

From Foundation to Fruition



ANNUAL REPORT
2023

ACLU Mississippi

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From Foundation to Fruition

FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

One constant I have learned about the ACLU is that every person you talk to has a distinctive perspective on what our organization does or should be doing. Whether it's staff, supporters, or the general public, the ACLU can mean very different things to different people.

That isn't a burden. It is an awesome responsibility. This is the result of the ACLU and its state affiliates, showing up in so many different arenas. As challenging as this duty is for staff of 12, the ACLU of MS is proud to be in this space.

Our team embraces this calling with the understanding that it's impossible to be everywhere, at all times. We have to remain intentional and thoughtful in how we attempt to carry out our mission. Accordingly, in 2021, the ACLU of Mississippi adopted a strategic plan that laid out our values and program objectives. While it outlines our affiliate priorities, it also serves as an accountability tool for our members and supporters. In 2021, we prioritized maintaining organizational endurance; protecting voting rights and increasing Black voting power; fighting for equality and standing up for the LGBTQ community; and reforming our criminal justice system and opposing efforts to increase incarceration.

We set out to build a sustainable and impactful program. This report illustrates our talented and driven team's commitment to that goal. Through everything that comes our way, we have labored to stay focused and intentional – so we can best show up for up for the diverse communities that call on the ACLU of Mississippi. Thank you for standing with us.



Jarvis Dortch
Executive Director

FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD

As the President of the Board of Directors for the American Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi, it is with an unwavering commitment to the ethos of equality and the relentless pursuit of justice that I present our Annual Report for the fiscal year 2023.

This report serves as a testament to the tireless efforts of our dedicated team as we traverse the complex terrain of civil liberties across the state of Mississippi. Aligned with the profound values of the ACLU, our pursuits have encompassed a fight against legislation that seeks to strip voting rights of the majority Black voters in our state capital, Jackson, Mississippi. We vigorously advocated for the autonomy of transgender youth across the state, to protect their freedom to express their transitioned gender without discrimination or harassment. This commitment reflects our stance as advocates for justice, equality, and the protection of constitutional rights through legislation, litigation and advocacy.

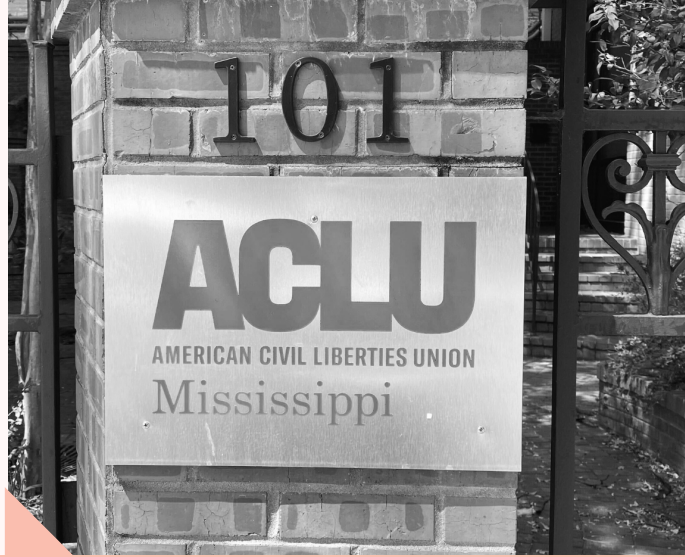
As we anticipate the challenges and opportunities on the horizon, we embark on the forthcoming year fortified by the enduring support of our community. The attached annual report offers a comprehensive narrative of our activities and achievements. Heartfelt gratitude is extended to our esteemed board members, dedicated staff, and the broader network that constitutes the ACLU of Mississippi.

In conclusion, I express profound appreciation for your steadfast support of the ACLU of Mississippi. Together, in the spirit of equality and justice, we persist in our pursuit of civil liberties and the transformative principles that define our shared humanity.



