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A Letter from our Board President

Inside this annual report you will find all the reasons you need to be proud of your decision to be a member of ACLU-MS. Under the leadership of executive director Jarvis Dortch, the ACLU-MS staff has had another banner year of defending civil liberties all over our state.

The affiliate's Board of Directors has continued to strengthen as well. Several of our members attended the national ACLU conference in Los Angeles this summer, returning home invigorated and ready to share the ideas and strategies they learned from colleagues all over the country. The ACLU-MS Board also held our own retreat here at home, getting to know one another better and discussing how we can support the staff's great work and continue to grow the organization's membership.

On a personal note, after five years on the Board and two as its President, the time has come for me to make way for new leadership. I am incredibly proud to have been a part of this Board and remain humbled by the opportunity to lead it. With a full staff operating in our new offices and a full roster of committed Board members, the affiliate is in a great place. I can't wait to see how its great work continues to make Mississippi a better place.

> Abram Orlansky Board President

A Letter from our Executive Director:

The ACLU of Mississippi was principally founded to fight on behalf of Black and Brown people and we continue to prioritize the fight for racial justice. Our Mississippi office grew out of the work of Civil Rights activists and attorneys whom worked on redistricting cases, implementing the Voting Rights Act, defending Black citizens from police brutality and protecting the First Amendment rights of civil rights workers. ACLU MS is rooted in the fight against White supremacy. And we must embrace that. But we also must understand that White supremacy is not just attacking the rights of Black people, but women, all persons of color, and LGBTQ individuals (especially trans kids) are under assault.

In 2022, we remained intentional about our work because this moment requires that we are purposeful and deliberate with our time and resources. In April of 2022, on behalf of a group of Black voters, we brought a lawsuit challenging the makeup of Mississippi's three Supreme Court Districts. Those districts are drawn to prevent Black Mississippians, particularly those living in Jackson and the Mississippi Delta, from electing justices of their choice. The ACLU of Mississippi is also preparing litigation to challenge legislative districts that dilute Black institutions will not respond to the policy needs of all Mississippians if those bodies fail to fairly represent the makeup of our state. This summer, we challenged the Legislature's \$10 million appropriation to private schools because it violates the Mississippi constitution's strict prohibition against providing public funds to

any school "not conducted as a free school." And we won! We brought this lawsuit because the powerful should not be able to disregard our laws when it suits them. We also know that when Mississippi fails to invest in public education it disproportionately hurts Black families. In January, we successfully settled a lawsuit in North Mississippi after we sued the City of Horn Lake for openly discriminating against a group of Muslim citizens and illegally denied their request to build a mosque. Last month, we stepped up to represent Black community leaders and organizations in Gulfport fighting for environmental justice and to block a port expansion through historically Black neighborhoods.

Going into 2023, ACLU of Mississippi will prioritize advocacy in the areas of voter education and rights, criminal justice reform and LGBTQ civil rights. We will continue litigation to protect marginalized communities, hold the state of Mississippi accountable for violating the State constitution, challenge electoral districts that harm Black voters, and advocate for smarter criminal justice policies. There remains much more work to do. We will continue the fight to preserve and extend constitutional rights to every Mississippian. I invite you to visit aclu-ms.org voting strength in Mississippi. We are bringing these lawsuits because our to learn more about our work, become a supporter or even sign up to be a card-carrying member of the ACLU.

Thank you for standing with us.

Jarvis Dortch Executive Director



Protecting and Expanding Access to the Ballot and Ensuring Fair Maps

Voting Rights Education Campaign

Mississippi lawmakers have effectively diluted the power of Black voters for decades and left thousands of Mississippians with representatives who don't make decisions in the best interest of their constituents. Despite barriers, we continue to educate voters on their right to vote through dozens of face-to-face and virtual interactions at community events, and engaging social media content.

