

BUILDING COLLECTIVE POWER



Vision & Direction

The Abolitionist Law Center's organizing work is deeply rooted in a network of relationships among currently and formerly incarcerated people, their family members, and supporters of decarceration and abolition. It's a web of connections forged in campaigns to bring people home from prisons, dismantle the dominant narratives around incarceration, and keep people in prison safe. This work builds political power that can move politicians and institutions and force them to be accountable to the communities they serve, while supporting marginalized people to be drivers of their own destinies.

Our vision and direction for organizing is rooted in politics and principles of Self Determination, and is expressed through many active campaigns.

Coalition for Parole Justice/Sunset Parole

This effort organizes hundreds of people across Pennsylvania on long-term and lifetime parole into a mutual aid network that highlights restorative and transformative justice and taking care of the needs of the community (e.g. food drives, cookouts, neighborhood clean ups), while advocating for an end to these long-term control measures via legislation and other means.



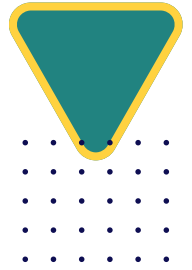
CPJ is led by John Thompson, ALC's parole justice and justice-impacted caucus organizer. JT served 36 years in prison and, like ALC executive director Robert Saleem Holbrook, is on parole for the rest of his life.

The coalition organizes and holds meetings monthly with members from across the state, while its center is primarily in Philadelphia, which until recently, had the distinction of having the highest incarceration rate of any city in the United States. While that statistic has changed due to local reforms, the tens of thousands of people who were subjected to this hyper-incarceration streak are still suffering the consequences of long-term parole.

"It's restrictive and is invasive, even though right now my checking-in is minimal. But the fact is that we still live under this cloud of reincarceration. So, any violation, any infraction, anytime you piss somebody off the wrong way—which as a social justice advocate, I tend to do."

**– Reuben Jones, member of the
Coalition for Parole Justice**

As part of the Parole Justice campaign, ALC's (c)(4) legislative director Roxanne Horrell drafted House Bill 605 that was introduced by Reps. Andre Carrol and Ishmeal Smith Wade-El. This legislation would provide a sunset to long-term parole in PA, and would impact approximately 68,000 people while also driving more directly impacted people into the Justice-Impacted Caucus we are building with our partner Free The Ballot: Incarcerated Voter Family Network.



Expanding Democracy Through Voting Access



"Incarceration should not impose a civil death upon an individual. Enfranchising incarcerated people, and the most marginalized segments of our society, is evidence of a strong and vibrant democracy. On the other hand, suppressing the sacred right to vote is a symbol of democracy in decline. In some of the most consequential elections in recent history the 43,000

people incarcerated in Pennsylvania should have their voice heard and more importantly their vote counted." – **ALC executive director Robert Saleem Holbrook**

ALC addresses mass supervision as undemocratic control. Roughly 70% of the nearly quarter million people ensnared by the criminal legal system in Pennsylvania are under forms of correctional supervision such as probation and parole that subject people to ongoing surveillance and restrictions. More than half of people in Pennsylvania prisons are incarcerated due to alleged parole violations that are often simply technical in nature.

These systems function as "invisible shackles" that impede people's ability to participate fully in civic life and enjoy the freedoms enshrined in the Constitution. In addition to the campaign for Parole Justice, another of ALC's core campaigns is aiming to pass legislation restoring voting rights for people currently incarcerated with felony convictions.

Ending Death by Incarceration

For more than a decade ALC has led the fight to end extreme sentencing in Pennsylvania, where more than 5,000 people are serving life without parole sentences, which we call death by incarceration (DBI) — the third highest number in the nation. Mandatory DBI sentences are the reason Pennsylvania has such a high rate of people serving life without parole.



Philadelphia County alone has the largest number of people serving life without parole sentences of any jurisdiction in the United States.

ALC organizers John Thompson and John Rowland regularly mobilize hundreds of family members and formerly incarcerated people across the state in the effort to eliminate these sentences through legislative action that would provide parole eligibility to this cohort.

