The ACLU comprises two separate corporate entities, the American Civil Liberties Union and the ACLU Foundation. This magazine collectively refers to the two organizations under the name "ACLU."

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The Fall 2025 issue of ACLU Magazine covers the renewed assault on civil liberties.

Re: "State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes"

My wife and I are longtime members of the ACLU and enjoy your magazine. The most recent issue had some very timely and important articles, for example, about free speech and current activism. I especially enjoyed the photo and brief article about John Thomas Scopes on the last page. The "Scopes Monkey Trial" was a fascinating event, and its long shadow is still with us. Thanks for putting it in the spotlight and celebrating the ACLU's important role in that trial.

*John Morris
Topsham, Vt.*

As a new member, I received your magazine for the first time with the Fall issue. I was particularly interested in the last page on John Scopes' trial. He was a native of Paducah, Kentucky, my hometown, where I lived for 90 years before moving to Franklin, Tennessee, to be closer to my children. I was privileged to know his sister, Lela Scopes. She told me she was a schoolteacher in Paducah at the time of the trial and was fired because of her brother's publicity. He and his sister and other family members are interred in Oak Grove Cemetery in Paducah. His monument is inscribed, "A Man of Courage."

*Bob Johnston
Franklin, Tenn.*

Fighting for Our Rights

I grew up in a family that strongly supported the ACLU. A very close family friend was Fred Okrand, legal director of the ACLU of Southern California and a fighter for the rights of Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II. He and my parents taught me the importance of standing up for everyone's rights and working to build a truly inclusive, democratic society. I think of them and the courageous Japanese American community often, now that our government is once again incarcerating and deporting innocent people, even U.S. citizens, because of viciously cruel, racist policies. They and the ACLU are my inspiration, giving me the courage to keep fighting for our rights. Thanks for all you do to keep our democracy alive!

*Susan Freeman
Walnut Creek, Calif.*

Free Speech, Free Country

I am a retired newspaper reporter and editor, and I remember many times when the local state ACLU rep was available to give me facts and stats when I was writing about citizens' rights being challenged by authorities. Free and honest speech is the most important right granted in our Constitution, and today the government is based on lies. I wish I could afford to give more to the organization that protects the Bill of Rights.

*Mark Howard
Medford, Ore.*

Back issues online:

Visit our website to see previous issues of *ACLU Magazine* in PDF format: aclu.org/publications

We love your feedback! Let us know what you think about this issue: [ACLUmagazine@aclu.org](https://aclumagazine@aclu.org)

A note from the chair of the ACLU National Board's 2026 Nominating Committee: Please be advised that ACLU members may submit nominations to the National Board for consideration by the Nominating Committee for the 2026 slate. Please send your recommendation to ACLU Nominating Committee, 125 Broad Street, 18th Floor, New York, NY 10004. ACLU members may also make nominations to the National Board by submitting a petition with the names and signatures of 50 ACLU members to the address above.

Protesters rally in support of immigrant families at the Supreme Court last year.



PROTECT
BIRTHRIGHT
CITIZENSHIP

PRIORITIES

Blocking Abuse of Power

The ACLU is defending birthright citizenship, a bedrock principle, from the administration's unlawful attacks.

On Inauguration Day, one of President Trump's very first actions was to issue an executive order that seeks to strip certain babies born in the United States of their U.S. citizenship. It was a direct attack on the 14th Amendment and immigrant families. The ACLU immediately filed the first of many lawsuits to check the administration's actions. It then followed up with a second class-action case against the executive order. At press time, the U.S. Supreme Court announced that it will hear arguments in the ACLU's class case this term, and a decision is expected this summer.

"No president can change the 14th Amendment's fundamental promise of citizenship," says Cecillia Wang, ACLU national legal director,

AP PHOTO/JACQUELYN MARTIN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

who will argue the case before the justices. “For over 150 years, it has been the law and our national tradition that everyone born on U.S. soil is a citizen from birth. The federal courts have unanimously held that President Trump’s executive order is contrary to the Constitution, a Supreme Court decision from 1898, and a law enacted by Congress. We look forward to putting this issue to rest once and for all in the Supreme Court this term.”

Ending birthright citizenship would create a permanent subclass of people born in the United States who are denied full rights as Americans. The consequences are profound for immigrants like “Susan,” who is part of the ACLU’s nationwide class-action suit on behalf of babies and families impacted by the order. Susan is from Taiwan and has lived in the United States for 12 years. She is applying for lawful permanent resident status. Together with her husband, Susan has three children who are U.S. citizens, and a fourth, “Sarah,” was born in April 2025 after President Trump issued his executive order. They fear that Sarah will be subject to immigration enforcement, their family will be separated, or their U.S.-citizen children will be forced to move to a foreign country they’ve never visited.

In February 2025, as a result of the ACLU’s initial challenge, a district court in New Hampshire temporarily blocked the administration’s executive order, as did judges in Maryland, Massachusetts, and Washington in separate lawsuits brought by partners. In June, when the U.S. Supreme Court opened the door to partial enforcement of the order’s restrictions, the ACLU and its partners swiftly filed the new class-action suit for immigrant families.

The ACLU’s fight for birthright citizenship has become a model for how to defeat an administration determined to upend long-standing constitutional protections. Throughout the first year of President Trump’s second term, the ACLU remained nimble in quickly challenging the administration’s lawlessness, and in cases like the birthright litigation, the courts, in turn, held firm in restraining executive overreach.

As the fight continues, the court and Congress have a chance to block, once and for all, the administration’s attempt to dismantle birthright citizenship and degrade the country’s promise. The Constitution is clear, and the ACLU will keep fighting this attack on future generations to ensure that birthright citizenship stays the law of the land. —JAY A. FERNANDEZ



LEARN MORE Find out more about our work to protect birthright citizenship at aclu.org/birthright.



Civil Service

The ACLU is suing the Trump administration for unlawfully firing career civil servants and violating their First Amendment rights.

On January 21, 2025, one day after President Trump’s inauguration, Mahri Stáinnak was eating dinner at home with their wife and toddler in Maine when they received a call from a D.C. area code. Stáinnak, who was then employed by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), quickly answered and was surprised to learn it was OPM’s human resources department.

“They said, ‘We’ve got some bad news for you,’ and I started shaking,” says Stáinnak. The HR rep then informed Stáinnak that they were being placed on administrative leave, effective immediately, while OPM investigated their “radical and wasteful” work on behalf of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

The news came as a complete shock. Stáinnak had worked for the federal government for more than 16 years, first for the Environmental



Ronicsa Chambers, pictured at the White House, is a 20-year veteran of the Federal Aviation Administration.

Protection Agency and then OPM, and had received nothing but positive feedback and accolades for their work.

Stáinnak is one of thousands of federal employees who have been targeted by the Trump administration and placed on leave or fired for their connection to DEI—even a connection based on work they were no longer doing. In March, the ACLU of D.C. began representing nearly a dozen federal workers, including Stáinnak, asking the government to reinstate them and compensate them for lost wages and other damages. In December, the ACLU of D.C. filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of the targeted workers.

“The American people need these dedicated, experienced, patriotic civil servants back at work,” says Scott Michelman, ACLU of D.C. legal director. “It both violates our clients’ rights and disserves the American people to have them suspended or fired to serve the administration’s political rhetoric.”

The lawsuit argues that targeting DEI-associated workers for their perceived beliefs violates their First Amendment rights. It also challenges the firings as employment discrimination because they disproportionately fall on Black workers and workers who are women or nonbinary.

Ronicsa Chambers, another client, led a team of five Black women and one white man with a disability at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). All were placed on administrative leave. It was a huge blow for Chambers, who had worked for the FAA since 2005 and adored her job and her team.

“Your whole world’s being blown apart,” says Chambers. “People are going from feeling valued and feeling like they’re a contributor to feeling like ‘I just got tossed out.’”