This legislative session, we fought bills which permitted the purging of voters from voting rolls who could not prove their citizenship with specific documentation. While we were able to kill one of these measures, another was passed in House Bill 1510. While we ultimately opposed House Bill 1510, our advocacy ensured the bill signed by the Governor was less harmful than the initially introduced legislation.

Suffrage Restoration Campaign

Stripping voting rights from people with felony convictions is a scheme created in the 1890 Mississippi Constitution to curb civil rights progress made during Reconstruction. As a result, over 230,000 Mississippians have lost their right to vote. There is a path that individuals can take to restore their voting rights, but unfortunately, it is extremely complicated and arbitrary.

This fall, we launched our Voting Rights Restoration Project to educate the public about voting rights restoration, guide people with past felony convictions through the current process of regaining their voting rights, and improve the process by making it more accessible and uniform. Mississippi is one of ten states where voting rights are not automatically restored to people convicted of felonies after the completion of their sentence. Our voting rights restoration clinics are designed to help get these Mississippians back on the voter rolls and to the polls.

State Supreme Court Lawsuit

The ACLU of Mississippi believes that elected officials should be representative of the communities they serve. On behalf of civic leaders, we along with our

Protecting the Religious Liberty of Mississippians

People of every faith have should have a safe space to worship, including the Muslim Community of Desoto County. Riyadh Elkhayyat and Maher Abuirshaid, two community leaders in Desoto County in North Mississippi, wanted to build a mosque for their families and their community in Horn Lake. Despite having land zoned for a house of worship, and their plans meeting or exceeding all requirements, both the planning commission and the board of aldermen of Horn Lake denied Mr. Elkhayyat and Mr. Abuirshaid a permit exhibiting naked anti-Muslim bias. At a public meeting, one alderman warned about the mosque, "if you let them build it, they will come," exhorting his fellow board members to "stop it before it gets here." Along with our partners at the ACLU and Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP, we sued. Understanding its untenable position, Horn Lake quickly settled the lawsuit agreeing to let Mr. Elkhayyat and Mr. Abuirshaid build a mosque, as well as paying \$25,000 in damages and \$73,030 in attorneys' fees and costs.

Supporting and Strengthening Public Schools for Mississippi's Children

Parents for Public Schools Lawsuit

This summer, we challenged what we determined was the illegal siphoning of funds by our State Legislature. The Mississippi Constitution clearly and expressly prohibits sending public funds to private schools. The drafters of the Constitution required that all public funds go to public schools. In 2022, the Mississippi Legislature passed a law and Governor Reeves signed it that sent \$10 million to private schools. Public schools and their students were not eligible for this money, despite the fact that public schools in Mississippi are, have been, and will be underfunded by the tune of millions of dollars. Along with our partners at Democracy Forward and the Mississippi Center for Justice, the ACLU of Mississippi sued the state to stop this money from going to private schools in violation of the Constitution. In October 2022, a Hinds County Chancery Court judge ruled in our favor, declaring this appropriation unconstitutional, and permanently blocking it from going forward.

partners at the American Civil Liberties Union, Southern Poverty Law Center, and Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP, filed a lawsuit to challenge the Mississippi Supreme Court district lines that have gone unchanged for more than 35 years. These lines dilute the voting strength of Black residents in state Supreme Court elections, in violation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the U.S. Constitution. Mississippi's population is almost 40% Black—a greater proportion than any other state. Yet in the 100 years that Mississippi has elected its Supreme Court, there have only been four Black justices ever to sit on that body, and never more than one at a time. It has been nearly 20 years since a Black jurist won election to the Court in a contested election. We are seeking to have the districts redrawn so that Black voters have an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice.

Highlight: Dyamone White, Plaintiff in State Supreme Court Lawsuit

As we have seen in recent cases, courts and their interpretation of the laws touch every single aspect of our lives. A prime example would be the Supreme Court making an appointment of judges to handle pertinent matters in the City of Jackson. Those judges don't understand our community, or the background stories, or seem to have much care to which is seen in the time it takes for them to make a decision. Not to mention, sending judges with less stellar records - which is an important note. Time, after time, we have not been satisfied.



