

FIGHTING *THEN &* NOW

to protect and expand civil
rights and freedoms for all
Mississippians.

ACLU
Mississippi

ANNUAL REPORT 2024

ACLU Mississippi

IN MEMORY OF CRYSTAL WELCH

The ACLU of Mississippi mourns the tragic loss of Crystal Welch, an extraordinary leader, advocate, and beloved friend. As Board President since 2022, Crystal brought unmatched energy, vision, and commitment to advancing justice, equality, and civil rights across Mississippi. Her leadership was marked by an unwavering dedication to making the ACLU's mission resonate in communities often silenced by injustice.



Crystal's advocacy journey began long before her tenure with us, spanning global outreach in Guatemala to local legal practice in family and child welfare to eventually heading the Mississippi College's School of Law Adoption Clinic. Her ability to connect with people, amplify their voices, and champion systemic change exemplified her steadfast belief in the transformative power of justice. As a board member and later president, Crystal consistently sought ways to deepen the impact of our work, whether by supporting voting rights, defending free speech, or ensuring accountability in law enforcement.

Beyond her professional contributions, Crystal's vibrant spirit left an indelible mark on everyone she encountered. Her kindness, intellectual curiosity, and boundless passion for justice inspired not only our team but also the broader legal and civil rights communities.

As we grieve this profound loss, we commit to honoring her legacy by continuing the work she championed so fiercely. Our thoughts are with her family, friends, and all whose lives she touched. Crystal's impact endures, a beacon reminding us of the change one dedicated individual can create in pursuit of a more just world.



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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

“Fascists is Jim Crow peoples, honey.” – LANGSTON HUGHES



Jarvis Dortch
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

True Democracy is new to Mississippi, and America. Between 1868 and 1875, Mississippi briefly experimented with a biracial democracy. But in 1875, White supremacists carried out a plan of organized terror, mob violence, and election fraud to overthrow Mississippi's biracial, reconstruction era government. They used coordinated mass murder, assassinations and lynchings to strip Black Mississippians – the majority of the state's population – of all political power and legal protections. White supremacists in other southern states would follow the Mississippi plan of killing democracy in order to usher in a century of Jim Crow.

In 1875, the nation stood by and watched redeemers violently replace democracy with fascism. 150 years later, many of us worry that the nation simply voted to make a similar swap. Prior to November's election, our office planned to, throughout 2025, uplift and retell the 150-year-old history of the terror campaign, commonly referred to as the Mississippi Plan. Following November 5th, it is even more important that we learn about and from the Mississippi of 1875.

It's critical that we all come to grips with the reality that a whole lot of people are ok with fascism. That's what Jim Crow was. It was fascism. It was so fascist that the government we most associate with fascism, Nazi Germany, sent officials to the American South to learn about the innovative ways southern states used their legal systems to subjugate the Black population.

And for decades, most of White America tolerated or embraced Jim Crow. They were collectively apathetic about fascism dominating the South.

We can dream and continue saying “we are better than this” or face our history and plan our way forward. That plan must be rooted in truth. Based on our actual record, not myths.

The past also teaches us that we will win.

It's proof that you don't have to be a superhero to defend liberty. Regular people took extraordinary actions to fight for Civil Rights, abolition, and reproductive justice. All while choosing to put themselves in harm's way.

A few weeks ago, Dr. Robby Lockett recounted a remarkable story. Prior to traveling to Mississippi, many of the Freedom Summer student volunteers spent two weeks in Ohio, training on how to survive in Mississippi. After learning of the disappearance of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, the great Bob Moses informed the students that the three were likely deceased and that no one would blame the students if they decided to go home. All but one student went to Mississippi.

We don't know how the next few years or decades will play out. But we do know what has come before us. We know that 1964 was not the first time Congress passed a Civil Rights Act. This is an opportunity to fight for a new version. We know people of all races, joined together to resist fascism and defeat Jim Crow. All of us have some agency in America's future. You can choose “do-nothing” complacency or speak out, because “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

I hope that you also know that the ACLU of Mississippi will remain committed to fighting to protect and expand civil rights and freedoms for all Mississippians. To quote a recent statement by our national office, “We are the American Civil Liberties Union. And we're not moving to Canada.”