Crystal Welch
Board President

LOOKING BACK: 2023 BY THE NUMBERS



OUR REACH

(Reported January 1, 2023–November 30, 2023)

17.9k+

SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS

150k+

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENTS

155k+

WEBSITE VISITS

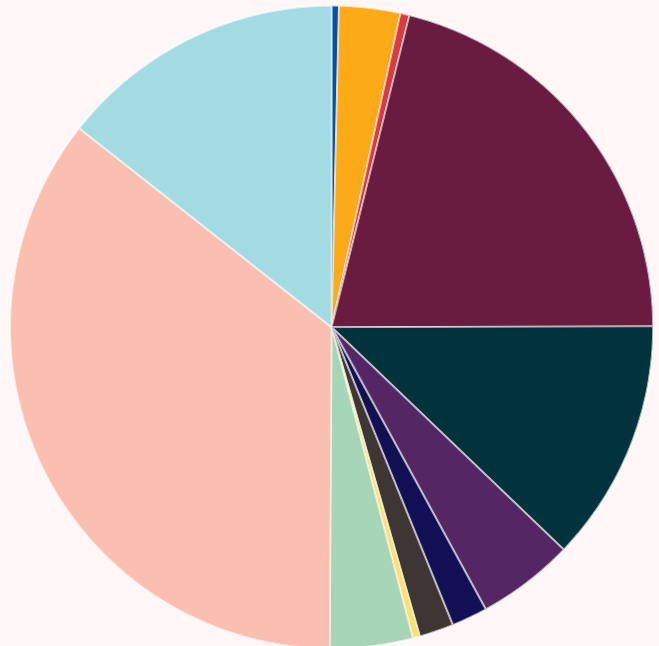
8.2M+

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPRESSIONS

INTAKE BY ISSUE AREA

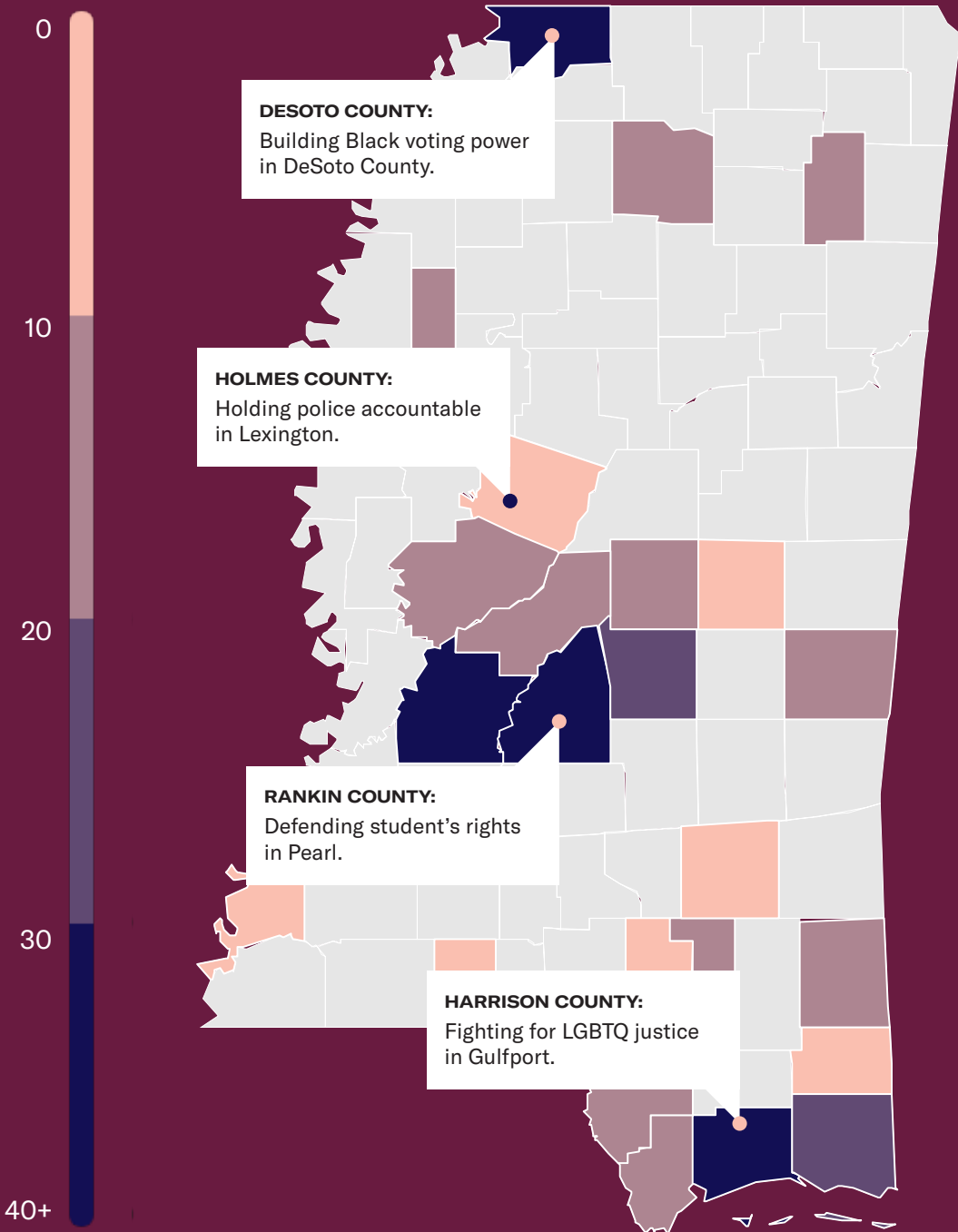
■ Immigration—0.4%
■ LGBTQ+—3.1%
■ Public Accommodations—0.5%
■ Prison or Jail—21.1%
■ Criminal Justice—12.2%
■ Education—4.9%
■ Employment Discrimination—1.8%
■ First Amendment—1.7%
■ Government (Open)—0.4%
■ Parole/Probation—4.2%
■ Policing—35.5%
■ Other—14.4%