Minorities have earned a seat at the table, but the current power structure has refused to provide equal access to a table they didn't set nor did they have to earn. A governing body that does not reflect the body cannot govern at full capacity. Not only in race, but economics and class as well. The dangers of these problems are evident throughout Mississippi. Because our government doesn't reflect the race, economics, and class structure of the state, mitigating policies are not addressed, infrastructural needs are not addressed, and public education compounding needs are not addressed. Instead, we hear the constant promotion of a healthy state "slush fund" when in reality we're still a severely impoverished state. And, telling everyone to "get a job" when a job does not guarantee a way out of poverty. This is why we, more than ever, need our state government to reflect the state's population in more ways than one.

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Protecting the Reproductive Rights of Mississippians Post Roe v. Wade

The Supreme Court's overturning of Roe v. Wade has been the most significant blow to reproductive rights in decades. Over the past year, the ACLU has focused on educating Mississippians about their reproductive rights as well as strengthening our relationship with grassroots organizations and activists. We provided funding and support for a rally immediately after the Dobbs oral arguments that was attended by both in and out of state pro-choice groups. We took on many media appearances to get out information about how the lack of reproductive healthcare harms people across the state. We are a coordinating committee member with the Mississippi Abortion Access Coalition, a newly-formed group of non-profits aimed at advocating for and ensuring Mississippians' ability to obtain reproductive healthcare. Additionally, we funded and released polling of Mississippians which revealed the majority (84%) disagreed with the Dobbs decision and supported abortion access in some form. Mississippi has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the United States and developed nations. This fall, we released a report on the state's failure in maternal and reproductive healthcare, highlighting hospital closures, ineffective sex education, and inadequate postpartum support.

Highlight: Vara Lyons, Policy Counsel, ACLU-MS

At present, Mississippi has the highest maternal mortality rate in the nation, a statistic that is even higher for Black mothers. Mississippi's abortion restrictions and failure to expand post-partum Medicaid mean very few women will get the reproductive healthcare they need and deserve. Mississippi women are forced to carry non-viable pregnancies to term under a "genetic discrimination" statute, a law that places them even more at risk of death because pregnancy is an inherently high-risk medical condition. If a woman wishes to receive an abortion under the rape exception, she must first make a report to law enforcement, a process that is traumatic and undesirable for many sexual assault survivors. As usual, these bans will fall hardest on poor Black women as their more financially stable white counterparts are more likely to have the resources to leave the state to access an abortion. However, no one should be forced to travel or endure financial hardship to attain healthcare.



On a personal note, I am a single woman who up until now has chosen to prioritize my career rather than have children. I have friends who have decided to focus solely on motherhood or balance both a job and children. We should all have that right to autonomy over our bodies. Personhood laws, which many Mississippi anti-choice groups and politicians support, would take away even the basic right to prevent pregnancy or to get pregnant due to IVF treatments. I was lucky enough to live for six years in a state that respected my right to make reproductive decisions. I came back to Mississippi last year to fight for people in my home state to have that same inherent choice.

Enforcing Police Accountability

Litigation Against the Lexington, MS Police Department

Lexington, MS is a predominantly black town in the Mississippi Delta, one of the poorest areas of the Country. Since July 2021, the Lexington Police Department has been violating the rights of people in that town with brutality, false charges, racially discriminatory roadblocks, and the use of cash bail to raise money. Despite repeated, credible complaints, the Mayor and Board of Aldermen have done nothing.

A recording was released of the police chief bragging about killing thirteen people and saying he didn't care if his officers "killed a m*ther f**ker in cold blood." He used the words "n***er" and "f**got" when discussing Black people and members of the LGBTQ community, and boasted about personally shooting a man 119 times in the line of duty. The chief was fired in a 3-2 vote. His second in command, who has many complaints of misconduct, was appointed interim chief. Lexington and LPD need accountability, and Lexington residents deserve justice.