Months after Chambers and her team were told they’d be reassigned, they’re still waiting. She recalled that last December, she gave her team coffee mugs that read “Best Team Ever,” alongside each of their names.

“It’s important that federal workers in this community know that they matter,” says Chambers of challenging the administration’s DEI purge. “The work that you did matters, and being fair, being equitable? There is no shame in that work.”

—THE ACLU

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS



Digital Privacy

With government searches of phones and devices on the rise at the border and beyond, our sensitive information is at risk. Here’s how you can better protect your digital privacy at home and while traveling abroad.

- Fully encrypt any device you carry with a strong password. Turn off facial ID so your phone can’t be unlocked without your consent.
- You do not have to provide your password to border agents, though authorities may confiscate your device or hold you longer.
- If you unlock your device for an agent, enter the password yourself and state that you do not consent to the search.
- Travel with as little data as possible. Move it to cloud storage and remove copies on local devices.
- With messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Signal, turn on the disappearing-messages function.
- When traveling, consider using a separate phone with only navigation apps, your itinerary, and your local contacts. —J.A.F.

i LEARN MORE Brush up on your rights at aclu.org/privacy.

Victories for Reproductive Freedom

Abortion rights are still under siege, but the ACLU is successfully defending continued access to care.

More than three years after the U.S. Supreme Court's catastrophic decision ending federal protections for abortion, the ACLU and its affiliates continue to pursue every avenue to preserve abortion access in both states at risk and safe havens.

"Reproductive freedom and our right to bodily autonomy are still under siege," says Deirdre Schifeling, chief political and advocacy officer at the ACLU. "The attacks are not coming in the most obvious or direct way. It's a 'death by many cuts' strategy designed by anti-abortion politicians to eliminate access nationwide, even in states where care is protected."

From blocking state bans and new restrictions to defending abortion rights in state constitutions, here are just a few of the states where the ACLU recently

BALLOT WATCH

This fall, once again, ballot measures to enshrine abortion rights in state constitutions will be in front of millions of voters across the country. Since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, abortion rights have prevailed in nearly every measure at the polls. The ACLU is working to see this trend continue.

fought and won continued access to reproductive health care:

Alabama: The ACLU of Alabama successfully sued to block the state from prosecuting people or organizations that help pregnant Alabamians access legal, out-of-state abortions. The ruling means local providers can provide direct support to those who are forced to travel across state lines for reproductive health care.

Arizona: Last year, the ACLU permanently defeated Arizona's 15-week abortion ban as a violation of the state's 2024 constitutional amendment protecting fundamental reproductive rights and access to abortion care.

Idaho: With Planned Parenthood, the ACLU secured a consent decree from the state attorney general agreeing not to prosecute Idaho health care providers for referring patients for out-of-state abortions. In a state like Idaho, which has fought to limit emergency care for pregnant people, referrals for out-of-state care can be lifesaving.

Missouri: In response to an ACLU lawsuit, a Jackson County judge blocked enforcement of Missouri's abortion bans last summer. The ACLU challenged the bans after voters passed Amendment 3, which restored abortion rights to the state constitution, in 2024. The judge's ruling cleared the way for the state's Planned Parenthood health centers to resume providing abortion care. —JAY A. FERNANDEZ

i LEARN MORE
Visit aclu.org/abortion.



Reimagining Democracy Together

ACLU President Deborah N. Archer on collective action as a powerful antidote to despair.

One year has passed since President Trump returned to office, and already decades of hard-won civil rights and civil liberties have been attacked—and in some cases, erased. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have been gutted. Mass efforts to disenfranchise Black voters are underway. Free speech and dissent are being chilled. Our immigrant neighbors are detained without due process. The National Guard patrols communities with armed federal agents near our places of worship, workplaces, and schools.

Faced with such sweeping democratic backsliding, grief is natural. But despair is not a strategy—and authoritarianism thrives on disengagement. We cannot let heartbreak harden into resignation. Instead, we must allow the weight of this moment to ground us, and then recommit to radical hope—the stubborn belief that transformation is possible, even against the odds—and get to work.

This moment of crisis also opens a moment of possibility. As institutions are weakened or dismantled, we are called not only to defend what is under attack but also to reimagine what could be built in their place. Let us dream beyond repair toward renewal. Let us defend the institutions under siege but also push beyond preservation to ask, What must we build to create a democracy worthy of its promises?

From that vantage point of possibility, the questions become urgent and personal: What can I help build to ensure the future we want to see? Who in my community is already building, and how can I stand alongside them? How can I act today, here, in this place? Authoritarianism falters when ordinary people choose to resist—when they insist on participating in democracy in every space where they live, work, and gather.

As president of the ACLU, I am often thanked for “working to save our democracy.” I am moved by that sentiment, but I always remind people: *you* are saving democracy *with us*. History teaches us that liberation has never been won by lawyers or courts alone. It has been won by thousands of everyday people who

used their skills, courage, and imagination to bend this nation closer to justice.

Whether it is speaking out at a town hall or PTA meeting, organizing a community safety watch rooted in care rather than fear, or supporting neighbors with food, housing, or childcare—every action matters. If enough of us act where we are, across differences and at every level, we can stitch together a multiracial democracy that is stronger, fairer, and more resilient than anything we have known. The most powerful response to tyranny is not despair—it is collective action, animated by radical hope.



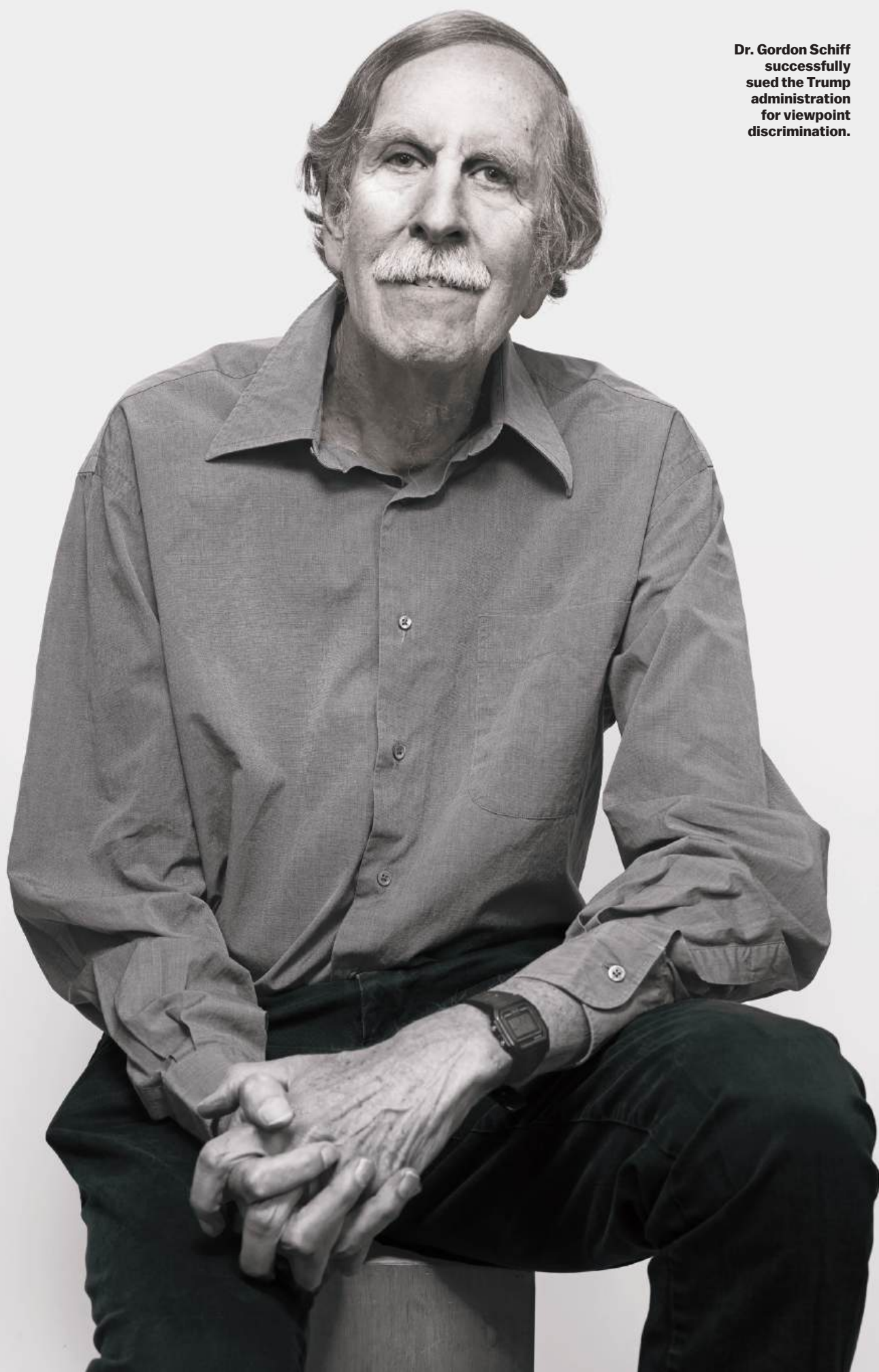
ACLU President Deborah N. Archer reflects on the power of collective action.

