



Reclaiming *Our* Rights



2024-25
ANNUAL
REPORT

A Future Worth *Fighting* For



The strength of our collective character is to refuse. We refuse to be so frightened that we do not act. We refuse turning our faces away from suffering and concern for others, especially those who are not like ourselves. We refuse to dehumanize ourselves, our neighbors, our family. We refuse to accept a reduction of our rights and a smaller vision of our shared future. This future is worth fighting, and sacrificing, for – and we are called to unite for this shared purpose.

The vitality of our demands comes from an entitlement – to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This is a moment not to posture that we have conquered fear that is being relentlessly sowed; instead, it is a moment when we gather ourselves, trembling and furious, and get to work.

We do what is required of us while we feel, we support each other through the most difficult moments with no hesitation. We march toward our future, and there is nothing which can stop our progression towards that shared future, one that we will, we must, craft together.

Wisconsin, the battleground for the nation, will continue to lead. Wisconsinites have refused bribery, loudly and well. We have refused to accept representation that is not fair or accurate. We have refused to accept candidates for office who will not serve the communities they represent. We refuse, and will continue to refuse, to accept anything less. It is the dignity of our lives and the future before us that demands no less.

The strength behind these refusals is the commitment to humanize. From enduring partnerships that deepen with trust across years, such as our colleagues in criminal legal reform work, or the approach of making room at the table – or mic – for those most often silenced, those are the moments that most often reaffirm our shared purpose and the precious value of belonging.

When our team, board and staff, dug in for the hard work of planning for the next five years towards our 100 year anniversary, we began with crafting a vision statement that would reflect our values and keep us afloat during the most difficult times. We needed a compass, a light in the room when all other brightness was not present. We wrote, in a shared voice, that “The American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin envisions a just society in which the dignity of every person is respected and our collective liberation is realized.” The moment we knew we had arrived at our “why,” and more than that, “why do this work now, and for whom” the room went silent with a shared, and very full, appreciation of what we continued to build together.

Let us remind each other that the power remains in each of us.

In Solidarity,
Melinda Brennan

Dr. Melinda Brennan



THE FACES BEHIND THE WORK

- | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| 01. Jen Bizzotto
<i>Staff Attorney</i> | 08. Kwesi Foli
<i>Comms Coordinator</i> | 15. Alex Larson
<i>Senior Accountant</i> | 22. Maria Robbins
<i>Organizer</i> |
| 02. Kate Braun
<i>Development Operations & Grants Manager</i> | 09. Marko Gajic
<i>Theoharis Intern</i> | 16. Melissa Ludin
<i>Coalition Relations Advocate</i> | 23. Rosie Rohrer
<i>Intern</i> |
| 03. Liam Byrnes
<i>Legal Intern</i> | 10. David Gwidt
<i>Deputy Communications Director</i> | 17. Alyssa Meinecke
<i>Director of Program & Strategy</i> | 24. Molly Schamberger
<i>Executive Assistant</i> |
| 04. Dr. Melinda Brennan
<i>Executive Director</i> | 11. Jade Hall
<i>Staff Attorney</i> | 18. Jon McCray Jones
<i>Policy Analyst</i> | 25. Hannah Schwarz
<i>Staff Attorney</i> |
| 05. Shauntia Carson
<i>Intern</i> | 12. Abby Homuth
<i>Youth Partnership Manager</i> | 19. Amanda Merkwae
<i>Advocacy Director</i> | 26. Sarah Siegel
<i>Deputy Executive Director</i> |
| 06. Ryan Cox
<i>Legal Director</i> | 13. Tina Itson
<i>Director of Development & Engagement</i> | 20. Conor Miller
<i>Campaign & Political Manager</i> | 27. James Stein
<i>Deputy Advocacy Director</i> |
| 07. Lan Flynn
<i>Digital Strategist</i> | 14. Zachary Kester
<i>Senior Development Manager</i> | 21. Tim Muth
<i>Senior Staff Attorney</i> | 28. Arielle Winter
<i>Organizer</i> |
| | | | 29. Paris Wooden
<i>Theoharis Intern</i> |



In the Courtroom

Over the fiscal year ending in March of 2025, the Legal Department at ACLU of Wisconsin underwent significant changes in staffing and processes while developing new litigation strategies, advocating for marginalized communities, and maintaining an ongoing docket of significant civil rights litigation. Here are some of the highlights.

OUR NEW LITIGATION

COALITION TO MARCH ON THE RNC V. CITY OF MILWAUKEE

Since the summer of 2023, the Coalition to March on the RNC had been planning a protest march during the Republican National Convention scheduled to take place in Milwaukee in the Summer of 2024. In early 2024, the city issued special ordinances that were overly restrictive of protesters' First Amendment rights and prevented the coalition from marching on its preferred route.

In June of 2024, we filed a lawsuit on behalf of the Coalition in federal district court. The suit challenged the city's proposed parade routes, restrictions on who could participate in demonstrations, and other aspects of the City's ordinances. While our lawsuit was not able to modify the U.S. Secret Service's secure zones, the court nevertheless did issue a permanent injunction against the City of Milwaukee, barring it from enforcing certain unconstitutional provisions of its special event ordinance by which the City purported to restrict the protest rights of individuals with prior criminal records. Our case will serve as a warning to other cities in the future that the First Amendment right to protest is not subject to a city's arbitrary restrictions.



PUPHAL V. WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

Coinciding with ACLU of WI's larger "Pregnant in Prisons" campaign, we filed a lawsuit against the Wisconsin Department of Corrections for its willful refusal to comply with state law that requires special accommodations for incarcerated people who are pregnant or have recently given birth. Working with pro bono counsel at Quarles & Brady LLP, we requested the Wisconsin Circuit Court in Dane County issue a Writ of Mandamus ordering the DOC to comply with that law by creating the "Mother-Young Child Care Program" for incarcerated mothers, as the law requires.

In February of 2025, the court entered final judgment in favor of our clients and ordered the DOC to comply with that law. ACLU of WI continues to negotiate the implementation of that program with DOC officials who remain out of compliance with the court's final judgment. We expect this win for families to impact hundreds of mothers in the coming years, keeping their families together and fostering healthy relationships with their newborn children.