(Reported January 1, 2023–November 29, 2023)



FIGHTING FOR ALL MISSISSIPPIANS

Intake reports by county (reported January 1, 2023–November 29, 2023)



FOCUS AREA

EDUCATION & STUDENT'S RIGHTS

Protecting the Right to Wear Tribal Regalia

Earlier this year, Merissa Wilson stood before the school board of the Pearl Public School District in Mississippi to make a small but crucial request: that the board permit her daughter, Zuri, to wear an eagle feather on her graduation cap and be wrapped in a traditional star quilt by her family after exiting the commencement stage. As enrolled members of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, these Native American traditions are an integral part of the family's cultural and spiritual heritage.

Dyleen, Merissa's mother and Zuri's grandmother, had previously reached out to the Native American Rights Fund (NARF), which helps students denied the right to wear tribal regalia at graduation.

NARF, along with the ACLU and ACLU of Mississippi, sent a letter to school board members explaining that Mississippi law requires public schools to allow Native American students to wear tribal regalia and objects of cultural significance, such as eagle feathers, at graduation. The letter also pointed out that the Native American practice of presenting graduates with a traditional quilt, which is made by close friends or family members and features a star in the center, also falls within the spirit of the statute.

After receiving the letter, the school board reversed course, and Zuri was able to wear her eagle feather and receive a star quilt at graduation.



Being able to walk across the stage wearing my eagle feather made me feel proud—of myself wearing it, of knowing that I honored my family, and knowing my grandma didn't get to do that.

I know I honored her by walking across that stage wearing it and getting my star quilt."

Zuri Wilson
ACLU-MS client



Special Education Coalition

This year, we launched the Special Education Coalition, a collaborative effort bringing together the expertise of the ACLU of Mississippi, the Southern Poverty Law Center, Disability Rights Mississippi, the Mississippi Center for Justice, and Attorney Kevin Frye of Frye Reeves, PLLC. The coalition was formed in response to numerous requests from parents asking for assistance with protecting their children's rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

DEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) is a federal law that ensures children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). FAPE means education tailored to these students' unique needs, the removal of barriers, and the provision of support. IDEA and FAPE require Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for special education students. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act ensures accommodations and services through a 504 plan for students not eligible for IEPs to access FAPE in regular educational settings.