**The Trump administration turned
the federal government into an arbiter of truth,
but with the help of the ACLU,
a group of artists and researchers fought back.**

BY ANITA LITTLE

MINISTRY OF TRUTH

**Dr. Gordon Schiff
successfully
sued the Trump
administration
for viewpoint
discrimination.**





LAST FEBRUARY,

when Marta V. Martínez, the executive director of Rhode Island Latino Arts (RILA) in Providence, should have been focused on artist contracts and season planning, that gray month brought something else. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the federal agency that had supported American creativity for 60 years, was now requiring grant applicants like Martínez to certify they would not “promote gender ideology” before they could receive funding. The vague, bureaucratic language couldn’t disguise what it really was: erasure.

“This felt like a step backward,” says Martínez, who for more than 30 years has been committed to RILA’s mission of advocating for all Latine artists. “My immediate thought was, How do we continue to stand with our artists while staying true to our mission?”

About 50 miles north of Providence, at Harvard Medical School, Dr. Gordon Schiff discovered his own erasure. An article he’d co-written about suicide risk assessment, specifically noting that LGBTQ people face heightened risk, had vanished from a federal patient safety website. The offense? It contained the words “transgender” and “LGBTQ.”

“It was quite bizarre and shocking,” says Schiff, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and associate director of the Brigham and Women’s Hospital Center for Patient Safety Research and Practice. “This was simply epidemiological data. These *are* patients at higher risk for suicide.”

These weren’t isolated incidents. They are part of an ongoing, systematic attempt by the Trump administration to impose its ideology across American arts, science, and medicine. Last year, the ACLU sued the National Institutes of Health after it canceled federal research grants that mentioned “gender identity” or “diversity, equity, and inclusion.” The ACLU and the National Education Association challenged the Department of Education for similar funding cuts. Martínez and Schiff are just two of many plaintiffs across the country that the ACLU is currently defending against censorship.

Attorney Vera Eidelman, whose team is leading the legal challenges, has seen government overreach before. As a senior staff attorney with the ACLU’s Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project, she’s spent years defending free expression. But she says that the scope of this moment feels different.

“The government is using every single tool at its disposal—and many tools not at its disposal—to impose ideological conformity and to force people to only express views that the government holds and agrees with,” Eidelman says.

On his first day back in office, President Trump signed Executive Order 14168 “restoring biological truth to the federal government.” The order did more than state policy. It declared certain ideas inherently “false.”

“We don’t have a ministry of truth for a reason,” Eidelman says. “At the end of the day, you have to ask who gets to decide what’s true. And I don’t think it’s a super hard sell right now to say it’s concerning for that to be the government.”

The executive order’s tentacles reached everywhere federal dollars flowed. The Office of Personnel Management issued guidance ordering all agencies to remove any “outward-facing media” that promoted gender ideology or DEI programs. The NEA directed that grant applications appearing to promote gender ideology be disfavored. Suddenly, decades of precedent protecting free speech in government-funded programs were under assault.

For Rhode Island Latino Arts, the NEA’s new requirement created an immediate crisis. RILA, in collaboration with Trinity Repertory Company, had commissioned *¡Que Diablos! Fausto*, an adaptation of the classic tale written by a nonbinary playwright. The play explored universal themes of temptation, identity, and self-reflection. But under the new rules, even these common ideas became suspect.

Martínez explains, “We suddenly had to ask while casting the play: Would this story be considered promoting gender ideology? Many of our actors identify as nonbinary and tend to interpret their roles based on their personal identities.”

The vagueness of the prohibition made it impossible to parse. Would featuring a transgender actor violate the rule? What about a play that simply acknowledged nonbinary people exist? The NEA provided, in the court’s later words, “zero explanation.”

“That’s a painful and absurd position for any arts organization to be in—having to scrutinize our artists’ identities rather than their artistry,” says Martínez.

RILA ultimately submitted a dramatically scaled-back grant application, avoiding any programming that might be construed as affirming LGBTQ identities. “That compromise left a heavy mark,” Martínez says. “It wasn’t creativity—it was caution.”

The chilling effect rippled through the arts community. National Queer Theater, which runs the Criminal Queerness Festival showcasing work from countries where LGBTQ identities are criminalized, faced a bitter irony. An organization dedicated to combating censorship abroad now confronted it at home. The Theater Offensive, which had presented “liberating

**Arts administrator
Marta V. Martínez
fought the NEA's
illegal restrictions
and advises others
not to self-censor.**



**Dr. Celeste
Royce's article
was removed
from a premier
medical resource
because it
included the word
"transgender."**



art by, for, and about queer and trans people of color” since 1989, suddenly found its core mission at risk.

“I remember conversations with young artists who asked, ‘Does this mean people like me don’t belong in publicly funded art?’” Martínez recalls. “Those words stayed with me. These were artists who had finally found spaces that welcomed their full selves, and suddenly they were being told that part of them might be too controversial for government support.”

And in the medical world, the Patient Safety Network (PSNet), the nation’s premier resource for preventing medical errors, has become a battlefield over scientific truth.

“This is the tip of the iceberg,” Schiff says about the research landscape. “I do this to prevent errors. I do this because it’s an academically important thing to me. But there’s a lot of self-censorship going on now.”

Dr. Celeste Royce, associate professor of obstetrics, gynecology, and reproductive biology at Harvard Medical School, faced similar censorship. The PSNet article she co-wrote on endometriosis diagnosis included an important medical observation: The condition can occur in transgender and non-gender-conforming people, and failing to recognize this could delay treatment. This acknowledgment caused the article’s removal.

“That’s when I got angry,” says Royce. “If you are categorically denying that a group of people exists or can have an illness, you’re ignoring the humanity of those people and that strikes me as so wrong.”

Endometriosis is a condition where uterine tissue grows outside the uterus, and it can affect anyone who has endometrial cells in their body, not just cisgender women. This painful condition already takes seven to 10 years on average to diagnose. Without the knowledge in Royce’s article, doctors might never consider endometriosis when a trans patient presents with abdominal pain, potentially adding years to an already lengthy diagnostic process.

“It’s devastating on an intellectual level, on an emotional level, for the government to come along and say no, no, no, you can’t talk about this,” says Royce. “It really just undermines the profession at a profound level and calls into question the independence of thought that’s necessary to be a physician.”

