

EXPANDING DEMOCRACY:

Building Power to Dismantle Systems of Exclusion and
Advance an Abolitionist Future



ABOLITIONIST
LAW CENTER

2026 FUNDER PROSPECTUS

WHO WE ARE: A Movement for Democratic Expansion

The **Abolitionist Law Center (ALC)** is a 501(c)(3) movement lawyering and power building organization that defends human rights and challenges incarceration and other state and structural violence. ALC is committed to the ultimate goal of expanding democracy by dismantling the criminal punishment system and building an abolitionist future.

With offices in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, and staff in four states, ALC is engaged in programmatic work in California, the District of Columbia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Washington state, and elsewhere. ALC utilizes advocacy, litigation, communications, lobbying within c3 guidelines, and other activities to attack carceral institutions and promote democracy.

Our foundational premise is that the challenge of mass incarceration is fundamentally a problem of democracy as practiced in this country. We believe that dismantling the institutions historically used to exclude or take away the freedoms of marginalized peoples is the first step in creating a more participatory democratic society.

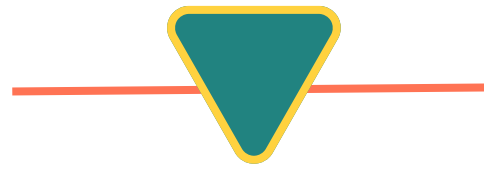
We define our goal as the expansion of democracy rather than its defense, because we assert that democracy in the United States has never been truly representative for Black and other peoples of color, and the working class. Our mission is to establish multi-racial democracy by expanding true power to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

Directly Impacted Leadership

Our power is built upon the leadership of those directly impacted by state violence and the criminal punishment system. ALC emerged directly from the Human Rights Coalition (HRC), a group founded in 2001 by people in long-term solitary confinement in Pennsylvania state prisons.

One of HRC's co-founders, ALC Executive Director Robert Saleem Holbrook, served 27 years in prison for an offense he was involved with as a 16-year-old child, including around 10 years in solitary confinement, before his release in 2018. Mr. Holbrook's experience informs the strategic necessity of contesting political power, noting that in the courtroom, those impacted "don't see justice...We see politics being expressed."

THE DEMOCRATIC CRISIS: Mass Incarceration as Political Exclusion



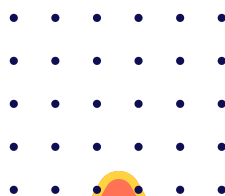
ALC's home base of Pennsylvania is a critical battleground state with some of the most extreme carceral practices in the nation, making it ground zero for the fight against surging extremism that strips away rights. The state's reliance on carceral approaches to health and safety has provided the infrastructure for racial injustice since the country's founding, and contributes to ongoing suppression of civic engagement by people of color and working people, in general.

Undermining Representation and Rights

1) Mass Disenfranchisement through Carceral Policy. Pennsylvania is the birthplace of solitary confinement and has more than 5,000 people serving mandatory life without parole (or "Death By Incarceration"—DBI) sentences, more than any state except Florida. Critically, Black Pennsylvanians are serving DBI sentences at a rate more than 18 times higher than white Pennsylvanians, demonstrating how the carceral system functions as a racist, classist engine of exclusion.

2) The Courtroom as a Political Arena. For the millions trapped in the criminal punishment system, the immense power of prosecutors and judges is "all too real." Executive Director Holbrook emphasizes that the courtroom is "the ultimate expression of law, because it is the courtroom that takes you into the carceral state and that leads you into the prison," demanding that it must be contested as hard as any other area.

3) 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 control such as probation and parole. This mass supervision subjects people to ongoing surveillance and restrictions, functioning as an "invisible shackle" and impeding their ability to participate fully in civic life and enjoy the freedoms enshrined in the Constitution. More than half of people in Pennsylvania prisons are incarcerated due to alleged, often simply technical, parole violations.



STRATEGY: Wielding Democratic Tools for Abolition

ALC pursues an integrated, multi-pronged strategy encompassing litigation, community organizing, legislative lobbying, and narrative change tactics 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.

A. Expanding Voting Rights and Electoral Power

ALC's public education, organizing, power building and c3-allowable lobbying work are focused on expanding democratic participation and injecting abolitionist demands directly into the political discourse.

