



# NEW YORK CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION ANNUAL REPORT 2022

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# MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



In the past year we faced some dark moments in our pursuit of freedom, equality, and justice for all. Racism and fascism remain on the rise, along with hate-fueled acts of violence. The right-wing Supreme Court decimated the constitutional protections of *Roe v. Wade*, then undermined popular common-sense gun regulations. Systemic inequality, anti-democratic assaults on voting rights and election integrity, and attacks on LGBTQ+ rights persist.

Worrying about the future of our democracy and the further erosion of fundamental rights by a radical right-wing judiciary is realistic. But we have a large supply of resilience and creative strategizing to draw on, and we will use the formidable momentum we've gained in a tremendously disruptive year to protect and advance the rights of New Yorkers for years to come. The fight is never easy, yet the NYCLU always stands strong to defend democracy and advance the cause of liberty. This year, we achieved some key successes for the people of New York, especially for those most at risk.

Throughout this report, you'll read about our many important legal, legislative, and organizing victories, meet some of our extraordinary partners and staff, and get a look at our ambitious plans for 2023.

In 2022, we led the nation in passing the state's **John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act**, now the strongest state-level voting protection in the country. The bill increases language assistance, strengthens protections against voter intimidation, enhances the transparency of critical voting data, and, most importantly, accelerates the inclusion of voting populations that have historically been denied an equal opportunity to participate in the political process.

In a similarly extraordinary accomplishment, we twice won legislative passage of the **Equal Rights Amendment**, which will literally put abortion on the ballot in 2024. If approved by the voters, the ERA will not only protect abortion rights; it will enshrine critical new anti-discrimination protections in our state constitution.

A major portion of the NYCLU-backed **SIGH Act**, which prohibits the construction of new schools near major polluting roadways, was passed (though disappointingly vetoed by the Governor due to pressure from New York City).

We filed a **class-action lawsuit** challenging the permanent exclusion of people with felony convictions from serving on juries in Manhattan and we **protected the right** of people in jails to receive treatment for Opioid Use Disorder. As part of our campaign for greater law enforcement transparency, we **filed lawsuits** against several police departments for unlawfully withholding misconduct records they are required to disclose and we worked proactively to affirm and expand our right to vote ahead of the crucial midterms in the fall.

After a decade-plus-long campaign, we finally overturned a relic of the Jim Crow era and **won overtime pay for farmworkers**. We also persuaded the courts to order due process fixes for immigrants.

And finally, we further developed the NYCLU's first Artist Ambassador Program to strengthen the partnership between NYCLU and artists in furthering civil rights and liberties.

These victories strengthen New York as a beacon of democracy and fairness, a model for state progress, and a safe haven for people across the country.

In the coming year, continuing our strategic work to promote equality, strengthen democracy, pursue justice, and protect privacy and autonomy, we will:

- Launch a major campaign to educate and mobilize voters to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in November 2024.
- Renew our campaign to expand and pass the SIGH Act to protect students across the state by prohibiting the construction of new schools near major roadways.

Pressure state lawmakers to protect and advance reproductive justice by enacting additional elements of our **Abortion Access Roadmap**. Though safe abortion care remains well protected in our state, we must expand meaningful access for the many people across the country who will have to turn to states like ours to receive the vital care they need.

- File additional lawsuits to hold law enforcement accountable.
- Champion the housing movement via the Good Cause Eviction bill, right-to-counsel protections, and other measures that support unhoused and rent-burdened New Yorkers.

Advocate for passage of the **Protect Our Privacy Act**, which would impose limitations on the use of drones for law enforcement purposes, prohibit drone surveillance of protests, and set rules for public access, retention, and deletion of drone-collected data.

We must fight to defend and expand civil rights and civil liberties every day, with all means, however daunting the challenges. Many more victories for criminal legal system reform, racial justice, voter protection, and reproductive rights lie before us if we keep the faith and remember that we go to battle not just for ourselves but for all those left vulnerable by a broken system. A fairer, more inclusive New York is possible because of our combined strength, passion, and ingenuity.

We are grateful for your commitment to advancing the work that brings us ever closer to true, lasting equality.

Onward,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donna Lieberman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Donna Lieberman

# A TRIUMPHANT YEAR IN REVIEW

Amid the ongoing dangers posed by anti-democracy forces and a Supreme Court disastrously hostile to our fundamental rights, the NYCLU brought resilience and persistence to our efforts to protect and expand civil rights and civil liberties this year. We made progress in police reform, labor rights, environmental justice, LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive freedom, and health care access for vulnerable New Yorkers. These formidable victories laid the groundwork for future advances on issues essential to the lives and rights of the people of New York.

## Some of our major wins and campaigns from 2022 include:



### We advocated for voting rights, labor equality, and environmental justice:

In the week before the pivotal midterm elections, the NYCLU and our partners delivered crucial oral arguments in state appellate court that resulted in dismissal of a lawsuit designed to **undermine absentee voting** in a win against vote suppression.

After a years-long campaign, the state Department of Labor finally set the **farmworker overtime threshold** to reduce to 40 hours over the next ten years, ending a racist loophole that denied wage fairness to generations of Black and Brown farmworkers.

As part of our ongoing environmental justice project in Syracuse, we moved to **file an amicus brief** challenging a lawsuit that seeks to stop the demolition of a crumbling portion of the I-81 viaduct. We have worked with impacted residents who are advocating that the aging viaduct be removed in favor of a new Community Grid that better serves the community.