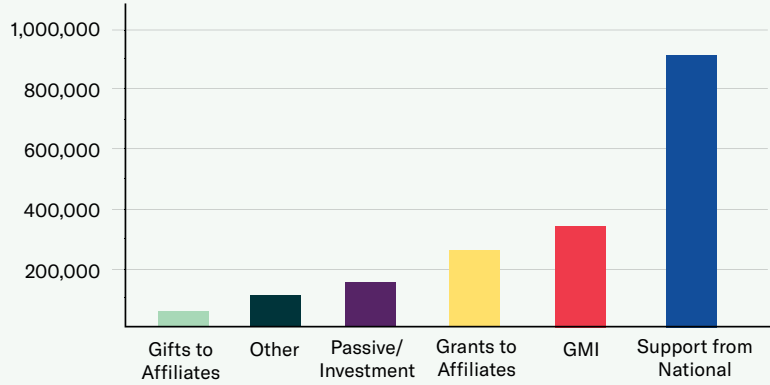
Thank you for standing with us.

NUMBERS

FINANCIAL

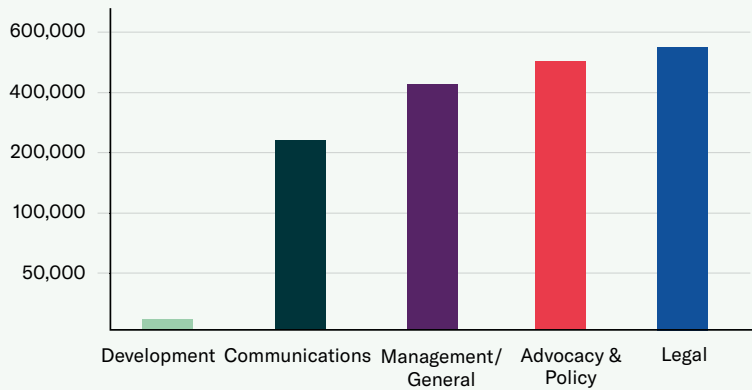
TOTAL INCOME **\$1,792,832**

- Gifts to Affiliates - \$70,464
- GMI - \$320,000
- Grants to Affiliates - \$256,408
- Support from National - \$903,569
- Passive/Investment - \$161,009
- Other - \$81,382



TOTAL EXPENSES **\$1,679,054**

- Management/General - \$404,210
- Advocacy & Policy - \$514,280
- Communications - \$212,825
- Legal - \$539,848
- Development - \$7,891