The government’s solution was Orwellian in its simplicity. Both doctors were told their articles could be restored if they simply removed the offending words “LGBTQ” and “transgender.” Both doctors refused.

For doctors, publication in PSNet means a lot professionally and can advance their careers. For these two Harvard Medical School professors, whose employer is already under attack from the current administration, joining an ACLU lawsuit meant compounding institutional risk with personal jeopardy. They decided to prioritize patients over politics.

“The whole point is that they’re trying to talk about accuracy, talk about safety, talk about good medical care, and politics really should have no place there,” Eidelman says. “Our clients’ view was that it changes the accuracy and undermines the whole point of their work on this website.”

Faced with this assault on free expression, the ACLU moved swiftly. In March, it filed two major federal lawsuits within days of each other: one against the NEA on behalf of arts organizations including RILA, National Queer Theater, and the Theater Offensive. Then another was filed against the Office of Personnel Management for the Harvard Medical School doctors whose patient safety research had been censored. The cases were different in their details—artists facing funding restrictions, doctors seeing their published work vanish—but the constitutional violations were strikingly similar.

Both were First Amendment violations, viewpoint discrimination where the government explicitly favored one perspective on gender over others. Both cases cited Administrative Procedure Act violations: The NEA had acted outside its congressional mandate to support artistic excellence, while the Office of Personnel Management had vastly exceeded its authority. “It was an unconstitutional restriction on private speech,” Eidelman says. “The executive branch was trying to do things that it simply doesn’t have the power to do.”

Whether silencing artists or censoring doctors, the government had overstepped. And the ACLU was prepared to prove it in court.

The government’s defense across both cases rested on one main premise: When the government pays for it, the government gets to control the message. This argument holds that whenever the government provides funding, such as an NEA grant for art or a website for doctors to publish research, that funded speech becomes “government speech.” But this argument ran headlong into decades of Supreme Court precedent, including a case Eidelman’s team knew well—*NEA v. Finley* from 1998.

Back then, the NEA tried to impose restrictions on funded art, suggesting it should consider “standards of decency.” The Supreme Court ultimately sided with the NEA, but only because the agency argued it was not trying to ban specific ideas or viewpoints. Via a majority opinion from Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, the Supreme Court issued a specific warning. It stated it “would confront a different case” if the NEA ever tried to deny funding based purely on viewpoint.

Now, nearly three decades later, that different case had arrived.

“The law—and the public—is on the side of free expression.”

—Marta V. Martínez, executive director of Rhode Island Latino Arts

“David Cole, who argued *NEA v. Finley* at the Supreme Court and, until recently, was the ACLU’s legal director, is one of the attorneys on our case,” Eidelman says. “We basically came to the district court and said, ‘This is that case.’”

The distinction between government speech and government-funded private speech proved crucial. When Congress created the NEA, it explicitly designed the agency to “help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.”

“Congress itself said the whole point here is to enable artists to express themselves,” Eidelman explains. “Our goal here isn’t to only fund government-approved messages. It’s to fund good art, and those two things are different.”

For the ACLU and its plaintiffs, the victories came in waves. In September, Judge William Smith delivered a decisive victory for the arts organizations. The NEA’s policy was unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination, he ruled. The government “does not get to support only those messages that parrot its views,” notes Eidelman.

“When the judge made his decision, I felt relief and validation,” Martínez remembers. “It was like a weight lifted. The ruling affirmed what we knew in our hearts, that art must be free to challenge, question, and represent everyone. It was more than a legal victory. It was a moral one.”

Then, earlier in May, a federal court issued a preliminary injunction in the doctors’ case, ordering the immediate restoration of the censored medical articles to PSNet. After months of absence, crucial patient safety information was back online.

“What lives could have been lost because my article was taken down?” Schiff says. “Each victory like this stops the government from doing what they would otherwise just do with impunity.”

The court victories extended beyond individual cases. For Martínez, it offers hope to others who are also facing pressure. “Don’t self-censor” is her message to other arts organizations. “Fear is what these kinds of restrictions rely on. This ruling proves that the law—and the public—is on the side of free expression.”

These cases, while significant, represent just two fronts in a wider war. When law firms like Perkins Coie faced retaliation for their voting rights litigation, the ACLU stepped in. When Harvard University was threatened with an ideological takeover, the ACLU was there. When NPR and PBS found their funding under attack

for coverage the administration disliked, the ACLU filed briefs. From newsrooms to courtrooms to classrooms, this is a unique moment.

“I don’t know that anyone would say they’ve seen all of these abuses happening all at the same time,” Eidelman says. It’s this “combination of everything” that makes this moment dangerous.

Yet the legal victories should serve as beacons for everyone. “I hope that people can take some solace in the First Amendment victories,” Eidelman says. “It’s important to push back because the only way to ensure that the government doesn’t succeed is to keep saying what we actually think.”

In Providence, RILA is moving forward with renewed purpose. “We’re leaning back into the work that had been on hold,” Martínez says. New storytelling projects are in development. Artists can explore identity, family, and transformation without constraint.

“When the government is using its full weight to try to impose ideological conformity, these cases are an important reminder that the First Amendment protects us.”

—Vera Eidelman, senior staff attorney with the ACLU’s Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project

At Harvard Medical School, crucial patient safety information is once again available to doctors nationwide. Transgender patients won’t face additional diagnostic delays because their existence was deemed politically inconvenient. LGBTQ youth at risk for suicide won’t be invisible in medical literature.

Says Eidelman, “I think it’s incredibly important for people to be able to just express themselves. And as members of society, we need to work together to figure out what our democracy, our government, and our country should look like.”

When the government declares certain ideas inherently false and punishes those

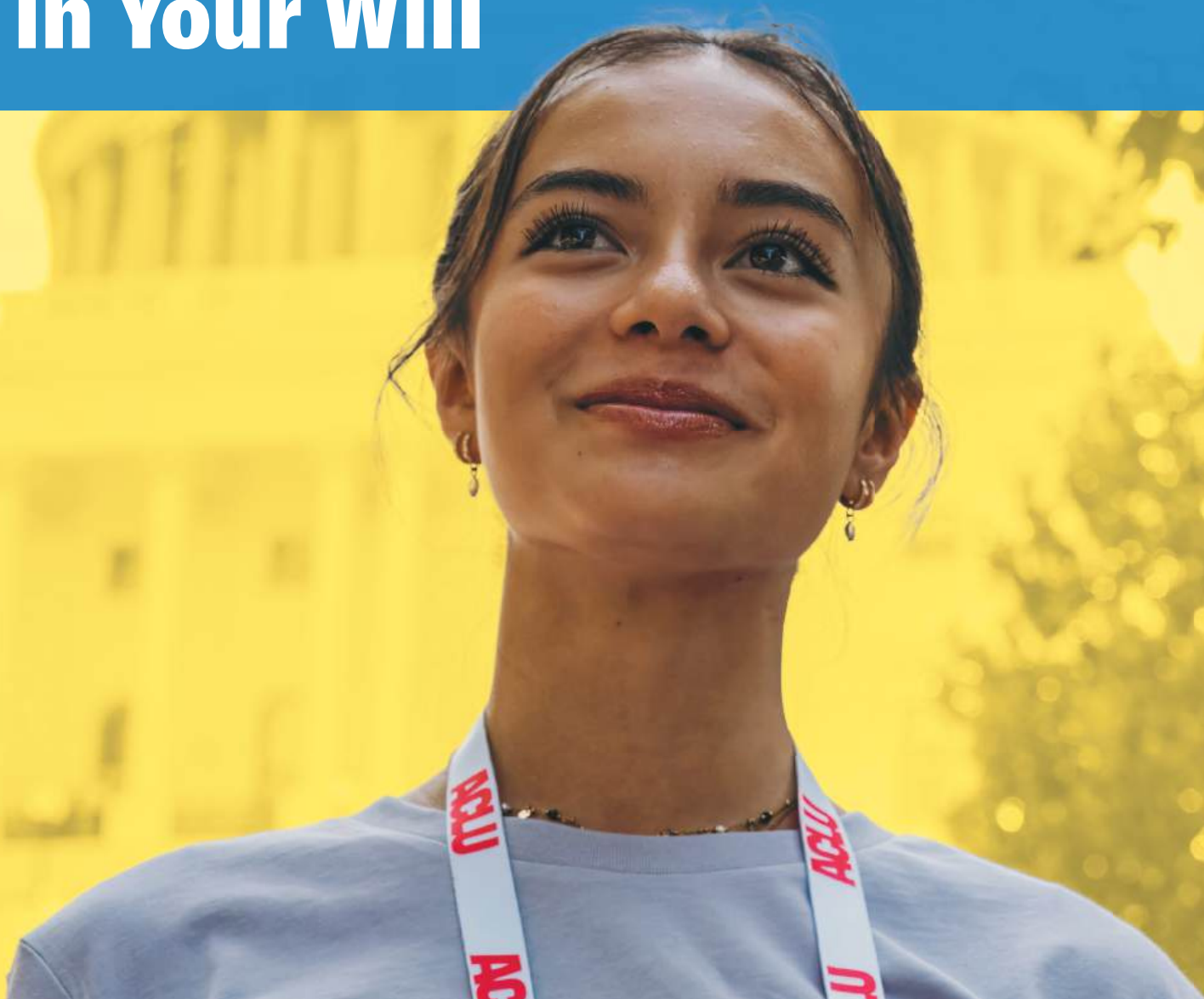
who express them, it is operating against the very notion of a free society.