The legislature passed a major portion of the **Students Impacted by Gross Highways (SIGH)** Act, which would prohibit the building of schools within 500 feet of a highway, where air pollution is amplified; though the governor vetoed the bill, our Environmental Justice Project will continue the fight to pass the measure and get it signed, to protect children's health.



### We achieved stronger protections for reproductive freedom, LGBTQ rights, and the sexual health of minors:

Following the Supreme Court's leaked draft opinion overturning *Roe v. Wade*, we and our partners released an **Abortion Access Roadmap** detailing how we can protect pregnant people in the state constitution, fund abortion access, and increase access to care.

The legislature twice passed the **Equal Rights Amendment**, setting it up for ratification by the voters in November 2024.

We **supported a bill** that would require public and charter schools to teach age-appropriate, medically accurate, inclusive sex education in grades K-12.

We **filed suit in Broome County** to guarantee greater protections for trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming individuals in custody so they are no longer subjected to discrimination, abuse, and denial of medical care.

We **supported a bill** that would enable vulnerable homeless and runaway youth to access health care without undue burden.



### We took legal action on behalf of police accountability and the rights of the incarcerated:

As part of our statewide campaign for greater law enforcement transparency, we continued to file lawsuits against police departments across the state, including the **New York State Police** and the **Suffolk Police Department**, for unlawfully withholding misconduct records they are required to disclose following the repeal of Civil Rights Law 50-a in June 2020.

An appellate court **ruled in our favor** in our cases against the Syracuse and Rochester Police Departments, requiring that they disclose requested disciplinary records to the public, and we **appealed a ruling** from earlier in the year that permitted the Nassau County Police Department to continue withholding complaint records created before 50-a's repeal.

In a nationwide first, our **class action lawsuit** resulted in a court order preliminarily blocking the Jefferson County Correctional Facility from denying prescribed medication for Opioid Use Disorder to those in custody.



**Seek Justice:** We filed 72 lawsuits and amicus briefs in support of civil liberties, and reviewed 1,054 legal requests for referral or further investigation.

**Stand United:** We brought together 75,000 members and donors with 10,500 volunteers across New York's 62 counties.

**Take Action:** We rallied 329,570 e-activists, 117,600 social media followers, and 888 volunteers to get involved through more than 42 opportunities for action — including 74 protests monitored by 252 NYCLU-trained protest monitors.

# PROTECT & STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY



# Making Voting More Equitable for All New Yorkers

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Voting is essential to a functioning democracy, yet New York has a notorious history and ongoing record of discrimination against racial, ethnic, and language minority groups when it comes to the ballot box. The result is a disturbing gap between white New Yorkers and residents of color in political participation and elected representation. From voter intimidation and gerrymandering to inaccessible poll sites and limited access to language assistance, too many obstacles prevent the robust voter registration and turnout rates that would make our state thrive. The NYCLU has long fought for improvements to the policies, processes, and practices that determine how New Yorkers vote — striving to implement a system that makes voting easy, accessible, and equitable for everyone.

Amid nationwide efforts to restrict voting, inaction at the federal level, and a judiciary that has gutted the federal Voting Rights Act, New York took a huge step in June toward making elections fairer and more equitable with passage of the **John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act** — one of the strongest and most comprehensive state voting rights laws in the country. It cements New York's status as a pro-democracy leader in promoting equal access to the ballot box, providing the framework for other states to take similar action. Most crucially, the bill ensures that communities historically denied an equal opportunity to participate in the political process can cast a meaningful ballot without obstruction, interference, or discrimination. As a result, our governing bodies will include elected officials who truly represent those communities' interests.

The Voting Rights Act's comprehensive framework comprises enhanced legal tools to fight voter suppression and racial vote dilution, puts the burden on authorities to avoid discrimination rather than on voters to find and fight it, provides expanded language assistance to limited-English-proficient voters, and protects against voter deception and obstruction. The bill goes even further, instructing the courts to interpret the law in ways that make sure qualified voters can cast ballots and have them counted whenever possible, and creates a central public repository for election and demographic data to promote transparency and evidence-based best practices for elections.

The NYCLU was instrumental in supporting the bill's drafting and devoted significant resources to advocating for its passage. We educated New

Yorkers about the need for these strong voting rights protections, testified in support of the bill, and co-led a letter sent to the governor, speaker, and majority leader signed by more than 70 organizations urging the legislation's passage. We mobilized New Yorkers through phone banking, virtual town halls, a lobbying workshop, and rallies — and through digital organizing and our social media platforms we encouraged thousands of supporters to reach out to their elected officials to promote the bill.

Now, we do the hard work of implementing the Voting Rights Act's great promise while ensuring that its protections remain strong in the face of any efforts to dilute their power. We will challenge racial gerrymandering wherever we see it, as well as any actions intended to suppress the vote or disenfranchise minority voters. We will expand language assistance and polling access while holding election authorities and legislators to account for protecting the bill's substance. And we will ensure New Yorkers understand the new protections we've fought for and know their rights in the face of voter suppression. Voting is our most sacred franchise and must be defended and strengthened. After all, it is the right we exercise to protect all others.