SOCIAL MEDIA REACH

18,636
FOLLOWERS

614,532
IMPRESSIONS

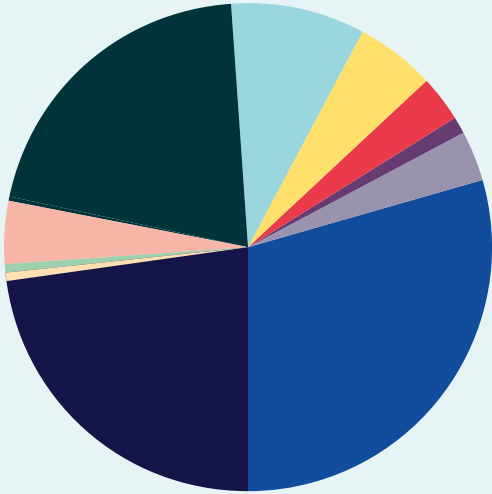
23,549
ENGAGEMENTS

124K
TOTAL PAGE VIEWS



INTAKE

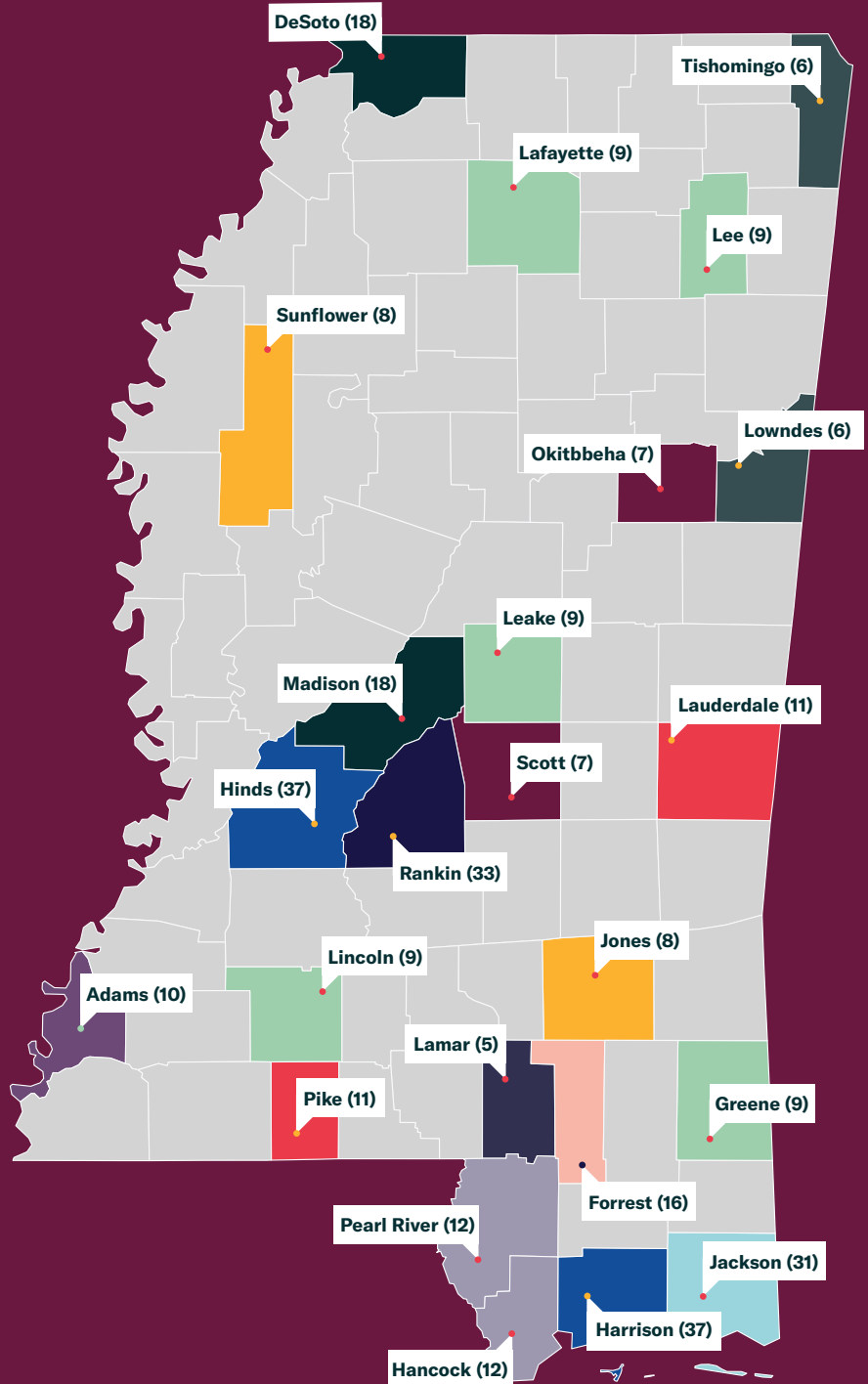
BY TOPIC



Police	239
Prison or Jail	167
Criminal Justice	71
Education	43
LGBTQIA	34
Parole / Probation	27
Employment Discrimination	26
First Amendment	8
Immigration	3
Public Accommodations	3
Second Amendment	1
Voting	1
Open Government	1
Other	191

BY COUNTY

(reported January 1, 2024–October 24, 2024)



2024 LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY

WINS, LOSSES AND PROGRESS IN BETWEEN

In 2024, we fiercely championed voting rights, winning key protections for disabled voters and pushing to restore rights for individuals who've completed their sentences, stood against discriminatory policies and successfully opposed gerrymandering efforts that would dilute Black voter influence. Our commitment remains unwavering in the fight for justice, equality, and fair representation for all Mississippians.



PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO VOTE

One of our primary initiatives was advocating for HB1609, a bill aimed at automatically restoring voting rights to Mississippians who have completed their sentences. The current suffrage resolution process places control in lawmakers' hands, leaving many individuals disenfranchised and disproportionately impacting marginalized communities. Despite setbacks, we achieved a significant victory with SB2425, which guarantees disabled voters the right to have assistance from a person of their choice at polling places. This legislation protects the rights and dignity of voters who require additional support. The ACLU remains steadfast in its commitment to accessible voting for all Mississippians.



PROTECTING PRIVACY

The SAFER Act (SB2753) mandates that individuals in public buildings, including colleges and universities, use restrooms aligned with their sex assigned at birth, limiting access for transgender individuals. This law also requires single-sex or unisex facilities and defines sex strictly as male or female, excluding intersex as a distinct category. Despite its passage, we are dedicated to monitoring SB2753's implementation and actively opposing future discriminatory legislation in Mississippi.



JUDICIAL REDISTRICTING

HB722 proposed changes to judicial districts that would have reduced the number of Black voter-influenced Circuit Courts and limited diversity among judges and district attorneys. We opposed this legislation as it undermined fair representation and risked further gerrymandering by decreasing the Black Voting Age Population (BVAP) in affected districts. Fortunately, this bill was not passed, highlighting the ongoing need to advocate for fair and constitutional redistricting.

PROTECTING BLACK VOTING POWER

This time, what's at stake is something deeper. It's a question of whether, in this country, we can find people who are committed. Who know, who care, who are willing to sacrifice. Who are willing to say that they want to do their share. Who are willing and able, perhaps, to look on this as...the country's business, not just as [the] Negro's problem. Who are willing to look on this, not as something...that just has to be done in Mississippi, but something that will be carried back, and will have to be done in places all across this country, if we're really going to get at the bottom of some of these problems.

– BOB MOSES

PRESIDENT OF COUNCIL OF FEDERATED ORGANIZATIONS (COFO)
AND FREEDOM SUMMER ORGANIZER

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

2024 marked the 60th Anniversary of Freedom Summer. 1964's Mississippi Summer Project raised the national awareness of the state's segregated society and its reliance on violence to prevent Black Mississippians from attaining political power. The young people that organized voter registration drives and freedom schools helped build support for the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

Mississippi has changed greatly in six decades but more subtle efforts to dilute Black voting strength continue. So, our work at the ACLU of Mississippi continues.

The ACLU of Mississippi celebrates Freedom Summer by fighting to protect the hard-won victories of the organizers of the Mississippi Summer Project.

PROTECTING BLACK VOTING POWER

MISSISSIPPI STATE CONFERENCE OF THE NAACP V. STATE BOARD OF ELECTION COMMISSIONERS

In February, we went to Court to challenge Mississippi's legislative districts for violating the U.S. Constitution and the Voting Rights Act. We fought and we won. Better yet, Black voters won. In July, a panel of three Republican appointed judges unanimously ruled that the legislative maps unlawfully dilute the voting strength of Black Mississippians. The Court has ordered the State Legislature to pass new legislative maps, by the end of the 2025 legislative session, that create new majority-Black districts based in DeSoto, Forrest, and Monroe Counties.

DISABILITY RIGHTS MISSISSIPPI, ET AL. V. LYNN FITCH, ET AL.

In July, with our partners, we successfully ended a lawsuit that challenged a 2023 state law that would severely restrict Mississippi voters' right to receive assistance with delivering or returning their ballots. Last Summer, a federal judge granted an injunction that blocked the law. During the 2024 legislative session, we worked directly with the House Elections Committee Chairman to change the law and ensure voters who need assistance due to disability, blindness, or inability to read or write can choose a person to help them with delivering or returning their absentee mail-in ballot.