EUCKE V. WISCONSIN ELECTIONS COMMISSION

In October of 2024, we learned that several individual voters were attempting to purge voter registration rolls in Milwaukee based on unreliable USPS change of address data. In coordination with partners at ACLU National's Voting Rights Project and co-counsel at the law firm Faegre Drinker, we intervened in the case on behalf of community organizations BLOC, WISDOM, and Souls to the Polls to make sure that the voter rolls would not be improperly purged of eligible voters. Following our intervention, the court dismissed the case on procedural grounds. The dismissal was a win for Milwaukee voters in the final days before the November 5, 2024, election, ensuring that every eligible voter in Milwaukee would be able to cast a vote that was counted.



ONGOING CASES, MONITORING, AND REPORTING

PAGE V. GREENDALE ISD

In a long-awaited resolution to ongoing litigation against Greendale Independent School District (ISD), we reached a settlement with the district in July 2024. This settlement resolved our litigation aimed at addressing racial harassment, which had been a persistent problem in the district. This case arose as an attempt to correct the district's breach of a prior settlement agreement resulting from a complaint filed with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

In this new settlement agreement, our clients were able to secure commitments to creating a process of community consultation with the district, including the consultation of families of color, to create new policies to improve the learning environment for students of color. We are hopeful that this resolution will result in positive changes for families and students in Greendale.

CHRISTENSEN V. MILWAUKEE COUNTY

For more than 25 years, along with our co-counsel at the Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee, the legal team at the ACLU of WI has been monitoring compliance with a consent decree that requires certain standards of operations at the Milwaukee County Jail, including population limits, access to medical care, and staffing levels. During 25 years of monitoring, including multiple visits to the county jail and to the Community Integration Center every year, the county has never come into full compliance with the settlement. We continue to monitor progress, report on violations that endanger those being housed in these facilities, and request enforcement orders from the court.

COLLINS V. CITY OF MILWAUKEE

In 2019, we reached a settlement agreement with the City of Milwaukee regarding its policies and procedures for "stop-and-frisk" activities conducted by the Milwaukee Police Department. During the fiscal year, the 5-year anniversary



of the stop and frisk settlement came and went without MPD reaching compliance with numerous aspects of the settlement or significantly improving the racial disparities in stops, frisks, and encounters.

We continue to monitor for compliance to guarantee the Fourth Amendment rights of every person in Milwaukee are protected. Over the fiscal year, we worked with our partners at ACLU National to negotiate new terms that could potentially bring MPD into compliance, and we have worked closely with the city to identify a new independent consultant that can properly track progress made by MPD and offer real recommendations to address non-compliance and to eliminate racial disparities in MPD's stop-and-frisk activities.

J.J. V. LITSCHER

Along with co-counsel at the Juvenile Law Center and Quarles & Brady LLP, we continue to perform ongoing monitoring of the juvenile prisons at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake that have been subject to court orders regarding their treatment in these facilities. While we look forward to these facilities being permanently closed, we continue to conduct regular visits to the facility with a court-appointed monitor to interview resident children regarding their experiences in the facilities. Conditions in these facilities have improved significantly since our lawsuit was filed in 2017, but we remain vigilant in ensuring that we do not allow any backsliding.

AMICUS CURIAE FILED IN SIGNIFICANT CIVIL RIGHTS CASES AT THE WISCONSIN SUPREME COURT

Every year, the ACLU of WI files Amicus Curiae (or “friend-of-the-court”) briefs in various cases impacting Wisconsinites’ civil rights. In these briefs, while not representing the parties in the cases directly, we offer to help explain important and complex Constitutional issues to the courts considering them.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD V. URMANSKI

In January 2025, we filed an amicus brief at the Wisconsin Supreme Court on behalf of several community organizations that supported Planned Parenthood’s claims in that case that the Wisconsin Constitution provides more expansive protections for reproductive healthcare than the federal Constitution.

On behalf of P.O.W.E.R.S., Freedom, Inc., Wisconsin Doulas of Color, and Reproductive Justice Action Milwaukee (RJAM), our brief focused on the impact of abortion bans on communities of color and asked the court to grant Planned Parenthood’s petition to review the issue. While the Wisconsin Supreme Court ultimately did not hear this case following its ruling that an 1849 Abortion Ban statute was no longer in effect, ACLU of WI will continue to support the expansion of reproductive rights and other organizations advocating for those rights.

WISCONSIN V. VANNIEUWENHOVEN

In June of 2024, we filed an amicus brief at the Wisconsin Supreme Court in a case that asked the court to consider whether a person has a right to privacy in their DNA that they unavoidably leave behind. In this particular case, a criminal defendant was tricked into providing DNA when a law enforcement officer asked him to fill out a survey and seal it in an envelope. The DNA on that envelope was then used as evidence against him in a criminal proceeding.

Our brief, filed along with co-counsel at ACLU National and the Electronic Frontier Foundation, argued that the warrantless extraction of a person’s DNA, without their explicit consent to provide DNA, was a violation of their Fourth Amendment rights. The Wisconsin Supreme Court refused to hear the case, but we continue to monitor for future opportunities to expand privacy protections in response to scientific and technological advancements.

REPORT

“FAILURE TO PAY: THE USE OF DEBT-BASED CARCERAL SANCTIONS AND WARRANTS IN WISCONSIN’S MUNICIPAL COURTS”

After a multi-year investigation that required hundreds of open records requests and scouring of public data, ACLU Senior Staff Attorney Dr. Emma Shakeshaft published her report on the deplorable number of criminal arrests resulting from non-criminal municipal court penalties across Wisconsin. “Failure to Pay” details how civil municipal tickets criminalize poverty when individuals fall behind on court payments.

Dr. Shakeshaft noted that the issuance of these types of sanctions creates a two-tiered system of punishment: one for those with financial means and one for those without. In late 2024, copies of this report were mailed to municipal judges and policy makers throughout the state, and in December 2024, the ACLU of WI hosted a convening on this problem for scholars working on this issue across the country. The report is available at www.aclu-wi.org/en/failure-to-pay.

Demands & ORRs

As part of our regular investigation process, we regularly send demand letters, open records requests, and informational/educational correspondence to various government agencies and elected officials. These often result in positive changes for our communities without the need to engage in expensive and time-consuming litigation.