**In the lead-up to the midterm elections, we published a comprehensive **Voter Guide** detailing key information about voter registration, polling locations, absentee voting, and voting rights.**



Read more about our many voting protection efforts and how you can get involved by visiting [www.nyclu.org/en/issues/voting](http://www.nyclu.org/en/issues/voting)

# Enshrining Equal Rights for All New Yorkers

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The fight for equality is never fully won, and the Supreme Court’s indefensible ruling in June eviscerating the fundamental rights enshrined in *Roe v. Wade* harshly underlined this painful truth. In the face of such a disappointing outcome, the NYCLU resolutely met the moment in our mission to advance equality, defend reproductive rights, and protect against all forms of discrimination. Following the leaked draft opinion overturning *Roe* in May, we and our partners compiled and released an **Abortion Access Roadmap** detailing how we can protect pregnant people in the state constitution, fund abortion access, increase hospital transparency and access to care, and protect providers, helpers, and patients. A major plank of the roadmap is passage of the **Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)**, which would enshrine abortion rights in our state constitution, among other

key advances. This achievement has long been a priority of the NYCLU, and the legislative portion of our campaign was ultimately successful, representing a tremendous victory that we need New York voters to help get across the finish line.

While New York already has strong antidiscrimination statutes on the books, the state constitution remains inadequate in its protections. The ERA will go a long way toward fixing these failures. It prohibits discrimination by the government based on ethnicity, national origin, age, disability, and sex, including a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy and pregnancy outcomes. The ERA also protects against any government actions that would curtail reproductive autonomy or access to reproductive health care, and the amendment for the first time explicitly includes language to clarify that discrimination based on a person’s pregnancy or pregnancy outcome is sex discrimination. This distinction is crucial in the context of the high court’s gutting of *Roe* and subsequent nationwide efforts to criminalize people for various pregnancy outcomes, including abortions, miscarriages, or stillbirths.

Our state constitution requires all constitutional amendments to pass the legislature twice before giving the public the opportunity to vote on the measure. The NYCLU played a key role in organizing a campaign urging the legislature to pass the amendment in a special session in June and **then again** in January 2023 in its second consecutive session,

a critical hurdle that means the amendment can now officially be presented to New York voters in November 2024 for ratification. With true equality on the ballot, the NYCLU will continue its efforts to educate and energize voters so we can finish the work of enshrining constitutional protections to prohibit discrimination against groups that have been historically targeted — such as those with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, people of color, immigrants, women, and pregnant people.

The NYCLU has always fought to protect and advance LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and the rights of pregnant people, especially as discrimination and lost opportunities hit the most vulnerable New Yorkers the hardest. We cannot allow our state to be pulled backward by the forces of inequality and injustice. Our movement toward dignity for all must maintain its momentum, as there is much work yet to be done.

**Additionally, the NYCLU and its partners wrote letters to the governor and other administration officials in support of two bills: One would require public and charter schools to teach age-appropriate, medically accurate, inclusive **sex education** in grades K-12, and one would enable vulnerable homeless and runaway youth to more easily **access health care**.**



Read more about our efforts to promote reproductive rights and justice for all New Yorkers by visiting [www.nyclu.org/en/issues/reproductive-rights-and-justice](https://www.nyclu.org/en/issues/reproductive-rights-and-justice).



**NEW YORKERS  
FOR ABORTION  
ACCESS**

**NYCL**

**ON**

**Abortion is  
Health Care.**

**Abortion is  
Health Care.**

**HEALTHCARE  
IS A  
HUMAN RIGHT**

**PROTECT & PROMOTE  
EQUALITY**

**PLANNED  
PARENTHOOD**

# STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE



## Fighting for Jury Diversity in the Criminal Legal System

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Since its inception, our criminal legal system has perpetuated racial injustice. And the damaging collateral consequences of becoming ensnared by the system are extensive: Criminal records follow people for life, limiting job prospects, access to housing and benefits, and inhumane incarceration results in trauma. Black and Brown New Yorkers disproportionately bear the weight of this unfair system. Whether it's fighting for marijuana legalization, police transparency and accountability, or the rights of incarcerated people, the NYCLU works tirelessly to reduce the number of New Yorkers who are arrested and imprisoned, make sure everyone accused of a crime gets a fair trial, and ensure that the formerly incarcerated can re-engage fully with civic life.

In a case that's the first of its kind in the country, the NYCLU and the law firm Clarick Gueron Reisbaum in December filed a **class-action lawsuit** in federal district court in Manhattan challenging the permanent exclusion of people with felony convictions from serving on juries. New York has a statute that bars any person convicted of a felony from state jury service for life. Decades of racialized policing and prosecution targeting Black residents in Manhattan has resulted in the mass disenfranchisement of Black people—and Black men, in particular—from the jury pool. Our lawsuit asks the federal courts to invalidate the jury-disqualification scheme in Manhattan on the grounds that it violates the federal Constitution's ban on racial discrimination.

Our extensive analysis has uncovered that the state's jury-disqualification law has resulted in a jury system where approximately 25 percent of Black residents of Manhattan, who would otherwise be eligible for jury service, are disqualified — and nearly 40 percent of Black men are disqualified. By contrast, approximately three percent of otherwise-eligible residents who are not Black are disqualified from serving. While all of New York suffers from racialized policing and prosecution, Manhattan has the largest disparities in felony convictions between Black and white people of any county in the state: Between 2002 and 2019, Black people in Manhattan were convicted of felonies at a rate more than 21 times greater than white people.