1) Judicial Reform: Flipping the Bench. We conduct democracy work including voter registration, Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) campaigns, and election-related educational canvassing with a focus on supporting participation by currently and formerly incarcerated people. We recognize that resistance to reform often comes from the judiciary. Our strategy informs people about the impacts of judicial elections, and the views and track records of candidates for municipal, county, and state-level positions. Amidst this backdrop, voters in Allegheny and Philadelphia counties have chosen progressive judicial slates that will sustain the movement for the next 20, 30, or 40 years.

2) Defending Democratic Outcomes. ALC helped stop a partisan attempt in the state legislature to impeach Philadelphia's progressive District Attorney, Larry Krasner, and subsequently turned out system-impacted voters for an election in which DA Krasner overwhelmingly won a third term. This successful action demonstrates our commitment to ensuring the will of voters in marginalized communities is protected.

3) Ending Prison Gerrymandering. ALC led the campaign to end prison gerrymandering in Pennsylvania, resulting in 20,000 people in state prisons being counted as residents of their home counties, increasing the political voice of system-impacted communities.

4) Building Legislative Power. ALC played a leading role in co-creating the PA Justice Alliance, a strategic alignment table coordinating over 30 criminal legal reform organizations (including formerly incarcerated people, activists, and legislative organizers) to build legislative power in Harrisburg.

B. 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.

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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 continue to ensure the implementation of this victory by establishing a community-driven accountability campaign at the Allegheny County Jail Oversight Board.
- 3) Court Accountability.** ALC's Court Watch program contributes to transformative racial justice by keeping the courts accountable through observation, data collection, and public reporting. By gathering data on bail, charging decisions, and judicial practices, Court Watch exposes judicial violence and systemic racial bias, generating data used for reports, litigation, and judicial misconduct complaints. Volunteers, by placing their bodies in the courtroom, stage an act of protest to disrupt the status quo.

C. Challenging State Violence as a Human Rights Violation

ALC contests state violence—such as extreme sentencing and solitary confinement—by leveraging both domestic litigation and an international framework, thereby expanding the political and legal arenas in which we challenge rights violations.

- 1) International Accountability for DBI and Solitary.** ALC views DBI as a human rights violation. After Executive Director Holbrook led a delegation of directly impacted people who testified at the United Nations in Geneva, the UN Human Rights Committee recommended that the U.S. institute a nationwide moratorium on DBI and executions and end the use of solitary confinement. This strategy ensures that those most impacted, who are often excluded from domestic political power, lead the charge for accountability on the global stage.
- 2) Ending Extreme Sentences (DBI).** In ALC's landmark case *Commonwealth v. Derek Lee*, the PA Supreme Court ruled in 2026 that Pennsylvania's mandatory DBI sentence for second degree murder is unconstitutional. This groundbreaking decision created a potential path to freedom for more than 1100 people and created an extremely impactful new precedent that expands a state constitutional right.
- 3) Abolishing Mass Supervision.** ALC advocates for Sunset Parole legislation to end long-term and lifetime parole. This legislation addresses the fact that parole supervision has diminishing returns after approximately three years, yet keeps tens of thousands of Pennsylvanians under surveillance, disproportionately impacting Black people.

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.

Our litigation has resulted in major financial redistributions of state resources (extracted via legal settlements) back to impacted communities, including the largest settlement in a mass protest-related case against the Philadelphia police department (\$9.25 million) and the largest settlement ever against the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (\$8.5 million) for medical neglect.

Financial Overview and Request:

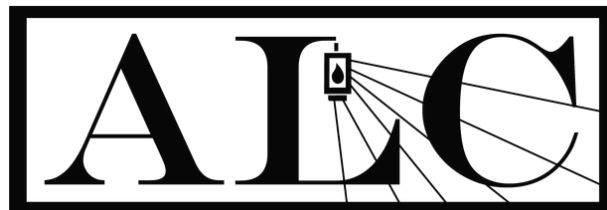
ALC's 2026 operating budget is approximately to \$2.3 million. We receive income from legal fees paid by institutions we sue, institutional grants, and individual donors.

We're seeking flexible multi-year funding to support our current footprint and allow us to expand our pivotal work in litigation, community power building, and the defense and 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.

CONNECT WITH US

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