

ACLU of Maryland

2026 – 2030

Strategic Plan

*Building a Maryland Where
Rights Are Real*

Dear Members & Friends,

In 1931, the routine denial of constitutional rights to Black Marylanders was daily reality. In a climate of white supremacy, Jim Crow, racial terror, and open resistance to equal justice under law, Elisabeth Gilman founded the ACLU of Maryland as an act of principle and resolve of the lynching crisis in our state.

One of the organization's earliest acts was defending a Black man on the Eastern Shore named Orphan Jones (aka Euel Lee) who was charged with murder, denied counsel, and threatened with lynching. ACLU attorneys secured a change of venue in Lee's case, a smart legal maneuver that protected his right to due process at a time when the courts offered few protections for Black people. It was a landmark case and a declaration of a core ACLU principle: the Constitution applies to everyone, even when society refuses to acknowledge it. Although Lee was hanged, ACLU's involvement helped to ensure that Black Americans would ultimately serve on jury panels — a significant win for Maryland.

From challenging segregation and protecting free speech, to defending voting rights, demanding police transparency, advancing reproductive freedom, and protecting LGBTQ+ Marylanders, the ACLU of Maryland has built a strong history of working across courtrooms, legislative chambers, classrooms, and communities to insist that civil rights and civil liberties are essential. Black Marylanders were present at this state's founding, shaping its land, its economy, its culture — yet none of its founding documents protected them. Nearly a century later, that exclusion still echoes. Over the past eight years, we have become more intentional about centering racial justice and ensuring that Black voices shape the policies and politics here.

I joined the ACLU of Maryland eight years ago because I believe deeply in its mission and in the people of this state. I came to this role with experience in racial justice advocacy, and with a clear understanding that rights only matter when they are real in people's lives. As Executive Director, I have had the privilege of working alongside Marylanders who make that truth tangible: students who want to learn where they feel safe and respected; families working to build stability while navigating a harsh and unforgiving immigration system; and communities brave enough to press for accountability when public officials abuse their authority. Our team of advocates, attorneys, policy experts, and administrators show up every day prepared to stand with them.

We work to ensure Maryland laws and policies reflect and uplift people's humanity.

The challenges we face are serious and systemic. Maryland continues to experience some of the country's starkest racial disparities in policing and incarcerating Black and Brown people. Immigrant communities remain vulnerable to sweeping, racist enforcement efforts that sidestep due process and treat immigrant families as targets for arrest and deportation. Voting rights and democratic norms require vigilant protection, and nowhere is that more urgent than here. Maryland just made history by passing its first voting rights act, a milestone we helped make possible. But that victory arrives in the shadow of a Supreme Court decision that gutted Section 2 of the federal Voting Rights Act, a ruling that is already being used to deny Black and Brown communities the representation they are owed. And it feels like every headline brings new ways

that public education, freedom of expression, and privacy protections are being challenged.

Our 2026–2030 Strategic Plan meets this moment with focus and discipline. Through litigation, public policy, advocacy, and public education, we will continue to protect the civil rights and civil liberties of all Marylanders.

The ACLU of Maryland is built for what comes next.

The years ahead will bring challenges, opportunities, and other developments. With this strategic plan as our north star, we remain steadfast in our mission to meet the needs of everyday Marylanders, especially those harmed by the most entrenched and harmful forms of systemic racism.

As we approach our second century, the ACLU of Maryland stands ready to defend civil liberties and civil rights, and ensure they are realized by everyone. The work ahead will require persistence and collective action. We are prepared to meet and fulfill that responsibility.



Dana Vickers Shelley

Executive Director, ACLU of Maryland

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Executive Summary

The ACLU of Maryland has spent nearly a century at the forefront of civil rights and civil liberties in this state. As we approach our centennial and look toward 2031, we do so in one of the most consequential periods for civil rights and civil liberties in modern American history.

This strategic plan, developed through deep engagement with staff, communities, and partners, sets our course for 2026 through 2030. It reflects hard-won clarity about where our work is most needed, what we do best, and how we build an organization capable of sustaining the long fight.