“At a time when the government is using its full weight to try to impose ideological conformity, these cases are an important reminder that the First Amendment protects us from exactly that,” says Eidelman.

The reminder came just in time. In conference rooms and laboratories, in theaters and medical schools, Americans are being asked to choose between their funding and their freedom, between their careers and their consciences. The ACLU believes people should never have to make that choice.

“The ACLU’s support made all the difference. We’re a small nonprofit, not a political machine—and they reminded us that standing up for our values is exactly what democracy is about,” says Martínez. “We owe it to our artists and audiences to tell the full truth of who we are.” ■

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POWER TO T

As protests across the country increase in size and scope, ACLU volunteers in states like Colorado are stepping into leadership roles and creating a model for local action nationwide.

BY SHAYLA LOVE

THE PEOPLE

ACLU volunteer Sophia Gomelsky urged the Colorado attorney general to investigate illegal collaborations with ICE.



ON JULY 3, 2025, the day before Congress passed H.R. 1, the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act,” gutting federal programs to fund the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant agenda, Angelina Cook stood in front of a group of people at the Colorado State Capitol to share how such programs had shaped her life.

When Cook was a child, she went into hiding with her mother and siblings to stay safe from her father. “I don’t know how my mother made it,” she says. “She worked hard to raise three kids all on her own, sometimes working 12-hour days, seven days a week.” Cook’s mother supported her, and so did something else: Medicaid, the federal program that helps people with limited income cover medical bills.

“It was Medicaid that gave me access to therapy when it was so crucial,” Cook says. “I wanted to step up and tell the story of an actual real person who probably wouldn’t be here today without those benefits.”

Cook was a key organizer of the event at the state capitol, when attendees gathered to protest H.R. 1. But the 42-year-old who lives in Centennial, Colorado, is not an employee of any advocacy group, nor a politician. She’s a volunteer at the ACLU of Colorado, and one who started volunteering only recently in 2025.

Since Inauguration Day, ACLU volunteers have risen to embrace larger and more consequential roles by leading protests, testifying for or against legislation, and teaching other volunteers how to get involved in their communities. “We call them volunteer leaders,” says Asha DuMonthier, an organizing strategist with the ACLU. “Another way of saying that is they’re becoming organizers in their own right.”

In partnership with the ACLU of Colorado, for example, volunteer leaders have been organizing around topics

they care about most, including disability rights, immigration, accountability in AI, and transgender rights. “Compared to previous years, volunteers like Angelina are taking on specific leadership roles right now and making their impact known,” says Julian Camera, the lead organizer at the ACLU of Colorado.

Since the passage of H.R. 1, Cook has continued to deliver her moving speech about the importance of Medicaid; distributed flyers and educational materials in CD 8, a battleground congressional district in Colorado; and completed an all-day, in-person organizing training hosted by the ACLU called Power and Purpose. The training program is a nationwide effort open to everyone. Participants learn how to organize effectively in their communities, have persuasive conversations that move people to action, and build lasting connections with others who are ready to rise to the moment.

The Power and Purpose training reflects the growth of the ACLU’s People Power, a national, grassroots army that includes more than 750,000 members.

Last year, tens of thousands of People Power activists attended Know Your Rights trainings in advance of large-scale protests and local activations in states like Colorado.

Cook had been on the ACLU mailing list for roughly 15 years. But the beginning of the second Trump administration provided the push she needed. “There are just too many people whose lives are at risk,” she says.

People of all ages are stepping into the role of volunteer leader. While still in high school, 18-year-old Maddie Lee noticed that many of her classmates were passionate about politics but didn’t have opportunities outside of school to engage on a deeper level. She contacted the ACLU of Colorado with an idea: a summer program for youth volunteers, which took place in the summer of 2025.

The program brought cohorts of high school and college students to Denver to be led by volunteer activist mentors. Each student came to the program with their own causes and learned how to organize, communicate, and plan action days.

One group wanted to focus on the intersection of healthcare and immigration and put their efforts into advocating for funding for OmniSalud, a program that provides undocumented Coloradans with a safe way to compare affordable health insurance plans. In July, Lee brought a group of students to a state committee meeting to testify on juvenile justice legislation. “Many of them had never even been inside the Capitol before, and suddenly they were sitting in front of lawmakers, sharing stories, data, and ideas that reflected their communities,” says Lee. “I could see how that experience shifted something for them as they realized that policymaking isn’t an abstract process, but rather a conversation that they can be part of.”

Sophia Gomelsky, a 20-year-old college student at the University of Wyoming, also participated in the youth program. She brought students to a protest organized primarily by the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition, and they

urged the Colorado attorney general to investigate law enforcement's illegal collaboration with the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Many of the program's young attendees had said immigrant justice was important to them and had experienced firsthand the impact of immigration crackdowns. When they saw all the others at the protest, "it was really powerful for them to see that there were people sticking up for the issue already," Gomelsky says. "And that their voices could actually make a difference in something that's so important to them."

The volunteers made signs and participated in trainings to know their rights during protests. Sometimes when volunteers first go to a protest, they feel nervous or afraid. Then they see the support from their community, cars honking in their favor. "They're reminded that this isn't just a thing that *we* care about," Camera says. "People are paying attention, and there's a lot more of us than

there are of the people who are coming after our rights."

Since the summer program, Gomelsky has been guiding some of the students to develop youth-led policy for the upcoming Colorado legislative session, and Lee has been helping students continue with the projects they started over the summer. One of the students met with the president of the Colorado Senate in September.

"Seeing how passionate the next generation of leaders were definitely helped us as mentors," Lee says. "It was

reinvigorating, and inspiring to watch all these big ideas come out of people."

When volunteers take charge, it means they can focus on the issues that matter most to them. "It's not just that they're being asked to do things by another organization," DuMonthier says. "They're actually part of a movement that feels like home. They're making friends and building relationships."

It also keeps the people who live in Colorado at the center of the ACLU of Colorado's organizing. "They have autonomy over the actions that are being planned," Camera says. For example, Gomelsky is currently starting a project that will reveal what it's like inside immigration detention, including overcrowding and a lack of medical care. She'll be gathering firsthand stories and connecting with family members to get

Since Inauguration Day, ACLU volunteers have risen to embrace consequential roles.