These ALC organizing staff members also facilitate multiple chapters of the Coalition to Abolish Death By Incarceration across the state including in Philadelphia, Allegheny, and Lehigh Counties and elsewhere in central Pennsylvania. Every year they bring hundreds of family members of incarcerated people to a high visibility rally against DBI at the state capitol.

In addition to CADBI, our (c)(4)'s legislative director and legislative assistant host monthly statewide virtual meetings and in-person gatherings of the Free Our People Coalition which is composed of family members of currently and formerly incarcerated people and allies across 37 of Pennsylvania's 66 counties. This coalition has conducted over 448 lobbying visits since 2021.

In March of 2026, ALC's litigation wing **won a landmark victory striking down mandatory life without parole sentences** for second degree murder convictions in Pennsylvania in the case of Commonwealth of Pennsylvania v. Derek Lee. **As a result of this case, more than 1100 people serving mandatory life without parole/death by incarceration sentences will be eligible for consideration for release. It will constitute the largest resentencing in the state's history.**



ALC has organized hundreds of people into action across the state in support of the crucial next phase of this multi-year effort, holding demonstrations, phone banks, letter-writing campaigns, and lobbying trips to move the PA legislature to implement the legal victory and provide a pathway home for the 1100+ people currently serving what is now an unconstitutional sentence. ALC is leading the fight to pass progressive legislation that would abolish all forms of death by incarceration, and that advocacy is driven by the scores of members across the state who are directly impacted.

"We are not going to be silent while lawmakers play political games, ping-ponging our loved ones back and forth between two parties and two chambers."

**– ALC executive director
Robert Saleem Holbrook**



Eliminating Solitary Confinement

ALC organizes dozens of survivors of solitary confinement in Pennsylvania to help lead the fight to end the barbaric practice. This work is led by ALC staffers John Thompson and John Rowland, with additional support from executive director Robert Saleem Holbrook. Both Saleem and John Thompson spent more than 10 years in solitary confinement while incarcerated, mainly for challenging abusive prison conditions and organizing fellow prisoners.

Our organizing project involves several initiatives: legislation introduced in 2025 to alleviate dangerous conditions inside state prisons including widespread use of solitary confinement; the creation of an oversight board to curtail rampant abuse and neglect in Philadelphia's county jails; and ballot initiatives in several other PA counties to change police and jail responses to vulnerable populations under their control. The work springs from our ongoing advocacy around county jails in PA, and amplifies it to take bigger steps to protect people who encounter police, jails, and prisons throughout the state.



We particularly target the role of solitary confinement and other human rights abuses such as restraint chairs, in criminalizing and contributing to mental illness, and we focus on the ways that prisons and jails use these punitive measures as a response to the manifestations of mental health issues. We also view solitary confinement as a tool of repression to prevent prisoners, their families, and communities from organizing against mass incarceration and the violation of their civil and human rights while incarcerated.

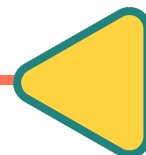
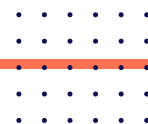
In addition, we have in the past trained statewide cohorts of survivors of solitary confinement to use the VPSA (Values Problem Solution Action) model to help them better advocate against the use of this practice that international human rights groups recognize as torture.



"I can tell you, without question, that solitary confinement is torture. It damages people ... to the point that there's nothing you can do to turn it around. Even myself. Even though I'm able to mask it sometimes, it still shows in being aggressive, being hostile for no reason. These are symptoms of being locked in solitary confinement for all those years. Please consider that these are human beings who are locked in those cages."

– ALC organizer John Thompson

Democracy and Accountability



ALC pursues an integrated, multi-pronged strategy encompassing litigation, community organizing, legislative lobbying, and electoral initiatives to dismantle the racist, classist mass incarceration system. Our core work is rooted in maximizing democratic engagement and holding political actors accountable to the needs of marginalized communities.

We define our goal as the expansion of democracy rather than its defense, because we assert that democracy in the United States has never been truly representative for Black and other peoples of color, and the working class. Our mission is to establish multi-racial democracy by expanding true power to people and communities who have been historically excluded from the decision-making processes governing their lives.

