

REALIZING VERMONT'S PROMISE OF

*Freedom  
& Unity*

ACLU OF VERMONT STRATEGIC PLAN  
*2025 to 2029*



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# *Introduction*

The ACLU of Vermont enters its 58th year as the state’s premier guardian of civil liberties at a time of deep political division and alarm over the direction of the state and the country at large.

Even prior to the November 2024 election, the challenges we faced as a nation were evident and daunting: extreme and worsening wealth inequality; intractable, systemic racism; and multiple other crises—in housing, in healthcare, and in the existential threat posed by climate change.

Vermont is not immune from any of these issues. To the contrary, most of them are more pronounced here than in other states: we are one of the least racially diverse states in the country; we have the second highest rate of homelessness; health insurance costs are among the highest in the nation; and over the last decade, Vermont ranked seventh in federal disaster declarations resulting from extreme weather.

And yet, as the people who call Vermont home can attest, we also have deeply embedded values and traditions from which we can draw to face these challenges head on. Reflected in our state motto of Freedom and Unity, they include tolerance, compassion, resilience, creativity, autonomy, as well as a strong commitment to the well-being of our neighbors and local communities.

As we face a wave of anti-democratic forces, particularly at the federal level, Vermont’s particular blend of individual and collective self-governance has never held more promise—not just for the region, but for the nation.

With this strategic plan, the ACLU of Vermont seeks to channel those traditions to meet this historical moment, always remaining true to our founding vision of realizing Vermont’s promise of justice and equality for all people.

# *From the Executive Director*



**JAMES DUFF LYALL**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear friends,

The ACLU of Vermont is excited to share this five-year strategic plan with our incredible community of allies, neighbors, and supporters—anyone who believes in the power of “We the People” to make real and live out Vermont’s foundational commitment to Freedom and Unity.

This plan was developed over the course of the past year, through conversations with the ACLU of Vermont Board and staff, as well as our statewide partners, many of whom highlighted the unique role and outsized impact of the ACLU in Vermont—as an unapologetic champion for racial and economic justice; as a government accountability organization that “speaks truth to power;” as a well-informed and principled defender of constitutional principles; and as a tireless advocate for marginalized people and communities statewide.

We believe the values and priorities that emerged in the planning process build on the rich history and traditions of this organization and this state and provide a roadmap to a brighter future for Vermont and the country at large.

We note that this plan took shape in the months prior to November 5, 2024, and while there is no question that we now face unprecedented threats to our civil liberties and our democracy, our strategic priorities came into focus well before the election results were known.

**Over the next five years, we will:**

- I. Position Vermont at the vanguard of states expanding civil liberties protections and defend against attacks from hostile state and federal government actors;



II. Advance a vision of positive civil liberties that help to ensure that everyone’s basic needs are met and that our democracy can thrive;

III. Support and empower more Vermonters to champion civil rights and civil liberties;

IV. Seek to live our values in all of our internal and external commitments.

These four pillars provide a strategic framework for the next five years that will help us to better realize the potential of this community of advocates. Never before in our 58-year history has the ACLU of Vermont been as well-positioned to advance such a bold and ambitious vision for our future, and with the support of our members we believe we can achieve it.

We know this is an especially difficult and uncertain time, but there are ample grounds for hope—not least of which is the commitment of the ACLU community to show up with compassion, kindness, and respect for the rights, dignity, and well-being of everyone who calls Vermont home. We are continually grateful to be in this work with all of you.

In solidarity,

James Duff Lyall  
Executive Director



# Mission, Vision & Values

## MISSION

The American Civil Liberties Union of Vermont is dedicated to defending and advancing the civil rights and civil liberties of all Vermonters through impact litigation, policy advocacy, strategic communications, community organizing, and public education.

## VISION

To realize Vermont's promise of justice and equality for all people.





## VALUES

These guiding principles inform the decisions and actions we take in pursuit of our vision of a Vermont where all people can flourish, individually and collectively:

**ANTI-RACISM:** We acknowledge that we operate within systems that have long upheld white supremacy. We believe that being an anti-racist organization involves actively interrogating the ways white supremacy culture is ingrained in our policies, practices, decision making and ways of operating. We are committed to challenging intersecting systems of oppression within our internal culture and operations, as well as our external work.

**COMMUNITY CARE:** We enthusiastically attend to the individual and collective health and wellbeing of our staff and our broader community.

**EXCELLENCE:** We are called on to tackle complex problems, and we employ research, evidence, and expertise to develop nuanced, innovative, and impactful solutions.

**HUMILITY:** We center the experiences and expertise of people and groups who have historically been denied full participation in our democracy and the full protection of our laws. We believe that people should have input into decisions that affect them.

**INTEGRITY:** We work to earn the trust of our partners and the respect of the public at large. We also confront hard truths, putting honesty and accountability above personal comfort. We set ambitious goals, do our due diligence, and follow through on our commitments.