During the 2024-25 fiscal year, we sent demands and records requests to schools and public libraries regarding their attempts to ban books, requests for contracts involving local law enforcement and immigration authorities, demands that emergency medical needs be addressed in jails and prisons, investigatory requests regarding coordination between election officials and law enforcement, demands regarding language access in municipalities required to accommodate Spanish speakers under the Voting Rights Act, and hundreds of requests involving disparate municipal court practices impacting communities.

Updates to increase the efficiency of our legal intake processes

Every year, the ACLU of WI legal department receives upward of 3,000 requests for legal assistance from the community. While we can only accept a few of these requests, reviewing legal intake and providing resources and referrals to the community remains an

important part of our work. To ensure that we can properly and timely respond to every request we receive, we undertook the development and implementation of an entirely new intake system in 2024, integrating an online intake form and simplifying our internal processes. Going live in the fall of 2024, this system has allowed us to cut normal processing and response times in half, and it allows us to track trends and patterns that we had never been able to track before.

Testimony and Public Comment

In addition to its other work, the Legal Department monitors and often provides testimony to the Wisconsin Supreme Court on issues under its rule-making authority that impact the civil rights and access to justice for Wisconsinites. In the 2024-25 fiscal year, we provided testimony and research to the court on two rule change proposals.

First, we provided written and oral testimony in support of a proposed rule that would require access to language interpreters in municipal courts across the state. While the court did not ultimately adopt this rule, we brought attention to the significant barriers to justice in local courts.

Second, we provided written testimony supporting a rule change that would increase funding to legal aid organizations across the state. Before this proposal, legal aid had received no increase in funding in over 20 years, despite significant inflationary pressures. We know that legal aid is essential to accessing the courts, and we were successful, along with many other community advocates, in advocating for this increased funding, which the Supreme Court adopted beginning in 2025.

Failure To Pay

The Use of Debt-based Carceral Sanctions and Warrants in Wisconsin's Municipal Courts



SCAN OR
CLICK TO VIEW
FULL REPORT

Pregnant *in* Prisons

Mother Young Child Care Program

“The DOC has continued to violate the law and deprive parents and their young children of a chance to build strong relationships”

For more than 30 years, a long-overlooked state statute – referred to as the “mother-young child care program” – has required the Department of Corrections (DOC) to provide programming that, among other things, allows pregnant and postpartum individuals who are incarcerated or on supervised release to retain physical custody of their infants and be held in the least restrictive custody for the first year of their lives.

This program would provide parental programming, support, and physical custody of the child. The goal is to allow a mother and child to build a stable and healthy relationship, which is vital for the child’s long-term development.

Yet, the DOC failed to offer this program.

Through the ACLU of WI’s legal intake service — a service that processes approximately 3,000 requests for legal assistance every year and allows Wisconsinites to report civil rights and liberties violations that they’ve experienced — the legal team learned of our client and the DOC’s denial to participate in this program.

As a result of the intake, the ACLU of WI began to investigate the issue, sending open records requests to find out why apparently eligible individuals like Alyssa were being denied participation. The DOC responded that it was an “old statute, and there is no funding for it.”

So we sued.

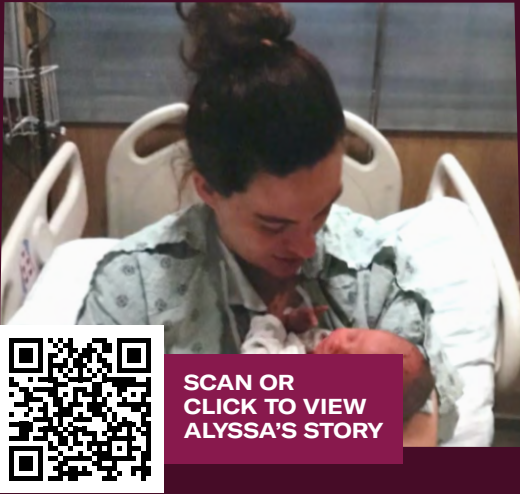
The ACLU of WI and Quarles & Brady LLP represented two women in DOC custody: one who was pregnant and due in June of 2025, and a second who gave birth in DOC custody in 2023. DOC had denied or ignored both of their requests to participate in the mandatory program.

During the lawsuit, it was discovered that the program did exist, but only for those on supervised release, and that it was funded by the state budget at approximately \$180,000 per year. The ACLU of WI argued that the statute indicated that the program needed to be provided not just to those on extended supervision but also to those currently incarcerated.

On February 6th, 2025, a Dane County Circuit Court judge ruled that the DOC must immediately provide relief to both mothers under extended supervision, as well as those who were incarcerated who are eligible to participate.

“We are pleased that the court agreed with us and impacted mothers in this state and will provide relief to not only our clients but all eligible mothers who are incarcerated and on community supervision,” said Ryan Cox, Legal Director at the ACLU of WI. “While the mother-young statute has been on the books for a long time, not one mother in DOC custody has ever been offered the services required under the law. By denying parents this opportunity, the DOC has continued to violate the law and deprive parents and their young children of a chance to build strong relationships and keep their families together, which is proven to have mutual benefits for both child and parent.”

Since this win, the ACLU of WI has continued to work with the DOC to determine a timeline for implementing the program.



ALYSSA’S STORY

While serving a two-year sentence at Robert E. Ellsworth Correctional Center in Union Grove, Wisconsin, Alyssa experienced pregnancy and gave birth while incarcerated. “When I would go from the county jail for appointments, I would be handcuffed. I would sit in the waiting room of my doctor’s office in orange,” she recalls, describing the indignity of prenatal care when visibly incarcerated.

During labor, male guards were present until right before it was time to push. While giving birth, Alyssa didn’t know anyone in the room. Then, just one day after giving birth to her son Bentley, Alyssa was forced to part ways with him.

“That’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do in my life”, Alyssa recounts. “I’ve been with my other children for this part of their life, and now I’m not with Bentley – and it’s heartbreaking.”

Alyssa discovered the Mother Young Child Care program from a fellow incarcerated person, and she took it to her public defender. Her application was denied, and she came to the ACLU of WI.

