

By ACLU Maryland Staff

FREE STATE LIBERTIES

WINTER 2025

The ACLU of Maryland remains committed to uplifting each person's humanity and making that truth real for everyone. Expanding voting rights and banning local agreements with ICE will continue to be top priorities for the 2026 Legislative Session. Along with protection of civil liberties and civil rights, the ACLU will remain committed to achieving justice— **and we will not stop until every person in Maryland can live freely, safely, and equally under the law.**

FREE STATE LIBERTIES

The newsletter of the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland and the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation of Maryland.

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COVER IMAGE: Wicomico residents and community members rally against 287(g). Photo by Lana Foley.

PAGE 2 IMAGE: ACLU staff celebrate Amy Cruice's 25th work anniversary. Courtesy Photo.

PAGE 3 IMAGES: Top-down Yanet Amanuel speaking at CASA press conference. Photo by Lorena Diaz.

Frederick residents gather for nationwide protest in the County. Photo by Sebastian Brown.

ACLU staff presenting plaques to Wicomico residents for voting rights victory. Photo by Lisa Collier-Purnell.

Veronica Dunlap speaking at Baltimore County redistricting press conference. Photo by Leah Bush.

DEAR FRIENDS OF CIVIL LIBERTIES

The First Amendment is under fire, and the moment demands that we rise together to defend it.

Over the past few months, we've seen this administration test the limits of free speech, press, and protest in ways that strike at the heart of democracy itself. Federal agencies have been ordered to strip funding from schools and universities that uphold diversity and inclusion; journalists have been banned from White House and Pentagon briefings unless they agree to report only what the administration dictates; and National Guard troops have been deployed in American cities to silence peaceful demonstrations.

These acts are not about safety or efficiency. They are designed to stoke fear in individuals and communities as well as control access to truth, to protest, and to free thought.

The stories and updates in this issue reflect the many ways the ACLU of Maryland is confronting these challenges head-on. **Our legal team is challenging unconstitutional restrictions on the freedom to think, speak, protest, and advocate for rights and principles on which the government may disagree.** We are partnering with educators and students to protect academic freedom. And we are standing alongside community organizers to ensure that peaceful protest remains protected, not punished. This is the work of defending democracy. **It requires courage, vigilance, and an unwavering belief in the power of truth.**

Every lawsuit we file, every case we win, every Marylander we empower is part of a larger promise—that the rights guaranteed by the Constitution are **not negotiable**. No administration, no political agenda, and no weaponized system of government can erase that truth.

Thank you for standing with us in this critical moment. Your support fuels our resolve and strengthens our ability to defend what is most essential: **freedom itself.**

With gratitude and solidarity,



DANA VICKERS SHELLEY

Executive Director,
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COREY STOTTELMYER

Board President,
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"We will not stop until every person in Maryland can live freely, safely, and equally under the law."



CENSORSHIP, DISCRIMINATION, AND LEGAL VIOLATIONS IN SOMERSET COUNTY

Somerset parents and organizations have raised serious concerns with the County Board of Education after nearly a year of limited transparency and accountability. Since the start of 2025, the now all-white board has advanced a harmful political agenda: censoring books that affirm Black and LGBTQIA+ experiences, blocking approval of a state-endorsed English Language Arts curriculum, holding secret meetings, firing the Black Superintendent of Schools, removing its own in-person meetings to bar public comment, and making threats toward parents and educators.

We have sent several letters and a Maryland Public Information Act request to the school board on these egregious actions that have fractured public trust and placed student rights and funding at risk. The people of Somerset County deserve better than this, and we intend to ensure that the school board honors the freedom to learn so that every student can thrive in a school system that nurtures curiosity, inclusion, and opportunity.

CHALLENGING FEDERAL CENSORSHIP IN OUR SCHOOLS

We joined PEN America in filing a brief supporting the American Federation of Teachers' lawsuit challenging a dangerous U.S. Department of Education directive that threatens federal investigations against schools that discuss race, diversity, or inclusion. Framed as anti-discrimination guidance, the policy functions as a gag order pressuring educators to erase accurate lessons on U.S. history, racism, and LGBTQ+ identities from the classroom.

In our brief, we argued that this censorship is part of a broader national campaign to restrict what students can read, learn, and discuss. It silences truth-telling and punishes those who speak up. In April 2025, a federal judge in Maryland issued a preliminary ruling blocking the policy. In August, the court struck down the policy in a final ruling, marking a critical win for academic freedom and the right to learn. The government is expected to appeal.



OUR PUSH FOR A FULL STATEWIDE BAN ON ICE 287(G) AGREEMENTS

Across Maryland, every day more than 10 immigrant families are separated, their children are left without parents. Maryland's participation in 287(g) agreements is contributing to this harm. 287(g) is a voluntary agreement between ICE and localities to deputize local law enforcement to act as ICE agents after minimal training. As opposed to other forms of local cooperation with ICE, 287(g) turns local jails and police into extensions of ICE – all at local taxpayers' expense. Last year, we were successful in passing the Sensitive Locations Act which requires the Attorney General to develop policy guidelines for locations like public schools, public libraries, courthouses, facilities operated by the Comptroller, state-funded healthcare and mental health facilities, and shelter care, that provide essential state-funded services to the public and prohibits federal immigration law enforcement from entering the location unless it presents a valid warrant issued by a federal or state court. But this is not enough.

After months of mobilizing in Wicomico County, we saw the impact that community action can have: the county executive announced that they will not move forward with entering a 287(g) agreement with ICE, for now. While this is a victory, we must ensure there is a full statewide ban on all 287(g) partnerships across Maryland so that our local law enforcement officers cannot continue to work with ICE to harm and intimidate our communities. This session, along with our coalition partners, we will advocate for a full ban because our communities deserve real public safety, not fear.

LANGUAGE ACCESS PASSED, NOW IT'S TIME TO SECURE THE REST OF THE MDVRA

Last session, in line with the landmark Maryland Voting Rights Act, we worked with our partners to win new language access requirements that ensure more voters can understand and fully access the voting process. The new provisions expand on existing federal laws requiring translation of election materials, lowering the population threshold required for language assistant coverage and increasing the number of languages covered. However, there remain critical parts of the MDVRA that must pass this session, including protections against vote dilution, voter suppression, and voter intimidation. Maryland must make fair voting access and voter protection a reality. These additions will be a top priority for the 2026 legislative session as we look to pass the rest of the MDVRA before the federal Voting Rights Act is further diminished.

"NOT ON OUR WATCH"

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