

# Liberty

ACLU OF NORTH CAROLINA NEWSLETTER FALL 2025

WE THE  
PEOPLE  
DARE  
TO CREATE  
A MORE  
PERFECT  
UNION

## Defending Freedom & Democracy

**W**hen lawmakers choose punishment and partisanship over compassion and justice, our freedom erodes and our democracy weakens. In North Carolina, the troubling trend of criminalizing

constitutionally protected speech, dissent, and historically marginalized communities has created conditions in which we fail to address the root causes of inequity and instead silence the community voices that

are instrumental in shaping justice-centered policies.

In early October, Governor Josh Stein signed HB307 into law, which increases punitive measures by limiting judicial discretion and mandating involuntary mental health evaluations for certain defendants. This bill does nothing to address the root causes of public safety issues or prevent crime before it happens,

**Democracy depends on our collective courage to speak out, to dissent, and to stand together in defense of our most fundamental rights.**



leading us to call it the “Do Nothing for Safety Act.” We know there are more effective alternatives to these measures. Eighty percent of North Carolina voters say real safety comes from affordable housing, mental health care, and addiction treatment — not simply jailing people. When resources are directed toward strong community support programs, we can better meet needs such as mental health care and create real pathways to safety.

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# Liberty

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## From the Executive Director



## Rooted in Resilience Amid Turbulence

Reflecting on their Southern upbringing in Durham, human rights activist, lawyer, and author Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray wrote: "...true emancipation lies in the acceptance of the whole past, in deriving strength from all my roots, in facing up to the degradation as well as the dignity of my ancestors."

At the ACLU-NC, we are celebrating 60 years of fighting for justice in the courts, legislature, and communities to protect the rights of North Carolinians. Yet, this celebration comes at a time of turbulence and immense threats to our democracy. There is no shortage of examples. State lawmakers are advancing harmful bills that increase punitive responses to crime without addressing root causes like inadequate mental health services. They redrew congressional maps to dilute the voting power of Black communities while passing bills that target immigrant communities and their neighbors, heightening fear through unchecked raids, racial profiling, and reduced protections. University administrators are suppressing protected political speech, often in alignment with state and federal agendas. Our state mirrors the federal government's anti-democratic and anti-civil liberties shift, evident in unauthorized National Guard deployments, immigration enforcement without due process, and mass student visa revocations with limited explanation.

Our current struggles are not disconnected from the past — they echo it. The South, often viewed through the lens of racial animosity, is also a site of powerful resistance and joy. It is a place where our ancestors fought not only to survive but to thrive. To be rooted in resilience is to refuse to obey unjust and undemocratic actions, not just because it is right, but because it is our legacy. Our roots, our whole past, are a sustaining life force in the present, driving us forward in the ongoing struggle to realize the democracy our ancestors envisioned and labored to build.

Our work relies on the dedication of our members, community partners, supporters, and staff who show up and remain deeply committed to the defense of civil liberties. This newsletter captures how resilience continues to grow stronger amid today's threats to democracy. I invite you to join us in deepening these Southern roots of resilience.

Toward true liberation,

Chantal Stevens  
Executive Director  
American Civil Liberties of North Carolina





# Bridging Struggles & Advancing Justice for 60 years

**O**n October 1, ACLU Board President Deborah Archer visited Durham to discuss her new book, *Dividing Lines: How Transportation Infrastructure Reinforces Racial Inequality*. In the book, Deborah examines how, even after the fall of Jim Crow, highways, roads, and transit systems continue to operate as tools of segregation strategically designed to isolate

Black communities and perpetuate inequality. Drawing connections across U.S. cities, she highlights the persistent structural divides embedded in our built environment. The conversation was especially resonant in Durham, where legacies of economic displacement and infrastructure-driven erasure continue to shape the city's landscape.

Deborah was joined by Dr. Henry McKoy, founder of Hayti Reborn, who works to preserve Hayti's history, protect residents from gentrification, and promote Black-owned businesses, and Donna Carrington, Executive Director of the Community Empowerment Fund, a Durham-based organization advancing housing stability, financial security, and economic opportunity. Our Executive Director, Chantal Stevens moderated the discussion.



Deborah's visit came just weeks before our 60th Anniversary Hootenanny Celebration on November 13, which brought together more than 300 community members and leaders for an evening of connection and reflection. A hootenanny is a traditional Southern gathering — an informal, spirited mix of live music, storytelling, and community. During the celebration, we honored five distinguished individuals whose tireless work has advanced civil liberties and held an auction featuring three artworks by local artists.