Our primary objective is to expand awareness and capacity within the legal community and communities across the state of Mississippi. One aspect of our strategy involves Continuing Legal Education (CLE) workshops designed for attorneys, including panel discussions and free legal consultations for parents and advocates. In 2023, we hosted workshops in Oxford and Jackson; looking forward, we plan to host these workshops no fewer than three times annually, rotating among the Northern, Central



and Southern regions of the state.

Our ultimate goal extends beyond legal capacity building. We aspire to empower children, parents, families, and communities by offering comprehensive instruction and representation. Through these efforts, we seek to create a ripple effect, transforming the educational landscape for special needs children across the state.

Above: A guest takes notes at a Special Education Workshop and Clinic in Jackson, Mississippi/ Photo by Neely Mullen.

Below: Attendees listen to a presentation at a Special Education Workshop and Clinic in Oxford, Mississippi/ Photo by Caleb Nelson, Ruby Red Media.

Left (facing page): Zuri Wilson poses in her graduation attire in May 2023 / Photo by Harold Lyle Films.



FOCUS AREA

DEFENDING LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

High School Dress Code Case

In May of 2023, our client, L.B., a transgender high school girl, was told by her school district that she would not be allowed to attend graduation unless she wore so-called “boy’s clothes.” The district’s decision came as a shock—she had already purchased the perfect dress for graduation.

Just two days before graduation, we filed a lawsuit to fight for L.B.’s right to wear a graduation dress under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, Title IX, and the First Amendment freedom of expression. After an all-day emergency hearing, a federal judge ruled against our client. She chose not to attend graduation rather than go against her values by attending in boy’s clothes.

Instead, during graduation weekend, L.B. flew to Washington D.C. to attend the first-ever Trans Prom, hosted by the ACLU. Dozens of articles from local, national, and international media were written about the case and L.B. and her parents appeared on national television.

When the dust settled, L.B. wrote about her experience in her own words on our blog.



“

I vow to stand for my rights, my freedom, and my life.”

L.B.
ACLU-MS client



Fighting Against HB 1125

Once the gender-affirming care ban for minors, HB 1125, emerged as the leading anti-LGBTQ bill during the 2023 session, we got to work.

We coordinated over 3,500 emails and 1,000 calls to legislators; organized a legislative webinar, a virtual community town hall, a rally for trans youth, and a protest of the signing ceremony; shared talking points with friendly legislators; released a statement, press release, and Governor veto letter; connected directly impacted parents and youth with journalists; and appeared in print and televised interviews.

While the bill was signed into law in February, immediately outlawing medically necessary care trans kids in Mississippi, we put up an unrelenting fight to show that trans kids are worth fighting for.

Top: Community leaders, parents, and activists protest HB 1125 outside of the Mississippi Capitol in February 2023 / Photo by Aerial Adams.

Left: L.B. poses in her prom dress at the first-ever Trans Prom in Washington, D.C. / Photo courtesy of client/ACLU

Protecting the Right to Read and Learn

In March, we sponsored and helped to organize the state's inaugural Banned Book Festival. The festival was designed to address the growing attempts to censor literature by marginalized groups focusing on racial justice, investigative reporting, and personal experiences.

The LGBTQ Justice Project curated a panel named featuring a librarian and student called "Erasing LGBTQ Books" as part of the festival. Seeing that our MS author banned book bookmarks have been an effective tool for engagement, we designed "read banned books" stickers, bumper stickers, and a poster.

During week of the festival, we launched a parents' advocacy toolkit. Like our students' resource guide to combat classroom censorship, it provides parents with resources, talking points, relevant Mississippi law, and information about how they can organize to support their children's right to access reading materials with diverse topics and viewpoints. This initiative was prompted by the observed coordinated efforts from right-wing groups, such as Moms for Liberty, targeting inclusive materials in schools.