Meanwhile, the separation took its toll: “I’m watching my child grow up in pictures. He’s almost 18 months, and he doesn’t say ‘mom.’”

The ACLU of WI’s landmark victory means mothers will finally have access to this essential programming that maintains crucial early bonds that benefit both the parent and child. Alyssa’s courage has opened doors for thousands of justice-impacted Wisconsin families, and we are grateful for her willingness to fight for her rights.



PREGNANT IN PRISONS CAMPAIGN

The ACLU of WI has long advocated for the rights of people who are incarcerated and the additional struggles marginalized communities face behind bars at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability.

Pregnant people and new parents face several harmful circumstances in Wisconsin jails and prisons, including shackling, separation, and more. Our pregnant in prisons campaign highlights the experiences of those pregnant while incarcerated, advocating for improved conditions, health care access, and more, while educating the community about these issues.

In addition to the Mother Young Child Care case, the affiliate focuses on work related to anti-shackling, especially in jails across Wisconsin, and reproductive health care, providing programs such as doula programs in jails and prisons.

This year, the affiliate hosted a community event in February, highlighting the work of the legal team with the recent case win, as well as the community partnerships that are deeply embedded in this work, advocating for the rights of pregnant people and supporting those who are directly impacted.

In the Legislature

In November 2024, Wisconsin voters elected a new state Assembly and Senate that kicked off the 2025-26 biennial legislative session in January 2025.

In the first few months of the session, we fought against a barrage of harmful legislation impacting Wisconsinites' civil rights and liberties through lobbying, testifying at public hearings, and engaging supporters to hold their legislators accountable. Here are some of the bills we testified against.



SCAN OR
CLICK TO VIEW
FULL REPORT



IMMIGRANTS' RIGHTS

[AB-24/SB-57](#) FORCING SHERIFFS TO DO ICE'S BIDDING

This bill pushes local law enforcement into harmful roles they were never meant to play — tools of mass deportation. If law enforcement refuses to do ICE's bidding, this law would strip away funding for essential services in our counties. Existing ICE/sheriff cooperation programs have a long history as vehicles for racism and anti-immigrant hate, despite being advertised as public safety initiatives.

This bill doesn't make us safer. It only erodes trust between law enforcement and our communities, particularly immigrants and communities of color who are already disproportionately impacted by deportation. People will be less likely to report crimes or cooperate with the police if they fear being handed over to ICE for something unrelated.

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

[AB-87/SB-94](#) MODERN DAY POLL TAX

This bill would prevent people with felony convictions from regaining their constitutional right to vote until they have paid all "fines, costs, fees, surcharges, and restitution" imposed "in connection with the crime." Put simply, this proposal would create a modern-day poll tax in Wisconsin.

The ultimate goal of legislation like this is to make it harder for over-policed and over-criminalized groups — disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, people with disabilities, and people in poverty — to exercise their constitutional right to vote.



CRIMINAL LEGAL REFORM

[AB-85/SB-93](#) AUTOMATIC REVOCATION

This bill would require the Department of Corrections to recommend revoking a person's extended supervision, parole, or probation if the person is charged with a crime while on release.

This would take away any discretion that the person's parole officer might have if they had otherwise continued to keep the person on supervision and automatically initiate an administrative revocation to send them to prison. This raises constitutional concerns because the practical burden of proof required for a period of incarceration on a new charge would essentially become "probable cause" rather than "beyond a reasonable doubt." Rather than trapping people in a revolving door of incarceration and supervision, people on parole, probation, or extended supervision should be given the support and opportunities they need to thrive in their community.



LGBTQ+ RIGHTS AND BODILY AUTONOMY

[AB-100](#), [AB-102](#), [AB-103](#), [AB-104](#): ANTI-TRANS SLATE OF HATE

In March, we joined coalition partners in long days at the Capitol to testify against a slate of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. After over 23 hours of powerful public hearing testimony from youth, families, and allies on bills targeting the transgender community — [testimony that changed Larry's mind](#) — the Assembly passed all four of these harmful bills proposing to:

- Exclude trans students from participating in sports and accessing locker rooms at the K-12 and college levels ([AB-100](#), [AB-102](#))
- Deny kids from using preferred names and pronouns at school ([AB-103](#)); and
- Ban best-practice medical care for trans youth ([AB-104](#))

FIRST AMENDMENT

[AB-105](#): INTERNET AGE VERIFICATION

This bill proposes to "card" people when they visit certain websites by requiring age verification for people to access websites with content deemed "material harmful to minors." That means blocking access to content without first uploading your ID, jumping on a quick Zoom call showing that your face matches your ID, AI facial-recognition software or other biometric identification, or uploading a credit card number for AI to scrape consumer data from the internet to identify your age.

While intended to protect minors, this bill exposes adult Wisconsinites to harmful surveillance and raises significant First Amendment concerns by requiring internet users to provide personal information to companies or applications that purport to be able to verify their ages.



REPORT

The State of Cannabis in Wisconsin



SCAN OR
CLICK TO VIEW
FULL REPORT

SUPPORT FOR LEGALIZATION OF MEDICAL MARIJUANA: 78% of Republicans, 84% of Independents, 95% of Democrats

We continued pushing for equitable and evidence-based cannabis reform in Wisconsin by uplifting the widespread public support for marijuana legalization and the deep racial disparities in enforcement that persist under prohibition. Our advocacy centers on **medical and recreational marijuana legalization that prioritizes racial justice and economic opportunity** for those most impacted by the war on drugs. In January 2025, we published the report **The State of Cannabis in Wisconsin** as part of this work.

A January 2024 Marquette Law School Poll confirmed what communities across Wisconsin already know: legalization is popular across the political spectrum. Support for medical marijuana legalization was near-universal, with 78% of Republicans, 84% of Independents, and 95% of Democrats in favor. A majority of voters also support legalizing recreational cannabis.

Voters have consistently backed legalization at the ballot box—a dozen non-binding advisory referendums on recreational marijuana passed across Wisconsin in 2018 and 2022, signaling public readiness for change.

Meanwhile, the cost of delay is disproportionately borne by Black Wisconsinites. In 2022, **Black people were over 5.29 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession** than white people in Wisconsin. In 2018, the ACLU found that the disparity was already 4.2 to 1.