This year, we hosted seven gatherings across North Carolina — from Asheville to Charlotte — celebrating our 60th anniversary and bringing together more than 600 people. These gatherings embodied what it means to bridge struggles and advance justice. From examining the ways our communities have been divided to honoring the people who have fought to bring them together, these events reminded us that justice grows strongest when we show up, learn together, and turn shared struggle into shared strength. ■

# Rallying to Protect Rights in North Carolina

**O**n June 18, the ACLU-NC, alongside Carolina Migrant Network, El Pueblo, Education Justice Alliance, Moms Rising, and Muslim Women For, organized an emergency rally at the North Carolina Governor's Mansion to demand Governor Josh Stein veto two dangerous anti-immigrant bills, HB318 and SB153. This effort built on prior immigrant rights advocacy with the same partners during Immigrant Rights Advocacy Day in May, which included an in-person gathering at the North Carolina General Assembly and a letter to Governor Stein signed by over 75 organizations.

These bills aim to expand cruel immigration enforcement activities in the state by expanding local law enforcement cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), blurring jurisdictional lines and increasing surveillance of immigrant communities. As the veto deadline approached, over 100 people gathered to send a clear message: no ICE tearing apart our communities. Governor Stein heeded the voice of the people and vetoed these harmful bills, along with others targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion, and clean energy. In partnership with Carolina Migrant Network, the Hispanic Federation, and NC Black & Brown Policy Network, our communities showed up again at Freedom Park on July 21 to urge the NCGA to sustain these vetoes. While many of the Governor's vetoes were ultimately overridden, including HB318, the people

power that pushed him to act — and the fact that SB153 has not been overridden yet — serve as powerful reminders that community-rooted and coordinated public pressure can influence outcomes and block harmful legislation.

Finally, on October 18, immense people power was on display once again as thousands participated in the No Kings rallies across North Carolina, condemning President Trump and his administration's escalating abuses of power. Millions took to the streets nationwide. Our team joined rallies in Raleigh, Charlotte, and Durham, distributing pocket Constitutions and signs, while informing participants about their protest rights. We look forward to channeling this energy into long-term mobilization through volunteer opportunities and supporting targeted actions led by labor and community organizations. These actions remind us that our power is stronger when it is rooted in resilience, grounded in community, and sustained by the courage to challenge injustice at every turn. ■

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## Power & Purpose Events

**T**he “Power & Purpose Training” by the ACLU, in partnership with the Rise4Freedom Coalition, is a no-cost, one-day, in-person activist education training designed to equip participants with the real-world skills of community organizing, including holding persuasive conversations, building genuine connections, and mobilizing their communities for impact. Two sessions were held in North Carolina, bringing together more than 150 people: one in Durham

on August 2 and another in Charlotte on August 23. From June to November, 12 trainings took place across the country, preparing hundreds of people to take bold action to defend our rights, our freedoms, and our democracy. In Charlotte and Durham, participants also learned about key issues that will drive ACLU-NC’s midterm electoral



campaign work as we launch our 12-month electoral strategy efforts. Together, we are building momentum, power, and purpose. ■

## Legal Developments: Access, Rights, and Oversight

**O**ur legal team has remained steadfast amid ongoing attacks on our democracy, using the courts as a powerful instrument of resistance to unjust policies. This year, our work has centered on three core themes: government accountability, care for people in custody, and free speech and association.

*No government official or institution is above the law.* On October 1, we joined the ACLU of Virginia and the ACLU to sue ICE. Our lawsuit demands that ICE comply with the Freedom of Information Act and release records about plans to expand immigration detention around Richmond, including potential growth in North Carolina and amid reports of a for-profit prison in Winton with a record of civil rights abuses being reopened. This case advances a nationwide effort to expose ICE’s expansion, part of the Trump administration’s stated goal of deporting 11 million immigrants from the U.S. It joins over 80 ACLU lawsuits nationwide challenging the administration’s anti-civil liberties agenda.

By forcing transparency, we hold ICE accountable to the communities it targets and the taxpayers who fund its actions.

*No one should be denied dignity or care while in government custody.* On September 29, we filed suit on behalf of Pamela Chambers, an incarcerated woman denied medically necessary surgery to restore her vision. In 2022, she was

scheduled to have cataracts removed from both eyes. After the first eye was corrected, the second surgery was denied by the prison medical director due to an apparent policy limiting cataract removal to one per incarcerated individual, regardless of their medical needs. She now suffers from blindness in one eye, double vision, poor depth perception, and an increased risk of falling.

Transparency is also critical in protecting the rights of vulnerable incarcerated individuals. For example, all state court clerks are required by law to maintain a docket of individuals deemed “Incapable to Proceed” (ITP), meaning people unable to stand trial due to mental health or cognitive disabilities. These dockets ensure that individuals with serious mental health conditions do not simply get lost in the system.

Over the past two years, we submitted seven public records requests to counties statewide seeking ITP dockets. New Hanover County repeatedly failed to respond to these requests. So, we took action and filed suit to enforce North Carolina’s public records law. Less than 24 hours later, the county released the long-withheld dockets.

