

STRATEGIC PLAN 2025-2028

Approved by Board of Directors
July 12, 2025

DEMOCRACY: from the Greek “demos”, meaning people, and “kratos” meaning power. A universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic, social, and cultural systems, and their full participation in all aspects of life.

We the People of the United States,
insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common Defence, promote the general
and our Posterity, We ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of

July 2025

We are in a defining moment for our democracy.

Across the country — and here in Ohio — we are facing a coordinated assault on our freedoms and the rule of law that is our nation's foundation. Authoritarian actors are working to dismantle the very systems that uphold our rights: the judiciary, the bar, public and private agencies, and fundamental legal norms themselves. These authoritarian actors are assaulting our civil liberties by rigging voting maps, criminalizing bodily autonomy, censoring classrooms and libraries, silencing dissent, attacking disfavored lawyers and judges, and targeting immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and communities of color. These attacks are not isolated. They are connected and strategic. They aim to divide us, suppress our voices, and concentrate power in the hands of a few by rolling back the rights and protections that belong to all.

The ACLU was founded in 1920 to defend civil liberties during a time of deep political repression and censorship. Today, that mission is more urgent and resonant than ever. **The ACLU of Ohio has long anticipated this moment —and is meeting it head on, with clarity, courage, and an unwavering commitment to justice.**

We know that injustice in America is deeply intersectional—rooted in a long history of racial oppression, economic exploitation, gender-based discrimination, and the criminalization of poverty and difference. Left unchecked, these actions amplify inequality, deny guaranteed freedoms, constrain basic opportunities for many, and preserve privilege for a few.

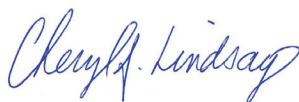
This 2025–2028 Strategic Plan is our blueprint for action to address these profound and escalating threats to our democracy. Grounded in our mission and guided by the realities we face, this plan harnesses the full force of our integrated advocacy—litigation, policy reform, community engagement, education, and mobilization—to defend civil rights and liberties, protect those most targeted, and build the collective power needed to resist and overcome these threats.

Together with our partners, neighbors, and allies, we work to fulfill the deeper promise of this democracy: that every person—no matter their background or beliefs—can live with dignity, safety, and freedom, free from government overreach. In Ohio, that promise must reach across every zip code, from rural communities and factory floors to college campuses, suburbs, and city blocks.

We believe that **civil rights and liberties belong to us all, and you are a part of “us”**. This plan is a call to action that can only be fully realized with you. The road ahead brings serious challenges. It also brings the promise that freedom will prevail, if we move forward with clarity, courage, and collective strength.



Erik Meinhardt
Board President



Cheryl A. Lindsay
Board Vice-President and Chair of
the Strategic Planning Committee



J. Bennett Guess
Executive Director

“So long as we have enough people in this country willing to fight for their rights, we’ll be called a democracy.”

~ Roger Baldwin, Founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, 1920

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 are able to live their fullest lives.

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.



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 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 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.

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 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 who believe in freedom cannot rest. We must join hands across all the lines that have been drawn to divide us and stand together as we the people. And when we do, ... a force more powerful than any of our individual actions will come and stand with us in the fire. That’s what the best of American history has taught us. That the force of truth, the force of love, the force of justice, and the force of equality is more powerful than any would-be king”

~ Reverend William Barber June 14, 2025

Our Reality

Ohio faces a deepening crisis for civil liberties and civil rights driven by unchecked political power, legal regression, and growing public fatigue. The Ohio General Assembly has enacted gravely detrimental policies that threaten individual freedoms and democratic norms.

We are experiencing a sweeping assault on civil liberties, including harsh voter ID laws, purges of voting rolls, and other tactics that disenfranchise eligible voters and attack direct democracy. There are coordinated efforts targeting LGBTQ+ people—especially trans youth—with legislation that criminalizes health care, erases their identities from schools and public life, and incites discrimination and violence. Academic freedom is under siege, with prohibitions on diversity, inclusion, and equity programs, and faculty strikes, and restrictions on teaching “controversial” topics, undermining open inquiry and dissent. Immigrants face escalating, devastating deportation threats and loss of due process, fed by a politicized narrative that fosters hostility and fear.

These threats are intensified by desensitization to our eroding First Amendment freedoms, increasing burnout and even despair among voters, advocates, and allies. In these years of deepening polarization and threats to democracy, the ACLU of Ohio has continued working with partners, upholding our values of engagement, inclusion, and mutual respect—securing meaningful victories:

- Defeating a legislatively referred ballot measure that would have effectively destroyed Ohio citizens’ right to referendum via majority vote;
- Guaranteeing reproductive freedom to Ohians via a successful ballot initiative and leading litigation to strike multiple laws that violate the newly amended Constitution;
- Prohibiting the death penalty for people with serious mental illness;
- Abolishing juvenile life without parole in Ohio;
- Restructuring Ohio’s sealing and expungement laws to be easier to use with expanded eligibility;
- Protecting the rights of persons with disabilities to receive essential assistance in voting.