Over 13,400 people were arrested for cannabis offenses in 2022, the vast majority for simple possession—arrests that can result in lifelong barriers to housing, employment, and education.

Wisconsin is increasingly isolated on this issue. Every neighboring state has legalized marijuana in some form, and in 2022 alone, **Wisconsinites spent \$121 million on cannabis across the border in Illinois**, contributing an estimated **\$36 million in tax revenue to another state**. The **Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau projects that legal recreational marijuana could bring in \$165.8 million annually** in state tax revenue—money that could be reinvested in our communities.

LOOKING AHEAD

With **new, fairer legislative maps** in place and a growing number of pro-legalization and swing-district lawmakers, we are seizing this opportunity to push forward. By **lobbying legislators, educating communities, and boosting strategic digital and earned media campaigns**, we believe that in the next 2 to 4 years, Wisconsin can join the majority of U.S. states in legalizing not just medical marijuana, but also recreational use—with equity, justice, and reinvestment at the center of the policy.



Community Control Over Police Surveillance

We continued building momentum for local oversight of police surveillance by organizing support for **Community Control Over Police Surveillance (CCOPS)** legislation in Milwaukee. **CCOPS would require law enforcement to pause the use of any surveillance technologies until the Common Council holds a public hearing and votes to approve it**, giving residents and elected leaders the power to decide how—and whether—surveillance tools are used in our communities.

Under CCOPS, police would also be required to publish an annual transparency report detailing every surveillance tool used against residents, what data was collected, who had access to it, and whether that surveillance demonstrably improved public safety. These commonsense accountability measures are long overdue.



WHY WE NEED CCOPS

At a time when **federal agencies are increasingly tapping into local surveillance networks** to target protesters, migrants, and LGBTQ+ communities, we need local laws that restrict those abuses. Milwaukee's current system lacks transparency, public oversight, and democratic input—**residents deserve to know how they're being surveilled, where that data goes, and who can access it**.

We also believe that democracy doesn't stop at the ballot box. Voters and the officials they elect should have a say in where public safety dollars are spent and whether they're being used to violate privacy or civil rights.

COALITION AND PROGRESS

Over the past year, we've built a **broad and diverse coalition of local partners**—spanning criminal justice, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and immigrant rights groups—to demand action on CCOPS. Our organizing has brought new visibility to the dangers of unchecked surveillance in Milwaukee, earning local media coverage and increased scrutiny of MPD surveillance practices.



In the Streets

ORGANIZING FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND GRASSROOTS POWER

With the support of Deputy Advocacy Director James Stein and Campaign & Political Manager Conor Miller, the ACLU of WI's Organizing Team builds grassroots infrastructure to protect and expand civil liberties across the state.

In 2025, the team advanced the **Civil Rights Alliance**, a growing network of trained volunteers ready to take action when rights are at risk. With field organizers Arielle Winter and Maria Robbins, the Alliance hosted a number of trainings, including civics sessions, legislative advocacy workshops, and civic education events. These programs equipped community members with tools to lobby elected officials, testify at hearings, and respond quickly to threats to civil rights.

During the Spring 2025 election cycle, the team executed the affiliate's largest direct voter contact campaign to date. Volunteers completed numerous shifts, making tens of thousands of voter contact attempts by phone and door-to-door canvassing, resulting in many meaningful voter conversations. Organizers maintained consistent outreach to recruit and support volunteers, sustaining strong engagement through Civil Rights Alliance events and targeted trainings. Additionally, the National Political Advocacy Department (NPAD) of the National ACLU lent their assistance in text and phone banking to urge voters to turn out. In total, over 600,000 voters were contacted by the ACLU during the Spring election season.

[Learn more about how to join the Civil Rights Alliance and other volunteer opportunities here.](#)

NPAD SUPPORT

The National Political Advocacy Department (NPAD) supported the Wisconsin affiliate in the final week before the April 2025 election. In total, NPAD's volunteer team completed **230 text banking shifts**, sent **362,333 texts**, and hosted **19 phone banking shifts**, resulting in **4,831 calls**. In collaboration with the affiliate's Advocacy and Communications departments, four waves of mailers were sent out to over **244,000 Wisconsin households**.



BY THE NUMBERS

Field Team Metrics

Thanks to the support of a dedicated team, ACLU of WI were able to accomplish the following:

- 81** Volunteers recruited
- 119** total actions
- 24,724** phone calls
- 1,762** doors knocked
- Over 1200** voters conversations

Communications Team Impact

The Communications Department, in collaboration with Mosaic Communication, ran robust 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 digital advertising campaigns which delivered:

- 267,619** impressions to 18,751 people (c3)
- 689,542** impressions to 23,057 people (c4)
- Social media reach:
 - 77,402** views
 - 29,065** people
 - 1,470** clicks

ELECTION PROTECTION

During the 2024 election cycle, we greatly expanded our efforts and volunteer recruitment to ensure the fair administration of elections across the state. As part of a large coalition of voting rights advocates, we worked with legal partners to prepare for every imaginable emergency litigation need that could arise in Wisconsin.



On Election Day, closely collaborating with our Advocacy Department and coalition partners, we mobilized more than 150 attorney and law student volunteers to observe 37 central count locations and over 300 polling places in every corner of the state, and we hosted and led the command center for voting rights attorneys across the Election Protection coalition to address issues identified by volunteers in the field and from the Election Protection hotline (866-OUR-VOTE) in real time.



AN INTERN'S PERSPECTIVE ON ELECTION PROTECTION *by Liam Byrnes*

When I applied to law school, issues of incarceration, the criminalization of poverty, and access to justice were some subjects that clarified my decision to attend. The ACLU was an organization I had long admired, given their engagement in all three of those issue areas. So, when I had an opportunity to work with the ACLU of WI after my first year of law school, I jumped at the chance to work with such a phenomenal team of people working to advance civil rights and civil liberties throughout the state.

During my summer '24 legal internship with the ACLU of WI, I got to engage in a broad range of issues, including: First Amendment litigation regarding the RNC, a toolkit on Wisconsin education law for teachers, students, and parents, and taking the testimonies of incarcerated people and conveying them to a court. What impressed me the most about the ACLU of WI's approach to any critical issue was their creativity and collaboration. At the same time, impact litigation or other legal remedies were sometimes the answer, our team valued input from other

folks in the organization on alternative or concurrent strategies to achieve our desired policy goals.