**SOCIAL JUSTICE:** With particular emphasis on racial justice—living as we do in one of the least racially diverse states in country, and recognizing the structural and cultural factors that perpetuate that reality—we work to interrupt and overcome oppression in all its forms, as well as the bias, discrimination, exclusion, and structural oppression that people from marginalized backgrounds continue to face.



# *Theory of Change*

It is our operating belief that Vermont can and should be a safe haven for our civil rights, civil liberties, and democratic institutions, particularly as rising fascism threatens the bedrock of our democracy. The ACLU of Vermont has a role to play in creating the conditions in which our rights and liberties can thrive by advancing meaningful policy change in the state and shifting the public narrative to make visible the threats and opportunities we face together. In this historical moment, the direct link between spiraling economic inequality and the turn







towards anti-democratic forces is all too apparent. We believe Vermont can and should meet the basic needs of its people; having those needs met is a necessary precondition for everyone’s rights and liberties to be realized and respected, and is essential to preserving the conditions under which genuine democracy can flourish.

The ACLU of Vermont can draw upon the state’s traditions—including but not limited to the state motto of “Freedom and Unity,” as well as state constitutional provisions like the Common Benefits Clause—to shift popular discourse and eventually policy away from a deeply rooted austerity mindset and towards one of abundance.

We envision a future where everyone in Vermont, particularly those communities who have been and are now denied full enjoyment of their civil liberties and rights can live with dignity and equity, enjoying freedoms unimpeded by racial and economic injustice and other forms of oppression.

We are fortunate to operate as the only multi-issue organization in the state with such established legal, policy, and communications expertise, strong brand recognition, and a powerful nationwide network. As such, the ACLU of Vermont has a unique role in Vermont, and we are well-positioned to deploy a strategic, integrated approach to protecting and advancing our rights and liberties via our work in the courts, by influencing policymakers, and through grassroots relationship-building and mobilization.

# *Strategic Priorities*

These four priorities are designed to build on the rich history and recent direction of the ACLU of Vermont as well as the shared values and traditions of Vermont itself to overcome the unprecedented threats facing our state and country, including deep-seated racial and economic injustice and sustained attacks on democratic norms, institutions, and values.

With this strategic framework, in collaboration with the countless community partners and individuals on whom our success depends, we will work together towards a brighter future for Vermont and the country at large.





# *Strategic Pillar I*

## Position Vermont at the Vanguard of Civil Liberties

This priority will draw on the most liberatory state traditions and history to ensure Vermont is a safe haven for individuals experiencing deprivation of their rights elsewhere, and a model for other states at the vanguard of advancing and protecting civil rights and civil liberties from attack.

- In our litigation, we will advance **novel and established state constitutional and statutory rights and protections**, shifting federal claims to a more defensive posture as the federal courts become increasingly hostile to new and established rights and liberties. We will increase our focus on the **Vermont Supreme Court's docket**, via direct participation as well as more coordinated **strategic advising** and regular use of **amicus briefs** in cases presenting important civil liberties questions.
- In coordination with the nationwide ACLU, we will introduce and/or help to advance **model legislation** annually that would make Vermont among the first states in the nation in protecting or advancing a priority civil rights or civil liberties issue.
- We will launch an **educational campaign** to ground our work in Vermont's past, present, and future as an incubator for civil rights and civil liberties and a leader in resisting federal overreach. We will highlight the unique qualities of Vermont's state constitution, emphasizing Vermont's tradition of leadership in legal and policy reforms, while also acknowledging where Vermont's has not fulfilled its promises, particularly with regard to racial and economic justice and the rights of marginalized communities.



## *Strategic Pillar II*

# Advance a Positive Vision of Liberty that Centers Economic Justice

This priority reflects a renewed emphasis on economic justice as a core civil liberties issue, and highlights the link between economic conditions and democracy. We seek to shift mindsets and systems from a deficit or austerity framework to one of abundance and shared responsibility—and to create the sense that such a shift is not just possible, but inevitable and central to a full conception of liberty. While we continue to respond to a range of injustices, we must simultaneously increase our emphasis on “upstream” interventions that help communities thrive, by seeking to ensure that Vermonters’ basic needs are met.

- In the next five years, we will advance **at least two proactive, integrated advocacy campaigns** that focus on making a vision of positive rights a reality. Drawing inspiration from groundbreaking ACLU victories like *Brigham v. State* and the Reproductive Liberty Amendment, we will leverage our organization-wide talent and resources to change institutional systems for the better. We will advance at least one campaign focused on economic justice and/or the state’s responsibility for meeting people’s basic needs.
- In our messaging, we will consistently point to and articulate the **systemic root causes** of rights violations unfolding around us, the disproportionate impact on people of color, as well as the systems-level interventions and solutions that could address them.





# *Strategic Pillar III*

## Cultivate Vermont's Civil Liberties Ecosystem

Through this priority we seek to increase external engagement across our programs, engaging in communities and coalitions statewide. By investing in partnerships and programming that grow our supporter base, we will deepen and broaden our community engagement so that more of our issues and framing saturate and take root throughout Vermont.