WHITE V. MISSISSIPPI STATE BOARD OF ELECTION COMMISSIONERS

In August, we again took the State to trial. This time, we challenged the Mississippi Supreme Court

district lines for violating the Voting Rights Act. The Legislature has kept the same district lines in place for almost 40 years. That inaction has left Black voters with little say in who represents them on the state's highest court. Mississippi's population is almost 40% Black. Yet in the 100 years that Mississippi has elected its Supreme Court, there have only been four Black justices ever to sit on that body, and never more than one person at a time. We are awaiting a decision on that case and a ruling could come any day.

HARRIS V. DESOTO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

This Fall, we partnered with the Legal Defense Fund (LDF) and Harvard Election Law Clinic to file a lawsuit on behalf of two individual voters as well as the DeSoto County NAACP and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. challenging a racially discriminatory electoral map in DeSoto County, Mississippi. DeSoto County's 2022 redistricting process was racially discriminatory in violation of Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. The county severely diluted the voting power of its Black residents, denying them a fair chance to elect representatives of their choice.

Black residents comprise more than 30% of the DeSoto County population yet have zero representation in the five governmental bodies that manage the services that impact the day-to-day lives of the county's 191,000 residents. Since the plan's adoption, none of the 25 county holders is Black, nor were any Black-preferred candidates elected.

2024 has been rewarding but we know we are only able to do this work thanks to the many people, who, 60 years ago, risked so much to bring democracy to Mississippi. This is a challenging moment for our country. But, because of Freedom Summer, the challenge is far less daunting.

POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY

JUSTICE FOR LEXINGTON: EXPOSING POLICE ABUSES IN MISSISSIPPI

In the summer of 2021, the small town of Lexington, Mississippi, hired Sam Dobbins as police chief. Almost immediately, residents began reporting abuses by the Lexington Police Department (LPD), including unjust roadblocks, arrests without cause, and demands for cash to secure release from jail.

By early 2022, the ACLU of Mississippi received a flood of complaints, prompting us to conduct interviews, submit public records requests, and uncover credible evidence of unconstitutional policing. Even after Dobbins' firing, the abuses persisted. In response, we filed lawsuits on behalf of victims like Javarius Russell and Alexis Jew, both unjustly arrested, jailed on baseless charges, and extorted for cash.

With these cases ongoing, we also submitted our findings to the Department of Justice (DOJ) in August 2022, urging federal intervention.

In November 2023, the DOJ acted, launching a pattern and practice investigation to determine whether LPD's conduct violated residents' constitutional rights. Of the DOJ's twelve such investigations across the country, two are in Mississippi—one in Rankin County and one in Lexington. Despite LPD's size—fewer than ten officers, their violations mirror practices found in small departments nationwide.

After a year of scrutiny, the DOJ's September 2024 findings were damning: LPD had engaged in excessive force, conducted illegal stops and searches, retaliated against critics, discriminated against Black residents, and exploited policing to generate revenue for the city. The DOJ is now negotiating with Lexington officials to bring reform and accountability to this troubled department.

The ACLU of Mississippi's work in Lexington played a critical role in exposing these abuses and prompting the DOJ investigation. But our fight isn't over. We will continue holding law enforcement accountable, ensuring that no community suffers from unchecked police misconduct.

FROM THE DOJ REPORT

Hours after the Department of Justice announced its investigation of the Lexington Police Department (LPD) on November 8, 2023, officers chased a Black man through a field and tased him nine times. The man began foaming at the mouth. One officer pointed to a Taser probe lodged in the man's hat and said, "Damn, one of my probes hit him in the head." The man, who has a behavioral health disability, had been accused of disturbing a business.