I was deeply excited when Ryan Cox (the ACLU of WI legal director) asked me to stay on as the Election Protection Intern at the ACLU of WI in the Fall of 2024. Working with an organization I deeply respect, like the ACLU, to ensure free and fair elections in a swing state during a critical national election was a dream come true. The work was difficult and taxing at times, but I was constantly uplifted and encouraged by the phenomenal people at the ACLU of WI.

I quickly learned the value of collaboration with other pro-democracy partners and volunteers through my work in this role. We were able to staff law students, attorneys, and other volunteers at every Central Count location in the state on Election Day in November 2024. These efforts allowed us to have expansive knowledge of what was happening "on the ground" and respond to issues in real-time. I left my experience as an Election Protection Intern with the ACLU of WI heartened by the vast support for pro-democracy work in Wisconsin and committed to supporting these efforts in my own legal career.

Meet the Organizers

Maria Robbins *(she/they)*

Maria Robbins moved to Milwaukee six years ago and quickly found themselves in the work of building systems of care. A recent graduate of UW-Milwaukee with degrees in psychology and gender studies, Maria worked across different community outreach, mental health advocacy, and student-led spaces to bridge the gap between institutions and the people they serve.

At UWM’s Women’s Resource Center, Maria launched a partnership with Title IX coordinators to offer students low-barrier support alternatives to filing police reports. “Students were dealing with food insecurity, lack of housing, violence — and not enough knew where to go,” they explained. “That experience showed me how critical it is to build pathways for support that feel safe, human, and accessible.”

Maria joined the ACLU of WI in March 2023, pivoting towards organizing based on their love of working with people. “The ACLU was very aligned with my own personal values, as well as what I’d studied in university, so it felt like a perfect fit,” they said, “and I’d known other people who worked here before and loved it, so I gave it a try!”

As an organizer with the ACLU of WI, Maria now has built a space of belonging and activism. Fostered through seeing barriers to civic participation, their organizing is grounded in a belief that everyone deserves to feel a sense of belonging in the fight for justice. “People need to see themselves reflected in the work. If they don’t, it gets lost,” Maria said. “I try to make sure people feel seen, respected, and invited in.”

When asked about their most impactful organizing experiences, Maria said that they’ve felt most moved when they get to bond closely with others in the community, whether at parades, local issue briefings, or one-on-ones with community members. “I’ve often left our events with people telling me that the community we build there, even if only for an hour, gives them the space to feel and speak their mind unquestioned, which I find very gratifying.” Cultivating those personal connections, creating spaces for open dialogue and feeling – these reaffirm Maria’s belief in the power and importance of community-building through their work.



“[The] experience showed me how critical it is to build pathways for support that feel safe, human, and accessible.”

Maria has a major goal of innovating with new forms of advocacy, especially in the smartphone age. “Figuring out how to balance traditional cornerstones of organizing, like canvassing, with new forms of work has been challenging, especially after the pandemic,” Maria said. They’re very excited to keep reintroducing the ACLU of WI to community members, educating them on important state issues, and finding new ways to build connections.



Arielle Winter *(she/her)*

Arielle Winter brings a strong political consciousness and deep passion for justice to their work as an organizer. Growing up in New Berlin, Wisconsin, Arielle first became politicized at 14, deeply affected by the killing of Mike Brown and the broader reckoning around racial justice and political violence. While she never dreamed of becoming a politician, she was deeply intrigued by the idea of community organizing after exploring her options following the pandemic.

Before joining the ACLU of WI in March 2023, Arielle spent several years in customer service and retail, where she built their skills in communication, relationship-building, and community-centered leadership. She consistently led with empathy and intentionality, prioritizing inclusion and care in every interaction. As an organizer, she has realized that “burnout doesn’t make a good activist,” but rather, success in activism can come without exhausting oneself.



“The most fulfilling work you can do is the most local you can get.”

Arielle brings a people-first approach to organizing, having worked with the Clean Air and Democracy Campaign (CADC), where they canvassed, scheduled stakeholder meetings, and managed the complexity of long days in the field. Her creativity, strong work ethic, and background in EDIB-centered environments make her a strong asset to the team. Whether planning a canvas, re-engaging a volunteer, or simply building relationships, Arielle centers care, strategy, and equity.

In her work, Arielle is proud when events allow people to transition from what she calls “social media activism” to “real people activism” especially when those events bring young people together. She does, however, admit that organizing does sometimes come with its own challenges. Arielle mentions a “modern-day level of disconnect” between things that need to be done, such as canvassing or phone banking, and the “sexier” forms of advocacy. She is hoping for future increased mobilization of community members willing to not just show up for the fun forms of advocacy, but also the necessary forms of advocacy that often don’t come with instant gratification but nonetheless are crucial to the work.

When asked what she would like the public to know, she simply said, “The most fulfilling work you can do is the most local you can get.” This stems from recognizing that local organizations allow for a personal way of empowerment that tangibly touches the lives of oneself and their nearby neighbors.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2026

The 2024-2025 year was challenging for the affiliate, leading up to the November election and the continued and increased threats to civil rights and civil liberties. In a direct response to the November 2024 election results, Dr. Melinda Brennan said: “No matter what happened on Election Night, we always knew the fight would continue. Justice and liberation are not won or lost in one election cycle, and while the threats we’re facing are real, we urge you to stay engaged. We know the nation’s eyes are always on Wisconsin. **Together, we can fight for our rights and drive our state and country forward.**”

While the current makeup of the Wisconsin legislature continues to allow harmful bills to be passed that take away the rights of Wisconsinites, the impact of new maps has moved the legislature closer to a reality where proactive policy and organizing work will be impactful for moving our state closer to a place where civil rights and liberties are honored and protected.