As one of a host of solutions that seek to end endemic and systemic unconstitutional policing practices in Lexington, the ACLU of Mississippi will: Encourage participation of-and lead-for-profit law firms, located inside and outside of Mississippi, in marshaling their resources to bring legal actions intended to stop these discriminatory policing practices. By focusing critical law firm resources on a single department, the ACLU of Mississippi-alongside community-based organizations, activists, and groups-can help establish a litigation blueprint geared toward altering police conduct.

Protecting the Civil Rights of LGBTQ Mississippians

Banned Books

Right now, in Mississippi classrooms and libraries, there's a coordinated attack on our students' right to read and learn. The attack on students' rights is especially disgraceful because Mississippi continuously ranks low among states for academic achievement. Instead of empowering teachers and providing adequate resources, politicians and school boards are making moves to ban books and erase history. The ACLU of Mississippi has been on the frontlines of this issue by providing students the tools to speak out against book bans in their schools. In March, we will also be co-hosting a Banned Books Festival to highlight the attempts by local officials to ban books. We are bringing New York Times bestselling author and native Jacksonian, Angie Thomas, to participate in the festival.

Reforming the Criminal Justice System

Reentry Initiative with Hinds County

Policymakers are waking up to the need to improve reentry for returning persons in Mississippi. Following reentry advocates' successes this past legislative session, the ACLU of Mississippi has come together with the Hinds County District Attorney's office to develop a collaborative reentry program for women returning to Hinds County from incarceration. Together, we are hiring a Reentry Coordinator with direct experience who will administer the program and act as a liaison between returning persons, the Hinds County DA, and the ACLU. We are also working together to develop a comprehensive reentry toolkit that includes a resource bank on everything from how to get a driver's license to where to find affordable groceries. Connecting regularly with the Reentry Coordinator, our team will monitor returning persons' progress over the long-term to ensure this program meaningfully ensures successful reentry for its participants. We hope the lessons from this program, which is still in its early stages, can be a roadmap for future reentry initiatives across the state.

Pretrial and Bail Reform

Mississippi is in a crisis of pretrial detention, where an estimated one hundred million dollars annually are spent jailing thousands of Mississippians for months (or years, in some cases) without any guilty verdict to justify their detention. Despite major reforms over the past few years, these conditions continue due to persistent flaws in our criminal legal system including excessive reliance on money bail, an underfunded and piecemeal public defense structure, and lack of consistent data reporting

ACLU of Mississippi has been conducting interviews with advocates, government officials, and public defenders across the state, region, and country to receive their first-hand guidance on Mississippi's broken pretrial system. Together with advocates, attorneys, impacted peoples, and other stakeholders across the state, we are strategizing to build a movement in Mississippi that not only sheds light on the flaws in our system but also offers sustainable solutions and builds power for the people who can make those solutions a reality.

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Legislative Wins: Successful in getting reporting requirements in reentry legislation

Building Community Power

We believe that enduring community power is derived from the grassroots. The ACLU of Mississippi has been intentional with partnering, training and building capacity with often marginalized groups. To that end, we have created three programs to carry out those ideals.

AIM Project

This summer, the ACLU of Mississippi launched its inaugural Advocates In the Making (AIM) Summer Internship Program. The AIM Program is a recognition that supporting public interest organizations in amplifying and expanding their reach, strengthens the impact of all of our work. Lack of resources (i.e., financial, human, etc.) can sometimes be an impediment for nonprofit organizations that want to work on new ideas projects, or campaigns. This grant provided the funding to materialize plans that public interest nonprofits may have put on hold.