The ACLU of Ohio’s longstanding presence, well-developed skills, and broad base of supporters and partners prepare us to step into this critical moment, collaboratively and with impact.

Our Envisioned Ohio

In Ohio, we believe in personal responsibility and the freedom to make decisions for ourselves. We are a place where neighbors look out for one another, and where hard work and resilience are the foundation of our shared strength. We believe in basic fairness, decency, and doing right by others.

We envision an Ohio where:

- Every eligible person can **fully participate in a vibrant democracy**—where every vote counts, every voice matters, and fair representation is the norm, where elections are secure and transparent, where eligible voters' participation is a right—not a privilege—and where the will of the people is heard, respected, and reflected.
- Justice means **dignity, fairness, and safety for all**—where no one is punished for being poor, and communities are strengthened by care, not cages.
- **Every person can speak, learn, and question freely**—where our guaranteed freedoms are not just protected, but powerfully alive in classrooms, communities, and public life.
- **All have the right to live as they are**, with equal protection of the law.
- Our **neighbors make important decisions for themselves** and are free from aggressive government overreach.

Our Lens

The ACLU of Ohio brings a **strong, nonpartisan perspective**, respected leadership, and a talented, multi-disciplinary team to the fight for civil liberties and civil rights. We are guided by our mission and values—not by political affiliation—we are committed to working alongside longstanding and emerging allies. We double down on our commitment to grow principled, respectful partnerships across the ideological spectrum, engaging those who share common ground with us on specific issues related to freedom, fairness, and systemic reform.

We operate with a lens of racial and economic justice, recognizing that deep-rooted inequities shape access to rights, power, and opportunity, and ensuring that our fight for civil liberties includes those most impacted by systemic injustice.

We will support Indigenous people, their rights, and their culture, through the essential step of learning more of culture, tribal law, and current needs, so that we can act in alignment with priorities of our Indigenous neighbors and our mission.

We are all on Native land and we acknowledge the many Indigenous peoples who have been dispossessed from this region. For millennia they occupied, traversed, lived from, and cared for land and waterways in Ohio. The name Ohio derives from Ohi:yó, an Onöndowa'ga term meaning “beautiful river. Today Native Americans of diverse ancestries and tribal affiliations continue to reside here, sustaining their heritages, beliefs, and practices and making contributions to our state's life and vitality. We pay respect to their ancestral claims and the present-day joys and struggles of their descendants. Because the understanding of Ohio's Indigenous history is imperfect and evolving, we will adjust this acknowledgement as we learn more.

We understand that the forces dividing us are intentional—used to justify policies that erode rights and target the most vulnerable. To confront these harms, we must engage with honesty, humility, and persistence. That means committing to **authentic engagement, meaningful inclusion, and cultivating a true sense of belonging for all**. We invite everyone into this work—because justice is not the responsibility of a few, but the shared calling of us all.

Our Planning Process

In December 2024, the ACLU of Ohio launched a strategic planning process to set bold, focused priorities for the next four years. Guided by a steering committee, the process engaged the board and staff at every level and included partners, impacted communities, members, and donors—grounding our plan in the voices and experiences of those on the front lines of the fight for civil liberties. Together we assessed the political, legal, and social dynamics shaping life in Ohio. We explored:

- Where are people's rights most at risk? Where can we take meaningful action?
- How do we make the greatest impact, while staying nimble in the face of increasingly hostile threats and overreach from executive and legislative branches?
- What strengths and relationships can we build on—and what internal capacities must we grow—to meet this moment?

The resulting priorities are **grounded in our unwavering commitment to racial justice**—a commitment to confront the deep ways systemic racism is embedded in our institutions, laws, and culture. **Racial justice work is intersectional by design**, recognizing that the fight for racial justice is inseparable from struggles for voting rights, LGBTQ+ rights, free speech, criminal legal system reform, and more.

Through this process, four Priority Issue Areas emerged as central to our mission and impact:

1 ENGAGED DEMOCRACY

2 INDIVIDUAL FREEDOMS AND DIGNITY

3 SMART JUSTICE

4 FREE SPEECH, FREE COUNTRY

Among these, the fight for **voting rights** rose as the top priority—named consistently by both internal and external voices as foundational to guaranteed democratic representation and collective power. Without fair and equal access to the ballot, every other right is at risk.

We also heard a clear call to expand meaningful, powerful connections —**deepening engagement, expanding our base, and mobilizing stronger coalitions for justice** across the state.