- Our development program will increase year-over-year the number of **in-person and virtual donor and prospect meetings**; expand our network through targeted engagement, including **sponsorships and events**; and develop and implement a **community-centric fundraising plan**.
- Board members will support development efforts by making introductions within their networks, hosting fundraising events, and/or collaborating on matching gift challenges.
- Our communication program will track annual progress on **expanding our network of partners and supporters**, including use of third-party validators in external messaging, and pursue new bases of prospective supporters (e.g., college campuses) to engage in our advocacy and/or development pipelines.
- Our advocacy program will establish a consistent **system for integrating partners into policy planning**; for building out and engaging a diverse list of **allies, community members, and other potential committee witnesses** across issue areas; and for developing and maintaining **relationships with more legislators and policymakers**.
- Our legal program will **take a leadership role in regular strategy meetings** with partners in the legal community and seek additional opportunities to engage the legal community more broadly.



# *Strategic Pillar IV*

## Living Our Values: Aligning Internal and External Commitments

This priority aims to further align our internal organizational systems and structures with our external values, building upon our existing equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB) policies and commitments towards more equitable, inclusive, and integrated ways of doing our work. We know the world that we envision “out there” is possible because we are building it here.

- We will refine our systems for legal case selection, advocacy campaign involvement, and high-level public communication planning to foster **more intentionality and transparency for all our colleagues**.
- We will invest in training resources and learning opportunities in service of **anti-racism as a practice and a lens** through which all of our work is intended to be done. We will examine our current practices and invest in the resources needed to develop a framework that holds us accountable to challenging the characteristics of white supremacy culture in our work and ways of operating.
- We will **further develop organizational systems and structures** that foster psychological safety and belonging. That includes adopting technologies and systems for democratizing access to information; developing clear systems for communicating modes of decision making; systematizing a culture of giving and receiving feedback; and adopting a restorative practices framework.
- We will invest in our **paid internship program**, enhance our outreach systems to reach diverse candidates, and diversify position types across all program areas.
- We will continue to strive for **compensation packages** that are in the top tier of affiliates in our budget range.
- We will enhance our systems for hiring, retaining, and promoting a **diverse Board and staff**, and evaluate and track our progress.



# Conclusion

This strategic plan provides a roadmap for the ACLU to defend the freedoms and advance the values of everyone who calls Vermont home.

We know that this is an especially challenging time for our state and our country, but there are ample grounds for hope—not least of which is the determination of the ACLU of Vermont community to show up for the rights, dignity, and well-being of our neighbors, consistent with our shared values of compassion, kindness, and mutual support.



# *Appendix A*

## **SUMMARY OF 2020-2024 STRATEGIC PLAN**

At the time the ACLU of Vermont adopted its last strategic plan, for 2020-2024, the organization had become “a very different organization from what it was five years ago—bigger, more diverse, more professional, and better resourced.”

Following a dramatic increase in supporters and staff in the wake of the 2016 election, many changes “[had] yet to be fully incorporated and reflected in the daily work and impact of the statewide organization.” The plan stated, “Looking ahead, for all these positive developments, we face tremendous challenges—not least an increasingly hostile federal judiciary headed by a far-right Supreme Court, a corrupted political and economic system, and systemic oppression in all its forms. We recognize the urgent need to further increase our impact and to engage more people in the political process to demand change if we are to overcome these challenges in Vermont and beyond.”

The plan identified six priorities: advance bold, ambitious legal and policy reforms; leverage integrated advocacy to maximize our impact; increase our electoral engagement; incorporate equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB) goals and values into our internal and external work; enhance internal operations and systems; and sustain our capacity through fundraising.

Over five years, we achieved remarkable progress on those priorities, with numerous, real-world impacts and measurable outcomes. It is also noteworthy that we made that progress in the context of profound and historic shocks that began in the months immediately following the adoption of our last plan. At the same time, we recognize there is much more to be done in each of these areas.

# *Appendix B*

## **SUMMARY OF PLANNING PROCESS**

We launched the planning process in the fall of 2023. After designing the structure, staffing, and timeline, our Board and staff participated in multiple facilitated sessions on organizational vision, strengths, and opportunities. The input collected in these sessions formed the basis for our values statement, theory of change, and four strategic priorities.

To further inform our planning and test our assumptions, all of our programs connected with a broad and diverse range of external stakeholders to ask about their perceptions, priorities, and experiences with the ACLU. This outreach included a survey sent to our full e-mail list, as well as interviews with various partners and constituents—clients, co-counsel, volunteers, donors, coalition members, government agencies, and journalists, among others.

After being finalized and approved by our Board of Directors, this plan will be shared across multiple channels, with our supporters, the stakeholders we consulted in the strategic planning process, and other valued members of the ACLU Vermont community.

We are profoundly grateful to everyone who contributed to the ACLU of Vermont's 2025-2029 Strategic Plan and look forward to working with our partners and community members to advance the goals, vision, and values we have articulated together.