Our lead plaintiff, Daudi Justin, is a Harlem resident and public defender who is himself disqualified from jury service because of a

2009 conviction for drug possession that today is classified as a misdemeanor. Mr. Justin's plight is a stark example of how this jury exclusion relegates too many Black New Yorkers to second-class citizenship. Jury panels lacking in diversity and experience prevent many of the accused from being judged by a jury of their peers and receiving a fair trial — while at the same time denying many the opportunity to fully participate in the democratic process. Additionally, the inclusion of the perspectives of jurors with firsthand experience of the criminal legal system is essential to its fair application.

The jury box holds law enforcement and the courts accountable and the suppression of jury diversity undermines public confidence in the justice system. Diversity in jury pools is fundamental to applying justice equally. A jury system that underrepresents Black New Yorkers becomes a self-perpetuating cycle that sends more Black New Yorkers to jail. Restoring the right of people with felony convictions to serve on juries is a racial justice imperative.

In conjunction with the Justin v. Tingling lawsuit, the NYCLU is legislatively pushing to change the jury disqualification statute and engaging in a statewide education and advocacy campaign on the civil consequences of criminal convictions in New York and their disproportionate impact on communities of color. Through workshops, community engagement, and coalition building, we are working in our communities to make sure that New Yorkers with felony convictions know their rights.

**As part of our statewide campaign for greater law enforcement transparency, we filed lawsuits against the New York State Police and the Suffolk Police Department for unlawfully withholding misconduct records they are required to disclose following the recent repeal of Civil Rights Law 50-a.**



Read more about our efforts to secure due process and justice for all New Yorkers by visiting [www.nyclu.org/en/issues/due-process-and-justice](http://www.nyclu.org/en/issues/due-process-and-justice)

# Curtailing the Unregulated Use of Drones

New York is already an over-surveilled state but new technology employed by both government entities and private companies threatens to erode our right to privacy even further. Police departments across the state use military-grade surveillance equipment to spy on New Yorkers. Invasive technologies such as facial recognition, predictive policing, and cellphone-spying devices are deployed often without the public's knowledge or consent. New Yorkers are increasingly targeted for their activism, and personal biometric information is collected by law enforcement and housed in databases without substantive oversight. This surveillance free-for-all inevitably has a more damaging impact on communities of color and other populations that already face bias and discrimination.

Technological innovation has always outpaced privacy protections, which is why the NYCLU is perpetually working to expose and curtail

excessive use of surveillance. In November, the NYCLU published a comprehensive report, **“Prying Eyes: Government Drone Data Across New York State,”** based on data obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, that paints a disturbing picture of the accelerated use of drones by government agencies. Key findings include:

- There are 530 active drone registrations by 85 different government entities across the state and most—62 percent—are operated by law enforcement agencies.
- The vast majority of these drones—86 percent—are made by DJI, a company the U.S. government added to its economic blacklist for allegedly raising national security concerns and enabling human rights abuses.
- There has been rapid growth in drone use in New York in recent years. In 2020 alone, 200 government drones were registered and in just the first half of 2022, another 79 drones were added. The 2022 state budget includes **\$20 million for advanced surveillance technologies**, including drones, for local law enforcement agencies without limitations and oversight.
- Drones can be equipped with biometric surveillance capabilities, object recognition, thermal imaging, autonomous flying, and even microphones sensitive enough to hear personal conversations.
- Many of the drones being deployed by police departments have the capacity to be weaponized.

The dangers posed by these incredibly powerful spying devices cannot be overstated. They're being used with almost no regulation or public oversight detailing how or when drones are used, what type of information they collect, where that information is stored, and who has access to it. The NYCLU supports the **Protect Our Privacy Act** (S675/A3311), which would impose limitations on the use of drones for law enforcement purposes; prohibit drone surveillance of protests, demonstrations, concerts, and other activities protected by the First Amendment; and require a search warrant before a drone is used in a police investigation. The proposed bill would also prohibit drones from using facial recognition software, weapons, or crowd-control devices, and would set rules for public access, retention, and deletion of drone-collected data.

The proliferation of drone use endangers New Yorkers' privacy and safety, further creating a society in which our every move is monitored, tracked, recorded, and scrutinized by the authorities. It is essential that we continue pushing back against these attacks on our civil liberties.

**A November episode of the NYCLU's Rights This Way podcast focuses on New York's surveillance state, including the use of facial recognition technology in schools, the proliferation of police drones, and the dangers of digital dragnet warrants.**



Read more on our efforts to protect liberty in the face of technological innovation by visiting [www.nyclu.org/en/issues/liberty-and-technology](https://www.nyclu.org/en/issues/liberty-and-technology)

# PROTECT PRIVACY & AUTONOMY



# Harnessing the Collective Power of the NYCLU

## AN INTERVIEW WITH AMREETA MATHAI, DIRECTOR OF STRATEGY AND PROGRAM INTEGRATION AT THE NYCLU

The NYCLU is simultaneously fighting on several fronts to protect and expand the civil rights and civil liberties of New Yorkers. From reproductive rights and education equity to voting rights and criminal legal reform, LGBTQ+ equality, and racial justice, we bring a combined strength born of our robust legal, communications, policy advocacy, and organizing teams. The task of coordinating and amplifying this collective power to achieve our strategic priorities has been placed in the talented hands of our new director of strategy and program integration, Amreeta Mathai, who joined the NYCLU in November.