The Context We're Working In

Maryland's racial disparities in incarceration are among the worst in the nation. Immigrant communities face an aggressive federal deportation apparatus that disregards due process. Voting rights, hard-won over generations, are under sustained legal attack. And across education, free expression, privacy, and democratic accountability, the space for civil liberties is being tested in ways not seen in decades.

At the same time, there is real momentum. Maryland passed its first state voting rights act, a milestone the ACLU of Maryland helped make possible. Coalitions across the state are stronger and more connected than ever. And public understanding of civil rights and civil liberties issues is growing.

Our Four Priority Areas

- ➔ **Legal System Transformation**
We will challenge Maryland's deeply inequitable criminal legal system and fight for immigrant communities targeted by federal enforcement, building toward a vision of public safety rooted in dignity and community.
- ➔ **Defending Democracy**
We will protect voting rights, free expression, due process, and government accountability to help ensure Marylanders can live, think, speak, and dissent freely.
- ➔ **Building Sustainability & Wellness**
We will invest in the people and infrastructure that make this work possible by creating a workplace where diverse perspectives thrive and our team has what they need to sustain this mission for the long haul.
- ➔ **Responsive Advocacy**
We will maintain reserved capacity to respond rapidly to emerging civil liberties crises, because threats don't follow planning cycles.

This plan is both a commitment and an invitation to our staff, our supporters, our partners, and the Marylanders we serve. The years ahead will be demanding. We enter them clear-eyed, well-prepared, and resolute.

Our Mission And Values

The ACLU of Maryland exists to empower Marylanders to exercise their rights so that the law values and uplifts their humanity. We seek a Maryland where people are united in affirming and exercising their rights in order to address inequities and fulfill the country's unrealized promise of justice and freedom for all.

Our Five Core Values



Transparency

We are committed to open communication and honesty about our intentions, actions, and decisions.



Collaboration

We partner with those who share our values to protect civil rights and civil liberties, with a specific eye toward partnership with those who have been historically excluded from the halls of power.



Anti-Racism

We recognize the impacts of structural racism on the issues we take on and the communities we serve. It is not enough for our organization to not be racist; we must be actively anti-racist. Through our partnership with Black, Latine, Indigenous, and communities of color, we will dismantle systemic racism and advance proactive solutions that uplift the humanity of all Marylanders.



Integrity

We can be counted on to honor our mission and values. We uphold integrity both internally and externally as we advance our statewide mission.



Accountability

We listen and align our actions to serve the people of Maryland and are answerable to the promises we make.



Commitment To Equity

We are committed to creating and continuously re-evaluating the internal and external systems, policies, and procedures that govern our work by ensuring they are rooted in equity and reflect the needs of all people.

Priority Areas:

Our 2026–2030 work is organized around four priority areas. Each is anchored by a concrete outcome — a measurable change we intend to help bring about by the end of this planning cycle.

Legal System Transformation

➔ **Outcome:**

Communities harmed by mass incarceration and/or deportation because of their racial identities will experience genuine public safety through community-centered solutions, meaningful limits on government power, and strong accountability mechanisms.

Justice is not abstract; it is felt, or denied, in the daily lives of real people. And for too many Marylanders, the systems meant to ensure safety have instead become instruments of harm.

Maryland's racial disparities in incarceration are the worst in the nation. The rate of young Black men serving extreme prison terms exceeds even second-place Mississippi. These inequities extend across the entire justice system, providing urgent evidence of the need to challenge racial bias at every level.

Maryland's immigrant residents face heightened risk under the Trump administration's inhumane deportation initiative. With over one million immigrant residents in our state, this indiscriminate enforcement pipeline disregards due process, constitutional rights, and public safety, threatening the rights and freedoms of all Marylanders, regardless of immigration status.

Our work in this area includes:

- Transformational change to policing, sentencing, and parole
- Safeguarding the rights of immigrants against unjust enforcement
- Promoting humane conditions of detention
- Advancing community-centered alternatives that prioritize dignity and safety over punishment

Through strategic litigation, policy advocacy, and community partnership, we are building a fundamentally different approach to justice — one that realizes a vision where safety, dignity, and justice are guaranteed for all Marylanders.