Leaders in Action

Launched this fall, Leaders In Action (LIA) engages 16 to 24-year-olds in trainings about organizing, legislative advocacy, and social media advocacy. The inaugural LIA members have had a particular interest in our campaigns to protect the right to discuss race in classrooms; to achieve equality for LGBTQ Mississippians; and to protect reproductive rights.

Ascend Project

This year, with funding from the Ascend Foundation, we are creating a pipeline of Black women that are interested in running for local office by the 2023 election cycle. We will provide candidate training and connect them with support services (i.e., financial, child care) that will allow them to run for office.

Highlight: JaMareous Thompson, AIM Intern

In this internship, I learned about diversity and what that looks like. I grew up in a predominantly black area and attend a Historically Black College/ University, Jackson State University. Needless to say, I have always been around black and brown people and been considered the majority in every level of my life from adolescence to adulthood. Being engulfed into an organization that consists mostly of white people was a culture shock to say the least. During this internship, I learned how to be a better advocate for not only one part of my intersectionality, but multiple facets! I came in only thinking that I would be doing things to create safer spaces for LGBTQIA+ members, but I did not know that would also be creating spaces for black and brown people as well!



During this 10 week program, ACLU of MS were not only an email, text message, or phone call away, yet they were a family to me! I remember having a problem pertaining to the internship and I contacted a member of the board. This person gave me emotional support, professional guidance, and relatable scenarios! After this conversation, the member kept in contact and would ask to assure that the issue was solved.

All in all, I would love to say that ACLU of MS not only gave me my very first internship opportunity, but gave me an experience of a lifetime! If I could do it all over again, I would without a shadow of a doubt! Thank you all for all of the hard work you do! I cannot wait to see what you

The ACLU of Mississippi is working very hard to impact the "hearts and minds" of our citizens to make it safer for LGBTQ people in Mississippi. We've done that through legal assistance, community education and engagement, and partner collaboration. We have hosted two LGBTQ clinics where we've assisted with issues of housing and gender marker change petitions. Our LGBTQ Justice Project has developed CLE credits for attorneys to better serve LGBTQ clients and have made an imprint in our communities by speaking and participating in Pride parades, town halls, civic clubs and church events across the state. More importantly, we partnered with like-minded organizations to ensure no anti-LGBTQ legislation passed during the session.

In the interest of protecting the dignity of all students in Mississippi, we sent letters to 55 schools with gendered language in their student dress codes. This resulted in at least one school district in Jones County revising their dress and grooming code.

Legislative Wins: Legislative Wins: Stopped passage of anti-transgender youth medical bans such as: SB 2111 (Transgender 21 Act), SB 2728 (MS Save Adolescents from Experimentation Act), and HB 1147 (Child abuse, revise definition to include gender reassignment) - Stopped passage of anti-transgender youth medical bans.

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Fighting for Environmental Justice

What's Next

The historically Black community of North Gulfport, MS has been fighting against a U.S. Department of Defense military installation going into their community. Despite there being other viable alternatives that do not have the environmental justice impacts on a long-standing residential community in Gulfport, the State persists in its attempt to put this military installation in North Gulfport. Along with our partners at Earth Justice and the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, we are representing local community organizations, a church and residents in an appeal to the Supreme Court of Mississippi to ensure that the residents of North Gulfport are treated fairly and are protected against harmful and hazardous uses on and near their land.

Our Reach

36.2k

Engagements

16.2k

Social Followers Website Visits

1,032,033 53.8k **Social Media Impressions**

The mission of the ACLU of Mississippi is dedicated to promoting, defending, and extending civil rights and civil liberties to all Mississippians with emphasis on issues related to criminal justice reform, education opportunities, equal access/equality for all, voting rights, and governmental transparency and accountability. In the coming year, we will employ these principles to all our future priorities through the tools of legislation, litigation and advocacy.

Our 2023 Priorities

- 1. Right to Privacy
- 2. Freedom of Speech
- 3. Ballot Restoration
- 4. Marijuana Expungement