Angelina Cook organized a protest against Medicaid cuts at the Colorado State Capitol.

the voices of those who are detained to reach lawmakers.

For Maya Blasingame, the heart of her organizing is amplifying transgender voices who need access to care, especially in rural areas of Colorado. “If you’re transgender and you live in a small town like Pueblo, or up in the mountain communities in Summit County, finding practitioners of gender-affirming care can be hard,” she says. “That’s one of the many items we’re trying to fight for when we host rallies, when we host protests, and we’re trying to get legislators to hear us.”

In June, Blasingame partnered with the ACLU of Colorado to hold a rally

in response to the *Skrmetti* decision, a Supreme Court ruling that upheld a Tennessee law banning gender-affirming care for minors. “It was amazing to get hundreds of people together to show our youth in this state that we

When volunteers take charge, they can focus on the issues that matter most to them.



Maddie Lee contacted the ACLU of Colorado about hosting a summer program for youth volunteers.

support them,” she says. “The main idea was, how can we show the youth here in Colorado, especially those living in rural communities, that we’re here for them?”

The rally’s speakers included activists, politicians, and doctors. Young people came to Denver from smaller cities, including trans youth who brought their parents. Blasingame teared up while remembering meeting one young trans boy, around 13 years old, who brought their father, a U.S. Marine veteran, who shared how equally proud he was of his country, his military service, and his trans son.

“That is why we do this,” Blasingame says. “When our community takes a moment to recognize you.”

Volunteer leaders can be the conduits for others to have their first experiences advocating for policies that matter to them too. Danielle Dawes Cox, a 35-year-old living in Thornton, Colorado, started volunteering with the ACLU of Colorado, like Cook, after Civil Rights Lobby Day. Her background is in social work; she often encountered the downstream impact of policy and wanted a better understanding of how policy gets created and passed.

She signed up to be the lead of a group of volunteers that visited the Colorado State Capitol during a special session in August, focusing on advocating for an ACLU bill on AI transparency in job and rental applications or college admissions.

The special session was many volunteers’ first time getting involved in policy in their own state. “There was a woman who has lived in Colorado her whole life,” Cox says. “She has a background in education and wanted to get involved.” The woman was able to submit testimony in support of the bill and how it could impact schools.

“It was so cool to give that woman her first trip to the Capitol and show her how she can make change,” Cox says. “She said to me, ‘I’m excited to do more of this in the future.’”



As a volunteer leader, Cox led the group on her own, coordinating what time they would meet and showing them where to find their legislators. She shared the facts about the bill and supported the volunteers' preparations to testify. "The ACLU volunteer program gives folks who could be novices, who have a completely different day job that is not related to politics, the chance to learn about the black box of government," Cox says.

On online volunteer calls, held weekly, Cox said that volunteers recently learned how to have organizing conversations with others: how to deeply listen, ask provoking questions, and engage with people with differing views—whether it's in your own family or passing out flyers at the grocery store. Every time volunteers continue to learn, they're able to take those skills back to their neighborhoods and make a difference.

"These volunteer programs make it a lot more accessible and empower folks

to be able to make those changes in their community," Cox says.

Local change is crucial when some days, it's hard to face the barrage of daily political news. Even before the current Trump administration, according to a 2023 Pew Research Center study, 65 percent of Americans said they always or often felt exhausted when thinking about politics.

"There's a lot of cynicism right now," Gomelsky says. "People feel like their government isn't listening to them, and that their voice doesn't matter." After participating and helping to run the youth summer program, she watched the students, many under 18, protesting, testifying, and meeting with lawmakers, and she felt the opposite: Their thoughts did matter and could make a tangible impact.

"When the courts fail, when policy fails, people are going to be the ones

holding the line," Camera says. "And our volunteers have heard that kind of messaging, and they're really stepping up at this moment."

The ACLU of Colorado has given volunteers the ability to do the organizing that they want to do, Blasingame says, with the support and protection of a larger institution. "It's so vital that people like me, who look like me, are speaking up and having the security to do that," she says.

For Cook, after sharing her personal story and volunteering more, she's met more people who live near her who are taking action every day, which has been the key to feeling more empowered. "As long as you're staying at home and only trying to keep yourself safe, not listening to what's happening, you're going to keep feeling like you can't do anything," she says. "We have to take action." ■

i TAKE ACTION Visit peoplepower.org or contact your local ACLU affiliate to make a difference in your community.

**Local and state leaders have joined
the ACLU's Firewall for Freedom campaign
to adopt new laws that protect
our rights from federal overreach.**

By Jay A. Fernandez

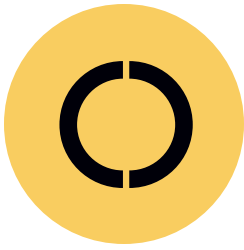
RAPID RESPONSE



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n September 30, President Trump encouraged a room full of military brass to use American cities as “training grounds.” By then, he had already ordered military troop and federal agent deployments to Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. In Chicago, federal agents were executing aggressive

immigration raids and firing tear gas at protesters and journalists at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility. Baltimore, New York City, and Portland were also potential targets of the administration.

Justifiably outraged, state and city leaders pushed back. The attorneys general of California, Oregon, and Illinois sued, while mayors and local legislators, supported by ACLU state affiliates, rapidly developed plans to fortify their communities. In Portland, with the backing of the ACLU of Oregon, the city council immediately passed a resolution that established a protocol for responding to federal troop deployments and

codified a directive that no city resources could be used for immigration enforcement.

Well before President Trump was inaugurated for a second term, the ACLU was ready with a detailed plan to mitigate the damage to communities across the country. The ACLU’s Firewall for Freedom playbooks, developed before the 2024 election in collaboration with state affiliates, outline proactive legal and policy actions that states, cities, and municipalities could take to protect immigrants’ rights, free speech, reproductive freedom, and LGBTQ rights from the administration’s authoritarian actions. A year later, the Firewall for Freedom campaign has proven both prescient and effective.

“We knew that there would be threats to our rights as well as abuse of power,” says Nahal Zamani, director of state campaigns for the ACLU’s National Political Advocacy Department. “And we knew that it was up to local and state leaders—as they had in the first Trump administration—to stand up.”

By last fall, the campaign had logged more than 85 policy wins across 43 states engineered, facilitated, or supported by



“The fertile ground we have to fight back is through state and local action.”

—Nida Alvi, ACLU State Policy Counsel

ACLU affiliates. In the face of the administration’s assault on immigrants and rampant ICE raids, affiliates have successfully advocated for 30 new laws and policies that protect immigrants’ rights in 17 states and jurisdictions.

“By design, Firewall has been a success because right now the fertile ground we have to fight back is through state and local action,” says Nida Alvi, the ACLU’s state policy counsel. “Our state and local governments are at the forefront of responding creatively to a federal administration that is hostile toward civil rights.”

By leveraging relationships with local and state leaders and through grassroots action, the ACLU has been successful in pushing forward a range of protective measures. Within weeks of the inauguration, informed by the ACLU’s playbooks, governors and attorneys general preemptively issued guidance about immigrants’ rights to community leaders, health care facilities, schools, and law enforcement agencies. Multiple states, including Colorado, New Mexico, and Vermont, restricted the collection and sharing of sensitive personal data such as citizenship and immigration status. By the spring, Nevada state lawmakers had passed a first-of-its-kind resolution urging Congress to protect schools and places of worship from ICE.

On May 6, the ACLU of Delaware discovered that the Camden Police Department had signed a 287(g) agreement allowing local police to work with ICE to enforce federal immigration laws. The affiliate quickly mobilized more than 1,600 Delawareans to contact their state leaders. Members of the public flooded a local city council hearing demanding an end to the agreement. The contract was rescinded later that same day. It turned out that Camden was just one of many Delaware municipalities ICE had contacted to engage in 287(g)s, and the affiliate’s quick action combined with the public outcry scuttled what would have been a dangerous acceleration of the administration’s mass deportation plans in the state.