For more than a decade, Amreeta has been in the trenches representing clients in a variety of legal proceedings stemming from interactions with the criminal justice system—everything from immigration defense to eviction proceedings, employment hearings, and family matters. She has clerked for a district judge in New Orleans, worked as a team leader and staff attorney in the Civil Action Practice at the Bronx Defenders, and been a staff attorney with ACLU's Racial Justice Program, where she specialized in debtors' prison and indigent defense work. A native New Yorker who spent summers in India growing up, Amreeta holds a B.A. in History from the University of Chicago and a Master of Philosophy in Development Studies from the University of Oxford. She's also a Harvard Law School graduate who has served as a lecturer-in-law on holistic public defense in the clinical program at Columbia Law School.

We spoke with Amreeta about her vision for her new role, potential progress areas in the coming year, and the family roots of her activist worldview.

**NYCLU:** You joined the NYCLU recently as director of strategy and program integration. How would you describe the role?

**Amreeta Mathai:** It's a new position. One part is about building out internal structures and cross-departmental systems of communications so that all our departments are communicating effectively with one another about the work, about priorities. It's about creating spaces where we can leverage the knowledge of all the really talented people we have at the NYCLU to generate ideas, and talk to each other in a way that brings a lot of different skill sets and perspectives to the table so that our work can ultimately be informed by that. The other part is then thinking through how we can consistently build out holistic, interdisciplinary campaigns that leverage our legal, policy, field organizing, and communications muscles so we can effectively address the needs of impacted communities and protect and defend civil rights and civil liberties.



**Looking ahead at this next year, where do you see the biggest challenges and where do you see the greatest opportunities for progress?**

**AM:** There are opportunities to increase public education and do work on what real transparency and accountability in the criminal legal system can look like and should look like. I also think there are opportunities for New York to take the lead in state-based legislation and initiatives to protect people's civil rights and civil liberties in the areas of algorithmic discrimination, machine learning, surveillance, and privacy. That's an opportunity particularly because the federal administration has put out a blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights and the NYCLU may have an opportunity to help New York think through what that could look like in practice.

Right now, our challenges are that we have a mayoral administration that is taking positions that are against our fundamental civil rights and civil liberties—for example, doing sweeps and involuntary hospitalizations of people who are homeless, criminalizing people who are unhoused or who don't have financial resources. There's going to be a presidential election next year so there's a shifting landscape. Will it be hostile to civil rights and civil liberties? Will there be room for us to really push things forward or are we going to be playing defense in 2025 in a way that's distinct from what we've been doing before?

**You were working in ACLU’s Racial Justice Program. How does this move to the NYCLU fit with that work?**

**AM:** I was with the Racial Justice Program at National for five years before I joined the NYCLU, and before that I was an attorney at the Bronx Defenders for many years, so I view all this work as aligned. While I was at the Bronx Defenders, I led an interdisciplinary team of advocates and our work was about, how do we use holistic, interdisciplinary methodologies to make change for communities that are marginalized and whose rights have been compromised? At National, I was more focused on litigation but I was doing economic justice work, I was doing prison conditions and prison detention work in Covid-19 circumstances, I was doing algorithmic discrimination work. The NYCLU does a lot of the same work but my role here is a shift in the sense that, now I’m thinking about the policy angle to this, what is the field organizing angle to this, what is the external communications strategy that we can add to this, and how can we use all these different tools that the NYCLU has in its toolbox to make positive change for New Yorkers? That’s a new and really exciting opportunity that’s distinct from what I was doing at National.

**You’ve been in these trenches for more than a decade, going back to your law school days when you interned for the ACLU’s National Security Program. Why is doing this work important to you? And have the reasons changed over time?**

**AM:** I fundamentally want to live in a world where people get a fair shake, have equitable access to opportunities, and live with dignity, and that’s been true from the beginning. That motivated a need to take on certain kinds of international development work as an undergraduate and motivated me to go on to law school. My experiences as I’ve gone along have informed the way I think about how we can do the work, and now I have a little more wisdom, I hope, a little more experience for how we can do this work better. But the fundamental reason for it—this real desire to have a society where people live with dignity —has not changed.

**Looking back, are there ways in which your childhood background shaped your later professional course as an activist? Was racial equality or civil rights part of your family upbringing?**

**AM:** I went to the United Nations International School as a kindergartener and there are kids from all different parts of the world — they speak all different languages, they’re bringing different food for lunch, they have different cultural practices, they are encouraged to wear outfits representative of their cultural heritage, and when you’re in that space, it becomes completely normal and it feels good. That experience really influenced my feeling that that’s how it should be. We should all be embraced that we’re from different places, that we have different ways of thinking about the world, that we have different

heritages, and everybody should be able to live with dignity regardless of where they’re coming from. My grandfather worked for the U.N. World Food Program and did a lot of international development work in his career, so he brought an I’m-a-citizen-of-the-world-and-I-embrace-all-people attitude to everything that he did. At the point that I knew him, he had already retired and come to New York to be with family but he brought that energy and that way of being with humans to every part of our family. So that was also present.