This was not the man's first encounter with LPD. Earlier that year, LPD officers had jailed him for ten days for trespassing; four days for stealing a cup of coffee; and twelve days for stealing packets of sugar. Each time they arrested him, LPD unlawfully refused

to release the man until he paid money towards old fines and fees he owed from misdemeanors and traffic tickets. But each arrest added more fines and fees to the ledger. By November 2023, the man—who has no job, no assets, and no bank account—owed more than \$7,500.

In encounter after encounter with the man, LPD violated his rights. But like countless people in Lexington, the man had little recourse. Through a combination of poor leadership, retaliation, and a complete lack of internal accountability, LPD has created a system where officers can relentlessly violate the law.

IMPACT

THE FIGHT FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The Mississippi Special Education Coalition (MSEC) was established in 2022, driven by the advocacy of the ACLU of Mississippi and strengthened by partnerships with key organizations across the state. MSEC was born out of the need to address widespread challenges in special education, following numerous reports from parents, guardians, and advocates about systemic issues in schools. Collaborating with legal experts from the Southern Poverty Law Center and other nonprofits, MSEC has grown into a powerful statewide alliance focused on safeguarding the educational rights of students with disabilities and reforming school discipline practices in Mississippi.

Since its inception, MSEC has provided critical support through Special Education Continuing Legal Education (CLE) sessions and free legal clinics, equipping parents, educators, and advocates with tools to effectively champion students' rights. With thoughtful planning—such as offering meals and childcare—MSEC's events have attracted broad participation, creating essential spaces for engagement and learning. In addition to hosting impactful events across the state, MSEC collaborates with policymakers and regulators to push for accountability and systemic change. Its annual report, developed with the Southern Education Foundation, has provided policy recommendations to state and federal agencies, promoting stronger enforcement of special education regulations. As MSEC continues to advocate through litigation and policy reform, it remains committed to ensuring that every child in Mississippi, regardless of ability, has access to a free and appropriate education (FAPE).



In Plain Sight

Special Education Outcomes and Challenges in Mississippi



ENSURING EQUAL ACCESS TO SOCIAL SERVICES

On September 24th, our Executive Director, Jarvis Dortch, testified before the United States House Ways and Means Committee on reforming the TANF due to states' misuse of funds. In his testimony, he outlined Mississippi's gross waste and misappropriation of TANF funds meant for children and families and offered solutions on how to safeguard this program going forward. His testimony can be found on our website.



SUPPORT

Financial support of the ACLU of Mississippi continues to be one of the best investments in making systemic change.

ISAAC RETHY SCHOLARSHIP

This year we are pleased to announce the creation of the Isaac Rethy Fellowship.

The fellowship is named after Isaac Rethy, Litigation Counsel at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP, who passed away suddenly at age 38 in the spring of 2023. His pro bono docket for the ACLU of MS covered a wide variety of issues, including challenging racially discriminatory policing; protecting the use of the town square for speech, assembly, and protest; and advocating for Black voters to have a fair opportunity to elect their candidates of choice to the State Supreme Court. Isaac was revered for his deep understanding of legal theories, his unique gift for developing nuanced and novel legal arguments, his unfailing patience with and kindness toward clients and colleagues, and his abiding commitment to civil rights and racial justice.

The Isaac Rethy Memorial Fellow will provide general support to the ACLU of MS legal department and will thereby engage in civil rights advocacy and litigation in the Deep South. The Fellowship will begin in the Fall of 2025.



In 1971, Fannie Lou Hamer presciently declared, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”

It is with this spirit that we pick ourselves up and continue the work of those that began it some 60 years ago. We face a pivotal moment in our nation’s history, and we need your support more than ever to protect civil rights, ensure fair voting access, push for criminal justice reform, and safeguard LGBTQ rights. This consequential election will shape our communities, impact the rights of millions, and determine the future of justice in America for a generation.

Join us in our mission to defend democracy, uplift marginalized voices, and advocate for equality. Together, we can stand against discrimination, fight for fair representation, and work toward a society where everyone’s rights are respected.

Act now—donate, volunteer, and make your voice heard in this critical effort.

ACLU Mississippi

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