This win builds on our broader work to protect incarcerated people with mental health needs. Last year, we sued the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services for extreme delays in evaluating and treating people found ITP. This case is ongoing. These systemic failures deepen injustice for people who most need care, not punishment.

*No university should suppress free speech.* On October 2, we sent a letter to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill demanding the reinstatement of Professor Dwayne Dixon, who was placed on administrative leave following unfounded allegations about his political associations made by an outside activist. (see p. 7 for an update on the Professor Dixon’s story) ■

# Rising Together: Take a Look

Over the past few months, we've had a powerful time celebrating how deeply our work is rooted in resilience through a series of 60th-anniversary events across the state, from gatherings in Charlotte and Asheville to a special commemorative Hootenanny in Durham, NC.. At each stop, we were honored to recognize community members advancing justice, reflect on our shared legacy, and hear inspiring remarks from local and national leaders, including ACLU Executive Director Anthony Romero. We were also excited to showcase the creativity of North Carolina's vibrant arts community through a silent auction featuring works from local artists whose pieces speak to themes of freedom, identity, and belonging. Most of all, we were grateful for the chance to come together in a spirit of determination, joy, and collective power, surrounded by the beautiful community that continues to propel this movement forward. ■



# Defending Freedom & Democracy

*continued from page 1*

Across North Carolina, our cities are already developing these much-needed solutions.

Back in April, Executive Director Chantal Stevens and Policy Counsel Reighlah Collins represented our team at ACLU Safety Week in Washington, D.C., where they advocated against proposed federal cuts to public safety programs, including domestic violence prevention and mental health and substance use services. Safety Week included press conferences and direct outreach to legislators in support of two bills that prioritize addressing the root causes of public safety concerns over punitive measures, as well as an appropriations bill that reflects the values and needs of communities across the country. These included the Driving for Opportunity Act, which would reform federal law so states are not penalized for declining to suspend driver's licenses for drug offenses and would instead incentivize states to end suspensions for unpaid fines and fees, and the Mental Health Justice Act, which would help communities establish mental health first responder units to reduce violence against individuals with mental illness, substance use disorder, and intellectual or developmental disabilities.

Our ACLU-NC representatives highlighted the success of programs like Durham's HEART (Holistic Empathetic Assistance Response Team) and Raleigh's CARES (Crisis Alternative Response for Empathy and Support). These examples strengthen our advocacy by showing that

community-informed alternatives can truly meet people's needs, especially those with mental health or other support needs, while promoting real safety and care.

These local innovations stand in stark contrast to a growing movement by those in power to silence voices, restrict rights, and control narratives. Whether through laws that punish rather than heal or policies that suppress rather than engage, the result is the same: our democracy weakens when fear replaces freedom. This pattern extends beyond the criminal legal system and into our

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public institutions, including our universities, where free expression and dissent are increasingly under attack.

To address these urgent threats, we sent an open letter on October 23 to the leaders of public colleges and universities, urging them to reverse policies that undermine constitutionally protected rights to freedom of speech and association. The letter also reminded university leaders of their fundamental responsibilities to safeguard free inquiry and expression for all. This comes after UNC Chapel Hill administrators placed Professor Dwayne Dixon on administrative leave for unfounded claims about his association with a political group. During his leave, Professor Dixon faced unconstitutional restrictions on speech, including prohibitions on

communicating with students and staff without dean approval. We sent a letter threatening legal action and highlighting the First Amendment violations, which was part of a broader effort that included a petition with over 900 signatures and a campus rally in support of Professor Dixon. UNC-CH ultimately acknowledged there was no evidence of wrongdoing and reinstated him, illustrating the power of coordinated advocacy in defending free speech and academic freedom..

From the legislature to the classroom, we are witnessing the same dangerous impulse: to control, punish, and suppress rather than to listen, support, and protect. This was clear in October, when lawmakers rushed a mid-decade congressional map redrawing to dismantle NC Congressional District 1, shifting thousands of Black voters as punishment for how they voted in 2024 and to make the 2026 midterms less competitive. Now, we are suing alongside voters and pro-democracy groups to stop this retaliatory redistricting. These incidents represent a growing erosion of civil liberties and underscore the urgent need to defend free speech as essential to a functioning democracy.

The fight for democracy is not abstract. It is happening here in North Carolina. Whether opposing punitive laws like HB307 or defending the rights of students and faculty to speak freely, we remain steadfast in our commitment to justice, equality, and freedom for all. Democracy depends on our collective courage to speak out, to dissent, and to stand together in defense of our most fundamental rights. ■



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## BUILDING THE WORLD WE WANT TO SEE



The ACLU of North Carolina uses an integrated advocacy approach to defend and advance civil rights and civil liberties in our state. Our team of litigation, lobbying, organizing, communications, and administrative professionals work across teams and with community partners to earn victories on some of today's most vital issues.

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