**Civil rights activism can be exhausting spiritually and logistically. What’s the thing you do outside of your work for the ACLU and NYCLU that most feeds or balances you?**

**AM:** Maintaining connection with close childhood friends and my family consistently is really important. I love dancing. And I really like watching and reading all kinds of science fiction and fantasy. Science fiction and fantasy have a lot of interesting ideas about what the world could look like and also a lot of commentary on what it does look like. So I like to talk about those kinds of things.

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*(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)*

# A New Yorker Fighting for Fair Housing for All

AN INTERVIEW WITH **JULIAN MORALES,**  
**SENIOR HOUSING STRATEGIST AT THE NYCLU**

New York counts more than 90,000 people as unhoused on any given night, with at least 60,000 in New York City alone. At the same time, skyrocketing rents across the state amplify the crisis, increasing the outlandish number of rent-burdened New Yorkers and pushing more and more people closer to eviction, where the odds are further stacked against them. These imbalances and failures in housing policy are a racial justice issue, and the NYCLU has supported the housing movement in New York State via the Good Cause Eviction bill and right-to-counsel protections, among other efforts.

Senior Housing Strategist Julian Morales is a passionate advocate for fair housing for all New Yorkers. As an organizer, he has developed the NYCLU's strategic plans; engaged with volunteers, coalition partners, community groups, policy organizations, and legal partners to build relationships for housing advocacy; and created educational materials for workshops and town hall meetings to build awareness around housing issues. Julian's background in community relations and public policy includes work with the Good Old Lower East Side, the New York City Council, and the Participatory Budgeting Project. A former professional carpenter and fantasy football devotee, Julian lives in Woodside, Queens, with his wife and four children.

We spoke with Julian about the origins of his activism, the housing movement's key priorities, and the importance of stable housing in a just society.

**NYCLU: You focus on trying to achieve better, fairer housing for vulnerable New Yorkers. How does this effort fit in with the NYCLU's mission to advance and protect civil rights and civil liberties?**

**Julian Morales:** Stable housing is a critical civil right. When you think about education, employment, infrastructure, children's well-being — having stable housing is at the heart of any of those issues that we work on. So we've been identifying ways to keep folks in their homes and find solutions for our unhoused community throughout the state.



**You grew up in the Red Hook Houses, a public housing complex in Brooklyn managed by the New York City Housing Authority. Did those experiences impact your desire to become involved in this larger housing movement?**

**JM:** Absolutely. I grew up in public housing in the late '80s and '90s, and I can't stress enough how much that has shaped me. I can go on for days about the history of public housing and how it was intentionally defunded by the federal government when there was a migration of communities of color coming in. I will say, as someone who lived in public housing, the towers-in-the-park model was a phenomenal concept with regard to having lots of open space for folks to recreate and be in community. But as I became a young adult, I started to realize that the conditions were subpar and I was intrigued by why it was taking so long to get repairs done and why standards weren't being upheld. And I got involved with a local organization in my neighborhood that low-key was building out an organizing program.

**A big part of your work for the NYCLU has involved interfacing with communities directly through town hall meetings and workshops, walking tours and trainings. How is that approach crucial to the housing movement?**

**JM:** That's the heartbeat of organizing and making change: having the folks most impacted by an issue at the forefront letting their legislators know that they're here to hold them accountable, that their needs are important. I've seen over the years that once we're able to identify some leaders who are impacted by an issue like fair housing, they bring their experiences and stories to the work and are able to change the minds and hearts of folks in power.



**You've recently shifted from field work as an organizer to a full-time policy position. How will this change NYCLU's housing work focus?**

**JM:** This is a newish role for the NYCLU. I'll be spending a lot more time in the state capitol meeting with and lobbying state legislators and their teams — particularly staff on the housing committees — to build rapport and let them know our priorities. But I'll also continue ongoing work on housing issues with partners and in coalition spaces. We've been working with a large upstate-downstate coalition known as Housing Justice for All that is leading the effort on Good Cause Evictions. The other is the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition, which was the first to pass right to counsel in 2017 for folks going through eviction proceedings, and now they're on the quest to get this passed statewide. The law hasn't been upheld as much as it should be because there's a shortage of lawyers and legal service providers to meet the demand, particularly post-pandemic when we have almost 200,000 people in eviction proceedings.

**Looking at the near-future landscape, what's the biggest challenge area and where is the greatest opportunity for progress?**

**JM:** Last year, real estate entities spent over \$8 million to push back on these initiatives, so that's what we're up against: they don't want extra protection for renters and they want the ability to increase rents unchecked. On right to counsel, 90 percent of landlords and real estate folks have legal representation, compared to five percent of tenants at best. So we're going up against big-time money. But one of the big things these coalitions are thinking about is how to increase people power in innovative ways. Particularly in a pandemic world, thinking about more virtual settings because that's a tremendous burden for folks to trek it all the way to Albany. Also, how we utilize social media in these legislative efforts, which has become a really strong tool in moving the needle on policy.

**How does housing fit into the racial justice picture?**

**JM:** If you think about white flight in particular, public housing was created not for Black and Brown people but for white people coming back from the Second World War. And then in the '50s and '60s, when people of color started to migrate into public housing, white residents were able to move to and revitalize the suburbs and they were eligible for loans that communities like my own could never dream of. We're constantly seeing [discriminatory] big banks and big lenders—recently, City National Bank on the West Coast had to pay this historic settlement—and so, whether you want to be a renter or a homeowner, or be housed for that matter, clearly it impacts Black and Brown communities in a much larger way than it does our white counterparts.