FOCUS AREA

PROTECTING THE BALLOT & ENSURING FAIR MAPS

CAMPAIGN IMPACT

3.1 million campaign impressions in Hinds, DeSoto, and Harrison Counties

728,141 YouTube impressions, with **183,092 completed views**

43,853 Hinds County voters received direct mail

9,000 doors knocked on by canvassers in DeSoto County

Your Vote, Your Voice: Election 2023

As a result of our state's law and policies, Black Mississippians face voter suppression at every step of the voting process. 42 states, including our neighbors in Louisiana, Tennessee and Alabama allow online voter registration. Mississippi does not. 47 States allow in-person early voting. Mississippi does not.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that Mississippi ranks at the bottom in voter turnout. But instead of removing barriers, the Mississippi passed laws to remove voters. In the most difficult state to cast a ballot, lawmakers are now allowing voters to be purged for simply not voting. It's almost enough to make you want to give up. After all, that is the entire point.

To encourage voters to turn out, we produced and placed online video ads in Hinds County – as well as DeSoto and Harrison Counties. In all, since September, this digital campaign has resulted in over 3 million impressions. We also sent direct mail to 44,000 infrequent Hinds County voter and ran stadium ads at Jackson State home football games. Because of the growth and demographic changes in DeSoto County, we worked with community partners to also knock on over 8,000 doors over the month of October. This was a major investment by our office. But we were not thinking about just one election but how we could best move our state forward. It was an investment in Mississippi's future.



Ensuring Fair Maps

We challenged Mississippi's 2022 state legislative district maps for unlawfully diluting the voting strength of Black Mississippians.

By gerrymandering districts for the State House and Senate, the Mississippi legislature denied Black residents throughout Mississippi an equal opportunity to participate in the political process and elect candidates of their choice. Fair and legally drawn districts could result in at least four additional Black-majority Senate districts and at least three additional Black-majority House districts.

The Mississippi legislature should accurately and fairly reflect its constituents.

One day, Mississippians will have a legislature that prioritizes their needs and follows the law.

But that only happens if we continue to hold the current body accountable. **That only happens when voters choose their legislators, not when legislators choose their voters.**

Jarvis Dortch
Executive Director • ACLU-MS



Protecting the Ballot

Following the false narrative by anti-voter politicians of widespread voter fraud, Mississippi passed S.B. 2358 in 2022, a law designed to diminish access to the ballot for Mississippians with disabilities. The bill applied harsh criminal penalties to Mississippians who help disabled members of their communities vote by absentee ballot.

Instead of making voting harder, Mississippi leaders should ensure all of those who qualify can access the polls. With support from our partners, we were able to stop this bill.

In July, a federal judge in Jackson agreed with Plaintiffs Disability Rights Mississippi, the League of Women Voters of Mississippi, and three Mississippi voters that the law violated the right of Mississippians with disabilities to receive assistance in voting from the person of their choice, as recognized in Section 208 of the Voting Rights Act.

Above: Mississippi residents attend a redistricting hearing discussing the state's new congressional maps in 2022. / Photo by Candace Coleman.

FOCUS AREA

RACIAL JUSTICE & POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY



Fighting for Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is racial justice. Historically, the most destructive, disruptive, and dangerous infrastructure projects have been sited in disadvantaged and racially discriminated against communities.

One such community—the historically Black neighborhood of North Gulfport—has fought for decades against projects that threaten community health and safety. Their latest battle began in 2019, when the Mississippi Environmental Quality Permit Board and Mississippi State Port Authority approved a permit to build a military installation. The installation, which is slated for construction directly adjacent to the residential area, may hold thousands of pounds of ammunition and explosives.