To be fit to win, we know that we must maintain the health, sustainability, and effectiveness of our organization by protecting a healthy, positive culture, and by growing varied revenue streams. **We must have the people, resources, and stability to defend rights, respond to crises, and to lead boldly in the years ahead.**

Our Priority Issues and Goals

ENGAGED DEMOCRACY

We envision an Ohio where every eligible person can fully participate in a vibrant democracy—where every vote counts, every voice matters, and fair representation is the norm.

The ACLU of Ohio believes voting is the cornerstone of all other rights—but that foundation is under serious threat. Gerrymandered congressional and legislative maps predetermine outcomes, silence voters, and shield those in power, eroding trust and real democratic choice.

Barriers to voting remain widespread—especially for historically disenfranchised communities and those with limited resources, unstable housing, or disabilities, or who live in rural areas. Suppression tactics like voter roll purges, restrictive registration rules, and harsh voter ID laws disproportionately affect Black and Indigenous people, voters of color, young people, naturalized citizens, and the elderly. These efforts discourage participation and deepen disconnection from civic life. Of serious concern is a downward trend in electoral participation observed in Ohio’s major urban counties where voter turnout decreased significantly between 2020 and 2024.

As civil society norms erode and collective mobilization proves more difficult, building informed, empowered communities of response and resistance is critical to not only resist regressive policies, but to keep Ohioans engaged for the long term.

To reclaim our democracy, we must expand access to democratic processes, reform broken systems, restore trust by combating mis- and dis-information, demand fair voting maps, and importantly, nurture and support a new generation of leaders and advocates who will pick up the torch and carry it further than our wildest dreams.



“Your vote is precious, almost sacred, it is the most powerful non-violent tool we have to create a more perfect union.”

~ Representative John Lewis, 2012

OUR GOALS



Grow a bigger tent for civic engagement rooted in shared values of freedom, fairness, and dignity. Implement a bold, strategic, multi-year engagement plan that brings together people across differences, especially those who have been historically marginalized, or who have withdrawn from the process. We will help transform despair and ad hoc efforts into concerted, purposeful actions— by removing barriers, amplifying voices, and supporting values-aligned Ohioans to speak, lead, and participate more meaningfully in our democracy.



Combat voter suppression, uphold the integrity of Ohio’s elections, and empower communities through direct engagement with the legislative process, election officials, partner organizations and the community at large, and through strategic litigation.

INDIVIDUAL FREEDOMS AND DIGNITY

We envision an Ohio where every person has the freedom and power to make deeply personal decisions about their body, health, and future, free from political interference, stigma, or discrimination.

This means full access to reproductive health care—including abortion—delivered with dignity, safety, and respect. Attacks on bodily autonomy extend beyond abortion. LGBTQ+ Ohioans, especially transgender people and more specifically transgender youth, still face discrimination in accessing health care and engaging in public life. Individuals with disabilities continue to encounter barriers to agency and inclusion.

True freedom and dignity means the right to live as you are, with equal protection of the law, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or disability status. It means privacy, autonomy, and freedom from government overreach.

As with all of these assaults on civil liberties, restricting individual freedoms perpetuates cycles of poverty and limits opportunities, especially for communities already facing structural racism and economic injustice. We are fighting to dismantle these barriers to personal autonomy, to protect individual freedoms, and to transform Ohio into a more welcoming place.

OUR GOALS



Assert and protect the humanity and rights of our LGBTQIA+ community, and especially, our trans neighbors. Build a foundation for much needed policy reform through coalition engagement, public education, legislative defense, and local advocacy.



Protect and advance reproductive freedom. Ensure that Ohioans' constitutional right to make and carry out their own reproductive decisions is fully actualized and protected.



FREE SPEECH, FREE COUNTRY

We envision an Ohio where every person - including migrants- can speak, learn, and question freely—where the First Amendment is not just protected, but powerfully alive in classrooms, communities, and public life.



At its core, a free country means that every person may think critically, speak boldly, and dissent without fear. This fundamental freedom is the bedrock of a safe, engaged, informed public.

A free country also means that the government must follow the rules when it arrests or detains someone, and that it may not deport a person without a chance to defend themselves in court.

Free Speech

Today, the First Amendment is under serious threat in Ohio. State lawmakers have imposed sweeping restrictions on academic freedom—chilling open discussion in our public colleges and universities and endangering the very spaces where ideas should thrive. If left unchallenged, this threatens educators’ ability to teach the full truth of our history and stifles the next generation’s capacity to think critically about power, justice, and democracy.

As states increasingly restrict what can be taught, discussed, or protested, Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities are disproportionately targeted. These communities are not only silenced, but are systematically stripped of their histories, cultures, and humanity, deepening a cycle of marginalization and erasure.