**Why is the NYCLU a good fit for your goals as an activist?**

**JM:** The NYCLU has worked in housing issues for decades, since the '70s on exclusionary housing in Long Island. We're a well-resourced organization that really cares about issues impacting Black and Brown communities. There's so much work to get done on the housing side and we bring a unique skill set as an organization to work with groups that need support or training in moving legislators in Albany. That's where I see myself in this role. We want to be good partners in the housing movement, but we also want to have a big impact.

**Why is this work important to you?**

**JM:** I first got introduced to this kind of by accident about 16 years ago. I had just landed this carpentry gig at a high school through the union and a friend of mine was like, "Oh, you should come to this meeting on policing." I went to the meeting and caught the eye of the executive director at the time and they were creating an organizing training program. About a month and a half into that program, we had the opportunity of a lifetime to go to the first ever United States Social Forum in Atlanta, Georgia, in June 2007. That trip really shifted the paradigm. I got to meet Black Panthers and Young Lords and hear about their stories, but I also got to hear from high school students in Boston who were doing kick-ass work. And it opened my eyes to this realization that nothing gets done—particularly for Black and Brown communities—unless we get it done. And the rest is history. Now years later I have children, and I think about what kind of world I want to leave them, what kind of barriers I want to break down for them so that they don't have to go through what we've had to go through or what past generations have had to go through. That's what keeps me going.

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*(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)*

# Organizing New York Students to Fight for Education Equity

## AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN SINGLETON, SPRING VALLEY YOUTH ORGANIZER, NYCLU EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

Deep-rooted racial disparities in educational opportunities persist around the state, with East Ramapo Central School District (ERCSD) in Rockland County being an especially acute case. For years, the NYCLU has been fighting entrenched forces on the school board intent on depriving Black and Brown public high school students and English Language Learners of the same resources, conditions, academic access, and activities that their white private school counterparts enjoy. The NYCLU has been doing youth organizing around the state for more than 20 years and our program in Spring Valley provides public high school students in the ERCSD with resources and tools to organize effectively around civil rights and civil liberties in their schools and communities. Student activism is a crucial piece of the struggle to achieve quality education and equitable outcomes for students of color in East Ramapo, and across New York.

Christian Singleton is in his second year as the NYCLU's Spring Valley youth organizer, working with the student ambassadors in East Ramapo and laying the groundwork for a campaign that we hope will continue for years to come. In his role, Christian works with the NYCLU team and our NAACP partners to develop directly-impacted high school students, educators, parents, and other community members in the ERCSD as effective organizers and mobilize them to advocate for improvements to public education in the district. He meets weekly with 25 active program participants to help the students identify goals and learn how to address them. After graduating from Penn State University with a degree in international politics, Christian worked as a childcare counselor and assistant at the Martin Luther King Multi-Purpose Center before joining the NYCLU in October 2021 at a critical moment in our East Ramapo work.

We spoke with Christian, a long-time resident of West Haverstraw in Rockland County, about what he likes most about this work and the importance of equitable education in young people's lives.

### **NYCLU: How would you define your role as Spring Valley Youth Organizer? What does the work look like?**

**Christian Singleton:** As a youth organizer, I'm working with the high school students in the area who are in our East Ramapo Ambassadors Program. The work is very personal. One of the most important things as an organizer is building relationships. Even though I grew up in Rockland County and I had friends who grew up in East Ramapo, I am not a member of the East Ramapo community, so when I first joined it was about building trust. When I was first invited to community meetings and spaces, I never came in with the mindset of, "OK, because I work for the NYCLU I have to take charge." I just wanted them to know that I'm there to help them. And a lot of great relationships have developed with community members over my time here. Their trust in me also allowed me to be able to create a program with the high school students. I have a great relationship with the students: They trust me, we talk about stuff in meetings, and I always confirm that this is a safe space—you can speak your mind here and be yourself.



You have to stay prepared, because there are a lot of issues in the district, and stuff tends to come out of nowhere. My first two weeks on the job, one of the high schools in the area, Spring Valley, had to be shut down due to black mold and asbestos. So I found myself in the position where I'm getting my bearings in the organization and suddenly I'm trying to navigate starting to build a youth base when one of their main access points is unavailable.

### **What's the best part about working with young people?**

**CS:** I've had many years of experience working with young people: I've been a camp counselor, and before the NYCLU, I worked in an after-school program. The best thing about working with youth has to be their curiosity, their willingness to learn more, not just about outside things but about themselves, as well. I like helping them to learn that they are capable human beings. They see adults in this profession at protests, at marches—and, of course, during the Black Lives Matter movement, youth were watching what was going on and they weren't sure if that's a place for them. I just want them to know that there's always a place for them in this world. The stuff that they bring to the table is equally as important as what their parents, teachers, or other adults bring, and they shouldn't feel like they have to play backseat on issues.

**Why is doing this work to achieve equal educational opportunities for students of color and English Language Learners important to you?**

**CS:** I grew up in a household where my parents really showed me the importance of education and that everyone deserves this right. Education isn't all about getting straight As and being at the top of the class—education comes in many different ways. I want to make sure that the youth have an opportunity for the future because they are our future. They shouldn't feel like they don't belong in a place. Also, education really opens a lot of doors for people. It really allows them to brighten their horizons, find stuff that they might like in the future. It's all about being given that opportunity to be something in life, not feeling like they have to be stagnant.