The spring 2025 election showed the power of Wisconsin voters in the crucial Supreme Court election that will shape the state’s future. The outcome of the spring election is a direct result of the people of Wisconsin’s belief in access to abortion, protecting Wisconsin’s workers, and ensuring safe & fair elections. The future of Wisconsin is in the hands of those who live here. In the coming years, states will be the frontlines of freedom nationwide. In connection with the National ACLU, the ACLU of WI is building a Firewall for Freedom to ensure state officials do not voluntarily assist in attacking civil rights and liberties. The affiliate will continue to work locally to raise awareness of legislative, courtroom, and community actions that seek to bring down democratic practices across the state.

In the courts, legislature, and streets

Partnerships create a pathway to victory

For a number of years, the ACLU of WI has adopted an integrated advocacy approach, focusing its work on finding comprehensive ways to move civil rights and liberties forward using litigation, communications, policy advocacy, organizing, and community engagement. At the ACLU, we’ve learned that not every problem can be solved solely through litigation, or legislative work, or community activation and education. Oftentimes, it is a combination of these strategies that allows us to be more effective over time.

We’ve also learned that the key to success in an integrated advocacy approach is the partnerships built amidst the work—donors, members, corporate partners, law firms, and community organizations and coalitions are vital to not just the work of the ACLU of WI but also to the advancement of civil rights and liberties across our great state.

This year, the ACLU of WI participated in numerous community partnerships that were key to its work. While the organizations we partner with are numerous, we’d like to highlight a few key contributions that helped lead to the affiliate’s success this year.



WISCONSIN IMPACT NETWORK

Roots & Wings Foundation

One key coalition that the ACLU of WI has been a part of is a group of organizations in Wisconsin focused on improving outcomes for those impacted by the justice system in Wisconsin. This coalition was brought together by the Roots & Wings Foundation to build connections and develop greater collaboration among organizations serving similar people. This group continues to do significant strategic work on implementing systemic change, each bringing their individual perspectives, approaches, and communities to the table.

For an organization like the ACLU of WI, which has a significant advocacy arm, this coalition, which is comprised primarily of direct service organizations, provides the

ACLU with a much-needed connection to directly affected individuals who may be impacted by the outcome of our work. It has allowed us to stay informed on the needs of those who intersect with the justice system, and gives us the opportunity to ask questions and get feedback on our work.

In addition, the support of the Roots & Wings Foundation, not only for our ongoing efforts in criminal legal reform, but also for this coalition, has been one that has created a non-competitive, supportive environment for nonprofits that has allowed participants to engage in developing solutions together, rather than apart.

MOTHER YOUNG CHILD CARE PROGRAM

Pregnant in Prisons

The work of our Pregnant in Prisons campaign would not be as vital without the support of five key partnerships. These organizations served many roles—from legal support to communications to helping the organization keep close ties to those directly impacted by the work. These partnerships informed our work, improved outcomes, and kept us accountable to the people we serve.

MY WAY OUT empowers and enriches the lives of justice-impacted individuals by bringing together community resources, supportive service providers, and employers to provide personalized reentry services. Through education and support, they work to provide participants with essential skills for successful reintegration into the community after incarceration.

THE OSTARA INITIATIVE is a women-founded, women-led, hybrid, non-profit organization that supports pregnant and parenting, as well as justice-involved people in a number of states, including Wisconsin. From doula support to education groups, access to breast milk, and more, the organization works to collectively transform systems by reimagining justice, advancing health, and reclaiming dignity in our policies and practices for all pregnant and parenting people to end prison birth in America.

FREE (FAMILIES & RESILIENCE THROUGH EMPOWERMENT AND EDUCATION) is a project led by women in the state of Wisconsin who are affected by the criminal-legal system. They focus on the gender-specific experiences and collateral consequences of interacting with the criminal legal system.

QUARLES & BRADY, LLP, a longtime legal partner of the ACLU of WI, was an important part of our case against the Department of Corrections. As Quarles & Brady states: “We have a deep and longstanding focus on giving back to our communities through pro bono service... Pro bono is an important way we can help bridge the significant justice gap in our country.”

“Contributing to this effort to help keep families together has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my legal career. It’s a powerful reminder of the role our profession plays in safeguarding dignity, stability, and justice for those who need it most.”
– **Dominique Fortune**, Associate Attorney, Quarles & Brady LLP

Our communications department worked with students from the **UW-MILWAUKEE FILM SCHOOL**, in partnership with **MUELLER COMMUNICATIONS**, to produce a series of videos for the Pregnant in Prisons campaign. This partnership allowed the ACLU of WI to share the powerful stories of the women impacted by this issue while students at UW-Milwaukee learned more about the issue of being pregnant while incarcerated and the work being done to improve their lives and experiences, while gaining film-making experience.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

With over 75 community partners and participation in dozens of coalition spaces, the ACLU of WI continues to do its work through a human-centered and community-focused approach. We know that the things that we fight for—the cases we file, the resources we create, and the legislation we support—serve people and communities.

As we deepen our work through the lens of our new strategic plan, we know that our connections in the community must also deepen, building new relationships and more voices at the table. Success is only possible when we all fight together for change.



Reclaiming *Our* Rights

The American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin envisions a just society in which the dignity of every person is respected and our collective liberation is realized.

The ACLU of WI has entered a new era of high-impact work, with a deep commitment to our communities and the rule of law. To guide our thinking and build a vital, cohesive organization, we created “**Reclaiming Our Rights: A Pathway to our Vision.**”

We knew that we needed a shared understanding to manage through the next 5 years; the potential challenges ahead would require a strong, nimble team able to activate quickly, manage resources, and make difficult decisions fast. We were also committed to ensuring this effort was an important leadership development opportunity for the entire staff and would unite us at a crucial time. The ACLU of WI constituency is a force for good when we are fully aligned and ready to marshal our resources and meet challenges with strength and resolve.

In the fall of 2024, our staff and board collaborated to update our mission statement and create our vision statement. It was important that we welcomed all voices to be heard and honored the team’s expertise. To write a vision statement, we needed to come together and hear our “ACLU stories”—what brought us to this work and why we do what we do. We achieved this level of engagement and feedback during dedicated board and staff retreats.



If our mission statement articulates why the ACLU of WI exists and the vision statement imagines a world in which we accomplish that mission, our strategic plan would have to outline how we work together and in service to the community.