Expanding Voting Rights and Justice Impacted People's Power

ALC's public education, organizing, and power-building are focused on expanding democratic participation and injecting abolitionist demands directly into the political discourse.



- **Judicial Reform: Flipping the Bench.** We conduct democracy work including our voter registration and education drives, Get Out The Vote (GOTV) campaigns, and canvassing with a focus on supporting participation by currently and formerly incarcerated people. Our ultimate vision is to build “legacy prosecutors and legacy judges” that will sustain the movement for the next 20, 30, or 40 years.
- **Defending Democratic Outcomes.** ALC helped stop a partisan attempt in the PA state legislature to impeach Philadelphia’s progressive District Attorney, Larry Krasner. ALC’s executive director aggressively defended the will of Philadelphia’s voters in the impeachment process, noting, “This is an attack on the democratic rights of Philadelphians to elect politicians that represent them and their values.” Subsequently the Pennsylvania Supreme Court invalidated the impeachment. This successful action demonstrates our commitment to ensuring the will of voters in marginalized communities is protected.
- **Ending Prison Gerrymandering.** ALC led the campaign to end prison gerrymandering in Pennsylvania, along with the NAACP-LDF. ALC’s executive director spoke for and rallied formerly incarcerated people around the state in protest of the practice, saying, “Incarceration should not obliterate civic engagement – or inflate long-standing imbalances of power. Ending prison gerrymandering will restore a measure of balance to our home communities, and right the wrongs of salamander-shaped voting blocs that privilege the few over the many. This battle is not over.” Our victory resulted in 20,000 people in state prisons being counted as residents of their home counties, increasing the political voice of system-impacted communities.

Utilizing Participatory Democracy (Direct Action and Referendums)

ALC uses the tools of direct, participatory democracy such as referendums and ballot questions, to overturn harmful carceral practices. ALC successfully led two of the largest prison accountability referendum and ballot questions in Pennsylvania's two largest cities. Both campaigns were steered by directly impacted members of ALC's base.

- **Winning Independent Oversight.** ALC organized a successful multi-year campaign in Philadelphia to establish an Independent Prison Oversight Board to bring accountability to the deadly county jail system. This initiative was overwhelmingly passed by voters in a ballot question election in 2025. ALC mobilized dozens of formerly incarcerated people to canvass across the city, making more than 40,000 contacts with voters.



"Our hope is that the Prison Oversight Board will serve as a real tool for accountability, not symbolic oversight, not delayed action, but meaningful intervention that will prevent not just deaths, but also other human rights violations."

– ALC executive director Robert Saleem Holbrook

- **County-Wide Referendum Curtailing Solitary Confinement.** ALC led organizing efforts that resulted in the passage of a first-of-its-kind in the country voter referendum curtailing solitary confinement at Allegheny County Jail. We've continued to ensure the implementation of this victory by establishing a community-driven accountability campaign at the Allegheny County Jail Oversight Board.
- **Court Accountability.** ALC's Court Watch program contributes to transformative racial justice by keeping the courts accountable through observation, data collection, and public reporting. Volunteers, by placing their bodies in the courtroom, stage an act of protest to disrupt the status quo. And by gathering information on bail, charging decisions, and judicial practices, Court Watch exposes judicial violence and systemic racial bias, and generates data used for reports, litigation, and judicial misconduct complaints.

IMPACT AND NEEDS

Our work directly benefits vulnerable populations—people who are poor, Black and Brown, queer or trans, disabled, or mentally ill—whose communities are disproportionately targeted by the carceral system. Our actions have resulted in fewer discriminatory arrests, less police violence, and safer, more humane conditions for incarcerated people. ALC's advocacy in Pennsylvania directly affects at least 60,000 legal-system-involved individuals annually, in addition to tens of thousands of voters whose rights and wishes we protect.

We're seeking flexible multi-year funding to support our current footprint and allow us to expand our pivotal work in community organizing and power building, and the expansion of real democracy. To dismantle the carceral state and realize a truly democratic society, we must sustain and amplify the power of those most excluded.



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