Due Process for All

We are steadfast in defending the First Amendment and the fundamental right to free speech. We will fight to uphold due process and protect our neighbors from unjust detention, deportation, and the destruction of the lives they have built here. We will partner to actively foster welcoming, inclusive communities where everyone can belong, contribute, and thrive.

OUR GOALS



Defend the right to free speech, expression, and inquiry in public spaces and educational institutions. Protect the ability for all in Ohio to read freely, speak truth, welcome classroom dialogue, and challenge power without fear of censorship or retaliation.



Partner with allies to nurture welcoming communities and to protect immigrant communities from unlawful detention and deportation. Ensure access to legal protections, public services, and safe participation in civic life.

SMART JUSTICE

We envision an Ohio where justice means dignity, fairness, and safety for all—where no one is punished for being poor, and communities are strengthened by care, not cages.



For too long, Ohio's criminal legal system has fueled mass incarceration as well as systemic racial and economic injustice. It disproportionately targets Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, criminalizes poverty and addiction, and devastates entire communities—while failing to deliver real safety. The current system pours billions into punishment and surveillance instead of investing in what actually keeps people safe: housing, education, mental health care, and economic opportunity.

Additionally, the pervasive use of surveillance tools in marginalized neighborhoods contributes to an overarching erosion of privacy and biased policing. Residents in marginalized communities often experience a “chilling effect,” where the constant awareness of being watched deters them from participating in civic and democratic life.

The ACLU of Ohio is working to end this injustice at its roots. We are fighting to reduce prison populations, decriminalize poverty and drug use, establish alternative crisis response programs, and abolish the death penalty.

We face a choice: continue investing in a system that harms and divides—or build one that heals, protects, and uplifts. We choose facts over fear mongering and people over prisons.

OUR GOALS



Reduce the harms associated with the criminalization of poverty, including through expansion and successful use of the sealing and expungement processes and evidence-based practices that make our courts fairer for all of our neighbors.



Reduce the number of people in prisons and jails; secure sentencing and parole reform, while focusing on legislation most likely to reduce racial disparities.



Advocate for death penalty repeal and champion clemency. Highlight the death penalty's racial bias, fiscal waste, and failure to deliver justice.



Reduce the number of youth funneled into the juvenile legal system. Advocate for reduced sentencing and against bindovers of youth into the adult system.



Protect against governmental overreach that infringes on personal privacy; ensure freedom from intrusive surveillance.

STRATEGIC ORGANIZATIONAL ADVANCEMENT GOALS:

We envision an ACLU of Ohio built for impact—rooted in equity, powered by people, and equipped to win lasting change.

To meet this moment, we are growing the strength, discipline, and sustainability required to deliver bold, measurable results. That means investing in our people, culture, and infrastructure—strengthening our commitment and practices so that diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging are lived internally, and financial resources match the scale of our ambition.

We are expanding our capacity to work with and within the communities most impacted by injustice—people of color, individuals with disabilities, trans and non-binary people, immigrants, refugees, Indigenous communities, those economically marginalized, and young people. We will deepen belonging, strengthen our engagement skills, and collaborate with humility—knowing when to lead and when to follow.

Our internal health is inseparable from our external power. By prioritizing inclusion, care, and sustainability, we ensure we can show up—again and again—with clarity, purpose, and impact.

OUR GOALS FOR 2025-2028



Build capacity within Board and staff to engage meaningfully with diverse communities across Ohio, listening and learning actively and confidently representing the ACLU's vision, values, and impact. Build skills in race/class and public narrative, and engaging across differences.



Diversify the team and strengthen the culture of equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging (EDIB). Continuously foster a culture where EDIB are lived values deepening our understanding and application of anti-racism, implicit bias principles and practices. Recruit and retain an increasingly diverse team.



Build the skills and consistent practice of cross-team collaborative planning and integrated advocacy. Develop the habits, systems, and shared leadership required for meaningful collaboration across departments, including well designed, consistent cross-functional planning sessions.



Increase and diversify our base of allies and supporters; grow our financial resources via multiple avenues, ensuring our ability to grow the team in support of the protection of civil rights and liberties as outlined in this plan.

On July 12, 2025, the ACLU of Ohio Board of Directors approved this 2025–2028 Strategic Plan: a focused, values-driven roadmap rooted in justice, designed for impact, and created in partnership with the people we serve and with whom we fight.

This living document is designed to meet the moment and evolve as new challenges and opportunities arise. We invite all who share a commitment to justice, dignity, and freedom—transcending party or political affiliation—to join us in building collective power for a democracy where safety, opportunity, and belonging are truly for all.

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ACLUOhio.org

4506 CHESTER AVENUE
CLEVELAND, OH 44103

1108 CITY PARK AVENUE
SUITE 203
COLUMBUS, OH 43206

103 WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT RD
CINCINNATI, OH 45219