“The Camden situation was really lightning in a bottle,” says Mike Brickner, the ACLU of Delaware’s executive director. “But all the work we did the previous year—coming up with the playbook, priming elected officials, doing public messaging, getting volunteers energized about these issues through Firewall for Freedom trainings—gave us the container to capture that lightning when it struck.”

The affiliate didn’t stop there. The affiliate’s work with Delaware Attorney General Kathy Jennings convinced her to write an op-ed in June urging state lawmakers to protect

Defending Immigrants’ Rights

More than a third of the ACLU’s policy wins this year have been on behalf of immigrants’ rights. At the state and local level, the ACLU is pushing elected officials to protect their communities from the Trump administration’s cruel campaigns. This includes:

1

Opting out of Trump’s deportation machine by minimizing local entanglements with abusive immigration enforcement programs. For example, by refusing to contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and ensuring local police do not provide any support to ICE.

2

Supporting communities impacted by mass raids. Public and private leaders must create a protocol for how to respond to raids, including setting up a hotline, providing pro bono legal assistance, and preparing educators and faith leaders to provide support to families left behind.

3

Protecting people vulnerable to deportation, including issuing pardons to immigrants for state convictions that make them deportable and passing legislation to allow people to obtain a driver’s license without regard to citizenship.

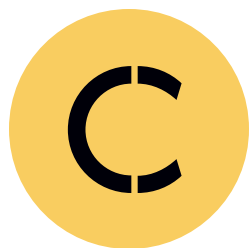


To learn more about the ACLU’s Firewall for Freedom campaign, visit aclu.org/firewall.

immigrant communities and declaring support for several Firewall immigration bills introduced during the legislative session. The following month, Delaware became the seventh state to ban 287(g) agreements when Governor Matt Meyer signed HB 182 into law, even though, just a few months before, sympathetic legislators had declared a proposed ban “too radical.”

“After the election, elected officials got very scared,” says Brickner. “It was really the people power that made the difference. People were going to the legislature, contacting their elected officials, protesting in public. Officials could no longer just wait things out—they had to take action.”

Zamani adds: “The ACLU of Delaware called on legislators to ban 287(g) agreements; they got public support from their state attorney general; they introduced the bill, moved it through the process, and passed it with bipartisan support. The governor signed it into law. It’s a master class in how Firewall works and why it’s so necessary.”



ultivating relationships with governors, attorneys general, mayors, and other local officials and legislators is a feature of the Firewall for Freedom campaign. ACLU affiliates in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have embraced this connective groundwork. The

results have been widespread.

“With the necessity of responding to Trump in this moment,” says Zamani, “our affiliates have become deep counsel for local and state leaders. They are at the table designing policy interventions, and they are oftentimes the first call. That was the goal: to build our political power in a range of states across the country.”

For affiliates in states with leadership that is particularly hostile to civil rights and civil liberties, the focus has been on working with school boards and state treasurers to pass municipal-level ordinances, bills, and executive orders that safeguard immigrants’ rights.

These municipal policy wins have had real-time impact for immigrant communities likely to be targeted by the administration’s aggressive detainment and deportation tactics. For example, in July, the Puerto Rican municipality of Aguadilla passed Ordinance No. 82, backed by the ACLU of Puerto Rico, designating Aguadilla a sanctuary city and instituting policies limiting cooperation with ICE and Customs and Border Protection. Since passage of the Aguadilla ordinance, and in the midst of ICE raids on the island, the chapter has engaged in grassroots organizing that has moved at least half a dozen additional municipalities to consider similar actions.

In April, the Milwaukee County Board in Wisconsin passed a resolution opposing ICE action at the county courthouse and calling on local law enforcement to safeguard individuals’ access to services and due process rights. In July,

“The most important ingredient is still ‘We the People.’ We have to fight for the country we want.”

**—Mike Brickner,
ACLU of Delaware Executive Director**

Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey approved the state budget with a \$5 million legal defense fund to protect immigrants at risk of deportation, and Rhode Island Governor Dan McKee signed Firewall immigration bills that prohibit the collection and use of immigration and citizenship status data by landlords and health care personnel.

Last fall, with support from the ACLU of New Mexico, the state’s most populous county, Bernalillo County, passed a resolution affirming the rights of all residents regardless of immigration status and expanding its policy prohibiting the use of local resources to assist in federal immigration enforcement. The county also advanced a Safer Community Places Ordinance to formally designate locations such as schools, hospitals, places of worship, and shelters as protected areas and to expand worker protections.

While the Firewall for Freedom playbooks have been highly predictive and proactive, the ACLU has also been nimble in adapting to developments in real time.

The ACLU political advocacy team has responded to ICE abductions and the illegal deployment of troops in American cities with a host of new Firewall policy actions to challenge masked agents conducting raids and monitor abuses of immigrants. After military forces were deployed to Los Angeles last summer despite the governor’s pushback, the ACLU of Southern California, alongside the bill’s cosponsors, were able to achieve passage of SB 627, the No Secret Police Act, which bans federal and local law enforcement, including ICE, from wearing masks starting January 1, 2026. Affiliates in other states are pushing similar legislation to ban the sharing of certain types of information between local and federal agencies that could enable the Trump administration’s autocratic agenda.



he federal crisis has opened the door for the ACLU to achieve long-pursued policy goals as state and local leaders become more driven to secure civil liberties protections. The ACLU of Delaware was finally able to push two long-desired bills through the legislature this past year that protect

immigrants from vigilante justice. One repealed the state’s Jim Crow-era citizen’s arrest statute and the other increased penalties for impersonating a federal agent. In August,

Massachusetts Governor Healey signed an updated shield law strengthening protections for patients and health care providers that include preventing the disclosure of sensitive data, protecting emergency abortion care, and prohibiting state and local authorities from cooperating with federal or out-of-state investigations into legally protected health care services such as abortion care.

“This affiliate work had been going on for years,” says Zamani, “but doing it under the auspices of the Firewall propelled it forward.”

Beyond immigration, state affiliates have been successful at advancing Firewall policies to protect reproductive freedom, trans rights, free speech, and data privacy issues. In one of the first Firewall actions, four days before President Trump’s inauguration, North Carolina Governor Josh Stein signed an executive order supported by the ACLU of North Carolina directing state agencies to protect reproductive freedom in the state. The order included safeguards for patient privacy and medical practitioners who are providing lawful reproductive health care.

As new developments emerge, the ACLU political advocacy team continues to workshop novel policy solutions

with affiliates to respond to the moment. With the 2026 midterms coming up, expanding voting access, reducing restrictive registration requirements, and safeguarding local election systems are growing areas of focus. And affiliates continue to develop creative ways to block the administration’s illegal deployment of military forces to cities for civilian law enforcement.

Since last year’s deployments in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Portland, the ACLU issued a new guide, “No Secret Police, No Troops in Our Streets,” with proactive policy responses—mask bans, laws prohibiting out-of-state deployments—for lawmakers to introduce during the 2026 state legislative sessions.

“We are a multi-issue organization with 54 affiliates doing everything we can to uphold civil rights and civil liberties,” says Zamani. “We recognize what’s at stake, and we’re using a range of tools—from litigation to public pressure, from peacefully organizing in the streets to educating people about their rights—to respond. We are designed for this moment.”

“After the election, it was people power that made the difference,” adds Brickner. “The most important ingredient is still ‘We the People.’ We have to fight for the country we want.” ■



Students in the
ACLU's National
Advocacy Institute
rally outside
the U.S. Capitol
Building.