Defending Democracy



Outcome:

Marylanders who, because of their race and/or identity, face barriers to civic engagement or targeted government overreach will have greater access to the democratic process through expanded voting rights, and protections for accountability, transparency, dissent, and free expression.

Democracy and civil liberties are inseparable. When one is threatened, all are at risk. In an era of rising authoritarianism, the right to vote, the right to speak, and the right to hold power accountable are not theoretical ideals. They are the conditions that make everything else possible.

By preserving voting rights and enforcing the rule of law, we safeguard Marylanders — including immigrants, currently or formerly incarcerated residents, and transgender people — against government overreach and abuse of power. By strengthening legal protections through legislative and legal advocacy, we protect against intrusive federal and state actions that threaten essential freedoms.

Our work in this area includes:

- Protecting and expanding voting rights, including enforcement of Maryland's new state voting rights act
- Defending free expression, dissent, and academic freedom in schools and communities
- Challenging government consolidation of power and ensuring accountability to the people
- Protecting due process and privacy against intrusive federal and state actions

Through litigation, advocacy, and strong partnerships with impacted communities, we will ensure that government remains accountable to the people, and that the constitutional rights of all Marylanders stay strong against authoritarian threats.

Building Sustainability & Wellness



Outcome:

The ACLU of Maryland will achieve long-term sustainability through a safe, healthy, open, and values-driven work environment for its staff that supports growth and development, along with responsible board governance that supports and strengthens our viability now and into the future.

Advancing civil liberties requires an organization built for the long journey. We cannot sustain this work without sustaining our people.

We are deepening our organizational capacity through transparent resource development, operational excellence, and partnerships that multiply our impact across Maryland. Equally vital is our commitment to staff wellness, equity, and belonging by creating a workplace culture where diverse perspectives thrive, resilience is cultivated, professional growth is prioritized, and team members have the support they need to bring their full selves to this meaningful work.

Our work in this area includes:

- Building a workplace culture grounded in equity, belonging, and psychological safety
- Strengthening board governance and organizational leadership
- Investing in staff development and well-being
- Ensuring the financial sustainability that gives this organization staying power

By building sustainable systems and nurturing our people, we ensure that the ACLU of Maryland remains a powerful, effective force for justice today and for generations to come.

Responsive Advocacy

→ **Outcome:**

Marylanders facing urgent or evolving threats will benefit from the ACLU of Maryland's flexibility and expertise to support their rights through its reserved capacity.

Civil liberties crises do not follow strategic planning cycles. Our long-term sustainability requires that we preserve capacity to respond to unexpected threats and support partners on core ACLU issues that may fall outside our four priority areas.

How we operationalize this capacity:

→ **Reserved Capacity:**

We will reserve organizational capacity across legal, policy, and communications functions for responsive work. This capacity is held available for emerging needs and unexpected issues that arise rather than allocated to specific priority areas.

→ **Threshold Criteria:**

Responsive engagement beyond reserved capacity requires reallocation from priority area work. This is considered when a situation involves urgent threat, when ACLU-MD is distinctively positioned to respond, when inaction would significantly harm impacted communities, and when the response can be time-limited.

→ **Decision Authority:**

The Executive Director has authority to deploy reserved capacity. Decisions to exceed reserved capacity require consultation with program leads and, for major reallocations, notification to the Board of Directors.

→ **Transition Planning:**

When responsive work extends beyond initial expectations, we develop transition plans to conclude involvement, integrate the work into an existing priority area, or propose a priority modification for Board consideration.

How We Work

The ACLU of Maryland works in deep partnership with a broad and diverse network of allies and stakeholders. These partnerships span local grassroots coalitions, statewide advocacy groups, national civil rights organizations, government entities, law firms, and most importantly — directly impacted people, their families, and their communities.