**You've been organizing since the fall of 2021, and this school year (2022-23) is the first full year of the organizing program. Looking at this coming year, what do you hope to accomplish?**

**CS:** I want to motivate more students and create more spaces for youth. The majority of the youth I work with are members of the drama club. That circle is very tight-knit, but they've spoken about wanting to create spaces and opportunities for students from other groups in school. They want to create a platform for the English Language Learner students, students who just immigrated to the country or just moved to the district. They have a right to speak on issues. They want to brighten their horizons and let other students know about these opportunities, that there's more to do than just going to school. They also want to create unity amongst the students. We've all been in high school, we know the different groups—but if they have a common goal it's powerful, there's strength in numbers. Another goal for me is more participation in school board meetings. I understand that the scheduled biweekly board meetings can be a challenge for high school students, but I want to see a consistent amount of people at school board meetings because it will show that this community wants to put in the effort, which sends a message to the children that the community is supporting them.

**You're in your second year in this role with NYCLU. What professional goals do you hope to achieve in terms of social justice or your career beyond this?**

**CS:** Right now, my goal is to progress more in the organization, learn more about the other work that's going on. I could see myself working on education five years down the line but maybe there's another issue that might arise that I want to take on and see where I can help out in terms of organizing. Social justice work is something that has always drawn my attention. I've really enjoyed learning how grassroots organizations work to lead these causes and bring change. Again, this is not only my second year in the organization but also my second year as an organizer, so I know there's still a lot I have to learn and a lot that I want to learn.

**What's the thing you do outside of your activism that feeds you?**

**CS:** One thing that drew me into this is, ever since I was young, I've always had a love of history and politics. So when I'm not working, I tend to enjoy watching documentaries and reading books, just learning about historical moments and of course seeing the impact of the change. But now, as an organizer, it helps me learn what happened behind the scenes to lead to that big historical moment, what led to that change.

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*(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)*

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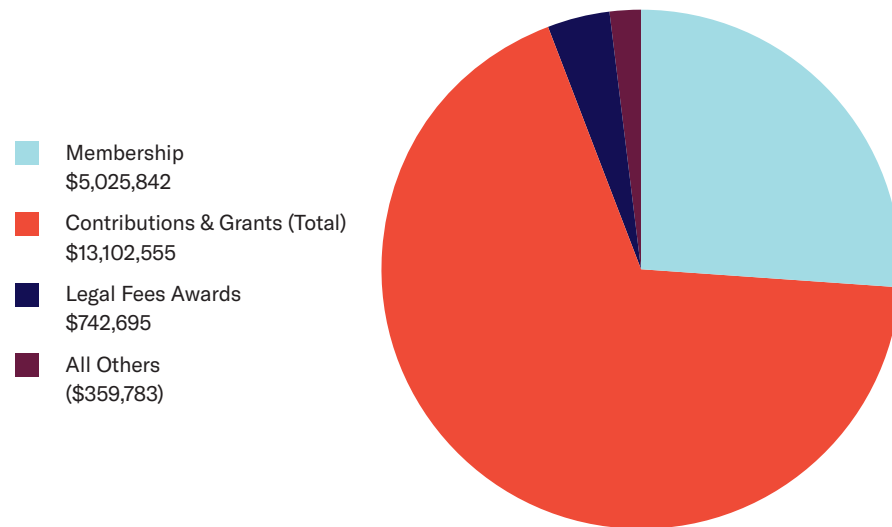
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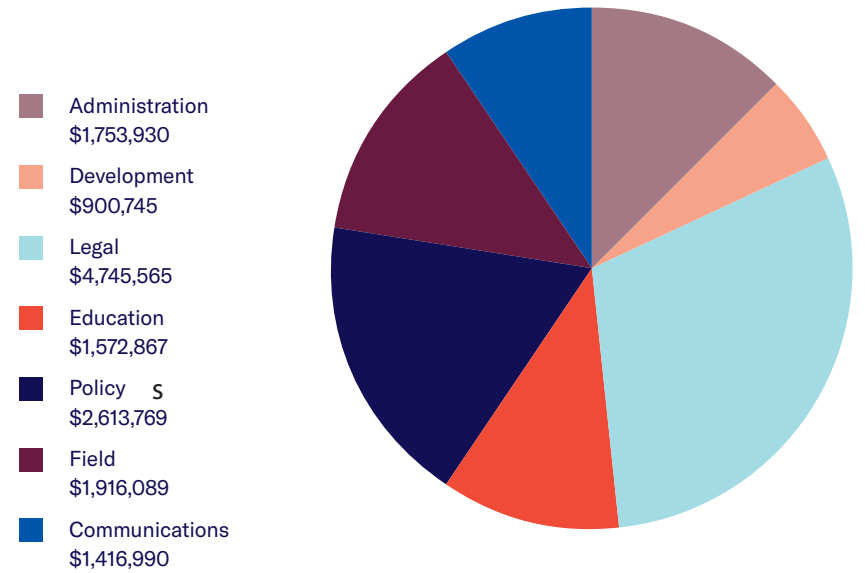
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