COMMUNITY

ACLU ADVOCACY INSTITUTE

Youth to the Front

The fight for justice and equality needs young people who are ready to use their collective power. That's why, in 2016, the ACLU founded the National Advocacy Institute (NAI), a weeklong learning experience for emerging social justice advocates. Last summer, 900 high school students from across the country—the NAI's largest cohort yet—gathered in Washington, D.C., to engage directly with ACLU lawyers, lobbyists, activists, and other experts who are defending civil rights and liberties. Through site visits, classroom sessions, and policy discussions, the students explored the complex nature of issue advocacy, legal strategy, and real-world political decision-making in the nation's capital—and how to bring advocacy tools back home to make change in their own communities. —TOM VELLNER

GREG KAHN

Language as Liberation

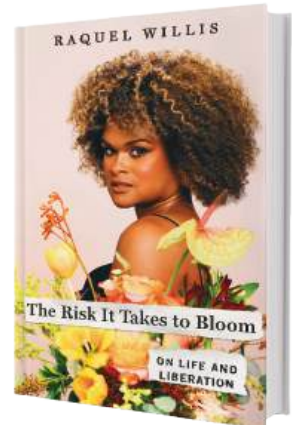
With the ACLU's help, Aesop offered customers free banned books by LGBTQ authors and allies.

Last summer, instead of browsing shelves filled with skincare and haircare products, visitors at select Aesop stores in New York, Los Angeles, and Toronto found rows and rows of free books by LGBTQ authors and allies. To cap off Pride Month, the retailer held its fifth annual Aesop Queer Library from June 26 to 29, featuring the theme “In Other Words—Language as Liberation.”

Stocked with titles by authors including Ocean Vuong and Raquel Willis (right), the Aesop Queer Library highlighted LGBTQ books that have been banned across the country, aiming to bring attention to the escalation in efforts to restrict what people can read in schools, libraries, and bookstores.

Aesop partnered with the ACLU to bring the Queer Library to life and to support the organization's long history of defending freedom of speech and expression from such efforts. Each library guest could take home a complimentary book.

“We celebrate the vibrant vocabularies crafted by LGBTQIA2S+ communities,” Aesop said of the 2025 Queer Library, “and showcase the power of language as both a shelter and a declaration of defiance.” —TOM VELLNER



Toward Freedom

Featured in last summer's Aesop Queer Library (left), *The Risk It Takes to Bloom: On Life and Liberation* is a memoir by trailblazing Black transgender activist and writer Raquel Willis, tracing her life of transformation and her work toward collective liberation. Blending personal narrative with social commentary, Willis shares her journey from a conservative upbringing in Georgia to becoming a prominent voice for LGBTQ and racial justice. Recounting her experiences with family, organizing, and coming out, she explores themes of identity, grief, and resilience. Willis reflects on the risks and triumphs of living authentically in a country that continues to marginalize trans people. In the face of escalating anti-trans legislation, her voice and activism are a testament to the power of persistence, self-discovery, and community. —T.V.

BRETT WARREN



Aesop's Rockefeller Center store in New York was one of the locations that hosted the brand's Queer Library.

LEARN MORE To find out more about the ACLU's work to protect literary freedom and resist efforts to ban books, visit aclu.org/righttolearn.

Illustration and text by Carlos Buelvas

Spring 2026 **33**

Fighting for Free Speech

Brittany Martin is seeking justice after being incarcerated for protesting police violence.

Shortly after Brittany Martin moved to Sumter, South Carolina, with her family in May 2020, George Floyd was murdered by police in Minnesota. She noticed her teenage son started missing his shifts at his new job. He was a hard worker, and his absences surprised her. She asked him why he wasn't going. "He said, 'Mama, they is out here killing us,'" Martin

recalled. "He said, 'I'm scared.' And when my son told me that, it just lit a fire, and I had to go."

Martin took to the streets in Sumter to join one of the many Black Lives Matter protests that emerged following Floyd's murder. It wasn't her first time protesting police violence—she began protesting when Philando Castile was murdered

in 2016, and she was born into a family that celebrated activism. When she protested in 2020, her father joined her and sat in a lawn chair, holding her daughter and a sign that said "No justice, no peace."

After five days of nonviolent protest with her community, Martin was arrested and later convicted of the South Carolina state crime of "breach of peace of a high and aggravated nature." She received a four-year prison sentence and was incarcerated until November 2024. Pregnant at the time of her arrest, Martin gave birth to her daughter while incarcerated. The ACLU of South Carolina began representing Martin in 2023, challenging the state's violation of her First Amendment rights.

In July 2025, she petitioned the Supreme Court, calling on the court to review her conviction and make clear that lower courts must protect free speech. The court denied her petition in October, but her commitment to fighting for justice persists.

"Somebody's got to be the example," said Martin of her case. "Somebody's got to walk in the fire and create the change. They are messing with our freedom of speech, and we've got to fight."

—THE ACLU

Brittany Martin, pictured in Mt. Vernon, Ill., where she now lives.



LEARN MORE Find out how the ACLU is fighting to protect our First Amendment rights at aclu.org/freespeech.

Ollie Henry (left) and Areej Qadeer at the Court Square subway station in Queens, New York.



Faces of the Future

By Areej Qadeer and Ollie Henry

In April 2023, we each received a phone call from the ACLU that would change our lives. We were the two activists selected for the competitive ACLU Pauli Murray Fellowship, named after the late activist, legal theorist, and ACLU board member. The fellowship offers recent graduates a full-time role in nonprofit management for 18 months.

At the time, Areej was in California serving as civil rights coordinator on the legal team at the Council on American-Islamic Relations. Building on a decade of grassroots organizing in the American-Muslim community, she supported religious discrimination casework and spoke with elected officials to advance resolutions opposing Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian hate.

Ollie had just graduated from Georgetown University, where they organized on campus and Capitol Hill for reparations, advocating at the intersections of gender, disability, and race. They were the first openly nonbinary person to speak at the March on Washington, the same pulpit from which Pauli Murray was denied.

We had looked up to the ACLU as the torchbearer in the fight for civil liberties, so the invitation to lead the charge with them felt surreal. We packed our bags and headed to the ACLU national headquarters in New York.

As fellows, we have contributed to meaningful work across ACLU issues: supporting the Border Humanity Project to defend immigrants' rights, organizing the Freedom to Be monument on the National Mall as a call for trans liberation, working on the Creatives for Freedom campaign to protect the First Amendment, and collaborating with ACLU staff across the country. We also led workshops for high school and college students at the ACLU National Advocacy Institute on how to build power and coalitions. Our capstone project aims to educate supporters on the ACLU's intersectional legal work, notably through the organization's racial justice, gender justice, and DEIA landmark victories.

As the Trump administration's crusade against civil rights and liberties escalates, the Pauli Murray Fellowship is a powerful testament to the ACLU's investment in the next generation of leaders who will defend those freedoms.

Pauli Murray said, "When my brothers try to draw a circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them. Where they speak out for the privileges of a puny group, I shall shout for the rights of all mankind." As Pauli Murray Fellows, we will continue to shout for the rights of all mankind, pushing our country toward true liberty and justice for all.



Here to Stay

The ACLU was built for and in times like these.

In the years following World War I, the United States was gripped by the fear that the Communist Revolution in Russia would spread at home. Beginning in November 1919, during what became known as the “Palmer Raids,” Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer authorized the rounding up and deportation of so-called radicals. Thousands of people were arrested without warrants or regard to constitutional protections against unlawful search and seizure. In the face of these egregious civil liberties abuses, a small group of people—including preeminent suffragist and lawyer Crystal Eastman (pictured)—decided to fight back. And the ACLU was born. Today, as the Trump administration threatens its political foes and detains legal residents for simply exercising their right to protest, the ACLU remains committed to its founding promise: to defend the fundamental freedoms that define this country.



Including the ACLU in your estate plans helps protect the future you believe in—a future where civil liberties are safeguarded, freedom prevails, and equality endures.

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