Nationally, the ACLU of Maryland is part of a collaborative structure of 54 affiliates along with the ACLU's national office, which provides strategic support, resources, and alignment on federal policy priorities. At the state and local level, we engage with legislative bodies, elected officials, school boards, and government agencies to challenge discriminatory policies and promote systemic reform.

→ **Integrated Advocacy**

As a political advocacy organization, the ACLU of Maryland integrates research, legal and policy analysis, knowledge sharing, and technical support across our legal and policy efforts to advance sustainable change.

→ **Coalition Resilience**

Our coalition partners are themselves navigating a challenging environment. We cannot assume the coalition landscape will remain stable, so we invest deliberately in its strength. We build coalition resilience by maintaining diverse partnerships, investing in relationship continuity, sharing our resources, and participating in coalition spaces.

When coalition partners face threats to their operations whether from funding cuts, legal challenges, or external attacks, we will evaluate how we can provide meaningful support consistent with our resources and mission. Strong coalitions require mutual support, not only shared campaigns.

→ **Partnering with Communities**

The communities most affected by civil liberties violations possess essential knowledge, leadership, and vision that must guide effective advocacy. Our role is not to speak for communities but to work alongside them, sharing power and resources while following their lead on priorities that affect their lives.

Help Fuel The *Fight Ahead*

For nearly 100 years, the ACLU of Maryland has remained a steadfast bulwark for the liberty of all Marylanders, thanks to the generosity and commitment of our community. Today, we are experiencing an unprecedented assault on our democracy that demands all of us to show up however we can.

The roadmap we have laid out in this strategic plan is bold, audacious, and necessary — and it depends on all of us. From longtime supporters to first-time philanthropists, we have never needed you more.



ACLU MEMBERSHIP



Become a **card-carrying member** of the ACLU — or renew your existing membership — and join nearly 1.5 million people nationwide in protecting and extending America's promise of liberty and justice for all. Your membership contribution supports all our work, including political lobbying, at both the ACLU of Maryland and the national ACLU.



Join the **Guardians of Liberty**, ACLU monthly donors who support our most urgent initiatives. Your monthly sustaining membership will provide stability and let the ACLU plan for whatever comes next.



ACLU membership gifts can be made **online** at www.aclu-md.org or by **mail** to: ACLU of Maryland, Attn: Development, 3600 Clipper Mill Rd., Ste. 200, Baltimore, MD 21211. Checks should be made payable to the 'ACLU of Maryland.'

Support The ACLU Foundation

You can also support our work through tax-deductible gifts to the ACLU Foundation of Maryland, which advance civil rights and liberties in Maryland and across the country through our litigation, research, and education efforts.

Donations to the ACLU Foundation of Maryland can be made in the following ways:



IRA-Qualified Charitable Distribution

Direct your IRA custodian to make your check payable to the ACLU Foundation of Maryland (Tax ID: 23- 7209538) and mail it to 3600 Clipper Mill Rd., Ste. 200, Baltimore, MD 21211. Specify it's an IRA QCD.



Donor-Advised Fund

Recommend a gift from your donor-advised fund to the ACLU Foundation of Maryland and create an immediate impact or set up recurring donations to plan for future support.



Stock/Securities

Transfer your securities to ACLU Foundation of Maryland's account (#30A121398) at T. Rowe Price (DTC #0443). Let us know by emailing development@aclu-md.org or calling (410) 889-8550 ext. 153.



Will/Trust/Beneficiary Designation

For more information about additional giving opportunities, such as by will, trust, or beneficiary designation, contact the ACLU of Maryland's Office of Development. We are happy to provide resources to help you fulfill your philanthropic interests and passions in a way that is consistent with your values. Email us at development@aclu-md.org or call (410)889-8555 ext. 153 to start the conversation.

ACLU Foundation gifts can be made online at www.aclu-md.org or by mail to ACLU of Maryland, Attn: Development, 3600 Clipper Mill Rd., Ste. 200, Baltimore, MD 21211. Checks should be made payable to the 'ACLU Foundation of Maryland.'



Together, We Are One Step
Closer To Making A More Just
And Equitable Maryland.

Thank You For
Fueling The Fight!