On behalf of the Educational, Economics, Environmental, Climate, and Health Organization (EEECHO), residents, and other community groups, we and our partners at Earthjustice are fighting back. In November, we delivered oral arguments before the Mississippi Court of Appeals on behalf of our clients. Everyone deserves a safe community free from state-imposed hazards.

Police Accountability Project

Too often, police misconduct goes unchallenged. With our Police Accountability Project, we are partnering with law firms across the country to ensure that people see justice and police departments who overstep are held accountable.

Lexington, a small town in Holmes County, is home to approximately 1,547 people, of which 86% are Black. The city has an extensive history of segregation and race-based socioeconomic stagnation, and residents have long suffered under the Lexington Police Department's racially-motivated and discriminatory policing practices.

As part of this project, we, alongside community members, advocates, lawyers, and law firms, are fighting back after years of bad policing. Currently, we are seeking justice for our clients Alexis Jew and Javarius Russell. Both were illegally stopped, searched, jailed, and required to pay illicit money by officers of the Lexington Police Department, including the current and former Chiefs of Police of Lexington.



It often feels like the issue of police violence is overwhelming. But the more individual civil actions we bring, the more we hold police accountable.

ACLU of Mississippi aims to bring greater legal resources to the fight against racist policing in Mississippi.”

Jarvis Dortch

Executive Director • ACLU-MS

Left: Community members and advocates pose for a photo outside of the Mississippi Court of Appeals. / Photo by Monique Harden.

Fighting to Block HB 1020

In an unprecedented move, the Mississippi legislature passed and Governor Tate Reeves signed a law that singled out the State capitol of Jackson, a majority-black and blackled City, with a new court system and new appointed judges.

Unlike every other city in Mississippi, Jackson would be subject to a court and judges who are not elected by the residents in their jurisdiction but rather appointed by the Chief Justice of the Mississippi Supreme Court.

In a partial win, three Jackson residents and a group of civil rights organizations successfully challenged this law before the Mississippi Supreme Court who found the law violated the State Constitution because Circuit Court judges must be elected. We can push back, and we did here.

Protecting the Community's Voice

In November 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a lawsuit on behalf of the Environmental Protection Agency against the City of Jackson for the failure to comply with the Safe Drinking Water Act. As a result, the parties reached an interim agreement leading to the appointment of an interim third-party manager to oversee Jackson's water system.

We, along with the Natural Resources Defense Council, Center for Constitutional Rights, and Forward Justice, are representing the People's Advocacy Institute and the Mississippi Poor People's Campaign in their efforts to obtain a formal role for Jackson community members in the decision-making processes that will direct the future of the city's water management for years to come.

In September 2023, the team filed a Motion to Intervene in *United States v. City of Jackson* to secure a formal role in the future of the city's water. We are committed to standing alongside the residents of Jackson as they fight to ensure access to safe drinking water for all.




FOCUS AREA

BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR MISSISSIPPI'S FUTURE

Our affiliate is continuing to expand our capacity through increased development. This year, we introduced a new fund called the Liberty Circle. The Liberty Circle aims to build and organize sustainable support for our racial justice legal advocacy.

In furtherance of that mission, we have created a staff attorney position named in honor of renowned Mississippi attorney Constance Slaughter-Harvey that will handle litigation for this specific purpose. All contributions to this fund will support our racial justice litigation, including the employment of the Constance Slaughter-Harvey Senior Staff Attorney staff position.



LIBERTY CIRCLE

RACIAL JUSTICE FUND

About Constance Slaughter-Harvey

Attorney Constance Slaughter-Harvey, a native of Forest, Mississippi, is a graduate of Hawkins High School and Tougaloo College. On January 27, 1970, she became the first African American female to receive a law degree from the University of Mississippi. In 1976, she became the first Black female judge in Mississippi's history. She fought for racial justice for over six decades.



Join the fight for equal justice for all Mississippians.
Scan or visit aclums.org to learn more.



Stay in touch!

Join our Liberty Action Text Line to stay-up-to-date on the latest in the fight for civil liberties in Mississippi.

Text **"JOIN"** to **(601)501-8700** to get started!

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