The strategic planning process was inclusive and aligned with our mission, vision, strategic priorities, and resources. To ensure authenticity, relevance, and focus, this was a staff-led process as our team has demonstrated they have the expertise, experience, and live the mission every day.

We are deeply grateful to the board, which partnered with the staff every step of the way, and the strategic planning committee, which supported the staff throughout the process and generously offered leadership, guidance, and expertise as they worked collaboratively to create this roadmap for our shared future. We are especially grateful to board member Commander Sheri Swokowski for her incredible leadership and input through this process.

Five goals emerged from our planning process to empower a more just Wisconsin. Just as the board approved our mission and vision statement, staff followed the same process in strategic planning and, in doing so, achieved our process goals. The board approved the following five issue areas: **Criminal Legal Reform, First Amendment, Immigration, LGBTQ+ Rights & Bodily Autonomy, and Strengthening Democracy**, as well as phased objectives for each issue.

In building an authentic and relevant plan, we needed to understand the history, our partners, and the Wisconsin landscape for each issue area. Led by staff, working groups were established, convening weekly over six months to understand the work within each issue area with a focus on professional development and learning from each other. Our staff created and is now implementing cross-department tactics to achieve our objectives.

We worked to define a direction for the affiliate, prioritize our areas of focus and objectives, and identify the required resources to accomplish that work. This plan provides the structure to make day-to-day decisions that follow a larger vision. Most importantly, we wanted an inclusive process. We have achieved our process goals.

AREAS OF FOCUS

CRIMINAL LEGAL REFORM

By fighting for transformational change to policing and prosecution, pretrial detention, the right to counsel, and probation and parole, we are working to reverse the tide of mass incarceration, advance constitutional rights, shift power to under-resourced communities, and elevate approaches to justice and safety that advance fundamental rights for all.

FIRST AMENDMENT

Protecting free speech means protecting protest rights, a free press, diversity of thought, freedom of religion, and so much more. The ACLU of WI is always on guard to ensure that the First Amendment’s protections remain robust — for everyone.

IMMIGRATION

The fundamental constitutional protections of due process and equal protection embodied in our Constitution and Bill of Rights apply to every person, regardless of immigration status. We will work to defend those rights and fight back against the mass deportation machine.

LGBTQ+ RIGHTS & BODILY AUTONOMY

All people deserve to live openly without discrimination and enjoy equal rights, bodily autonomy, and access to the health care they need. We continue to protect and defend Wisconsin’s rights to love who they love, be who they are, and control their own bodies.

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

Voting is the cornerstone of our democracy and the fundamental right upon which all our civil liberties rest. The ACLU of WI works to protect and expand Wisconsin’s freedom to vote.

Join Us

Sarah Siegel, Deputy Executive Director

In a time when civil rights and liberties are under unprecedented pressure, the ACLU of Wisconsin stands at the forefront of the fight for justice, equity, and human dignity. Our mission—to protect, defend, and expand civil rights and liberties, especially for communities historically denied their rights—is not only a call to action but a mandate for transformative change.

Our mission and vision are the bedrock of our work, guiding us as we work tirelessly to protect civil liberties and ensure that the dignity of every person is respected.

Our strategic plan in place makes our decision-making faster and more accessible. This is vital to an organization like the ACLU of Wisconsin, which routinely deals with dynamic and evolving political realities. Strategic priorities give us guardrails and the crucial ability to hold ourselves accountable and remain focused; our strategic plan offers the entire team a long view in a reactive environment, which anchors our work.

We created this work together. We are implementing this work as a team. We look forward to working alongside the community to realize our vision.

We invite you to join us.



ACLU of WI Board

William Sulton
President

Angela Lang
Vice President

Nichole Yunk Todd
Treasurer

William Lynch
Secretary

Alonzo Kelly
National Board Rep

Nat Godley

Jane Hereth

Selika Lawton

Nieves Lopez

Christine Munson

Xuan Nguyen

Sheri Swokowski

Maria Rodriguez

Tricia Zunker

FY25 AUDITED FINANCIALS

will be available on the website following the completion of our yearly audit.

How to Get Involved



DONATE

Your gift to the ACLU of WI Foundation is tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law and supports litigation and civil rights education in Wisconsin and across the country. The ACLU receives no government funding and does not charge its clients for legal representation. Our work depends entirely on private donations and legal fees earned from successful cases.



BECOME A MONTHLY DONOR (OUR GUARDIANS OF LIBERTY)

Strengthen our lobbying efforts and grassroots activity by joining the ACLU of WI! Paying annual dues of \$35 or more entitles you to a membership in the state and national ACLU. Monthly donors also reduce our costs, meaning that a greater portion of your gift goes directly to fight injustice.



VOLUNTEER

There are many ways you can take action as a volunteer – from canvassing and message actions to activating in your local community. Join our team of dedicated volunteers and make a difference.

Other Ways to Support

WORKPLACE GIVING

Many companies offer employees a variety of ways to donate to their favorite organizations, including convenient options like payroll deduction and a company match. This is a perfect way to make a larger contribution and pay for it in small, more feasible installments. Check with your company to learn about your options for workplace giving.

PLANNED GIFTS

Naming the ACLU of WI as a beneficiary of your will, life insurance policy, HSA fund, or retirement fund is a simple and effective way to support the ACLU. Additional legacy giving vehicles, such as gift annuities, are also available. Connect with our development staff to learn more about how you can leave a legacy that protects civil rights and liberties for generations to come.

CORPORATE SUPPORT

Join our Business Partnership Program. Whether through philanthropic gifts, event sponsorships, or in-kind support, corporations and businesses are important partners in the work. Our business partners receive recognition, volunteer opportunities, and tools for advocating for the issues that matter most to them.

Please contact our Development & Engagement Department for more information at development-engagement@aclu-wi.org or 414-272-4032



FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

 facebook.com/ACLUofWi

 [@ACLUofWisconsin](https://twitter.com/ACLUofWisconsin)

 [@acluofwi](https://instagram.com/acluofwi)

 [@acluofwi](https://tiktok.com/@acluofwi)

 [@acluofwi](https://youtube.com/acluofwi)

 [linkedin.com/company/
aclu-of-wisconsin](https://linkedin.com/company/aclu-of-wisconsin)

ACLU
Wisconsin