

# THE ROAD AHEAD

2023–2026 Strategic Framework

DECEMBER 2022

**ACLU**  
Colorado







# THE ROAD AHEAD

## 2023–2026 Strategic Framework

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# Executive Summary

We believe Colorado can become the most just and equitable state in the country. A state where civil rights and liberties are not only protected, but also a state united by a shared commitment to creating a thriving democracy that continually expands the definitions and protections of liberty and freedom.

ACLU of Colorado can help our state reach this goal if we act proactively and marshal our combined strengths to overcome unprecedented threats to our democracy. Future generations of Colorado children and families depend on it.

That is why we are engaged in an unprecedented initiative to create the strongest and most strategic organization in our history. This initiative is reflected in this 2023–2026 Strategic Framework and has three major components:

## 1. *Priority Communities and Issue Areas*

Communities deprived of power, representation, and resources become more vulnerable to systemic deprivations of fundamental rights. For this reason, advancing a more equitable society is the most effective long-term strategy for achieving ACLU’s core mission of protecting and expanding civil rights and civil liberties. That is why we are making a multi-year commitment to focus our resources on three campaigns that will allow us to attack the root causes of inequity and inequality: the **Systemic Equality Agenda**, the **Campaign for Smart Justice**, and the **Privacy & Liberty Project**. In addition, we will ensure that every campaign or project we pursue will further one or more of our strategic imperatives: **Racial Justice**, **Immigrant Justice**, and **Indigenous Justice**.

## 2. *Integrated Advocacy*

ACLU of Colorado will employ every tool in our toolbox to disrupt and dismantle inequitable systems and to build fair, just, and visionary alternatives. In our **integrated advocacy model**, ACLU of Colorado and our partners will strategically weave together litigation, policy and legislative expertise, community organizing, communications strategies, electoral engagement, public education, coalition building, and ACLU supporter and donor advocacy as one coordinated and evidence-based effort.

With this model, we will build power to overcome fierce opposition, change hearts and minds, and maximize long-term impact.

## 3. *A New ACLU of Colorado*

In 1952, we began as a scrappy band of courageous volunteer lawyers with virtually no funding. We have since grown to a formidable organization that is 210,000 supporters strong and led by a professional team of policy experts, communication strategists, organizers, political strategists, lawyers, and fundraisers — all working in deep partnership with communities, organizations, and elected officials across the state. Successfully implementing this Strategic Framework will require us to evolve yet again by creating a new multi-disciplinary department of Advocacy and Strategic Alliances. We will also invest in internal systems and processes to equitably support and grow our staff and expand our philanthropic capacities.

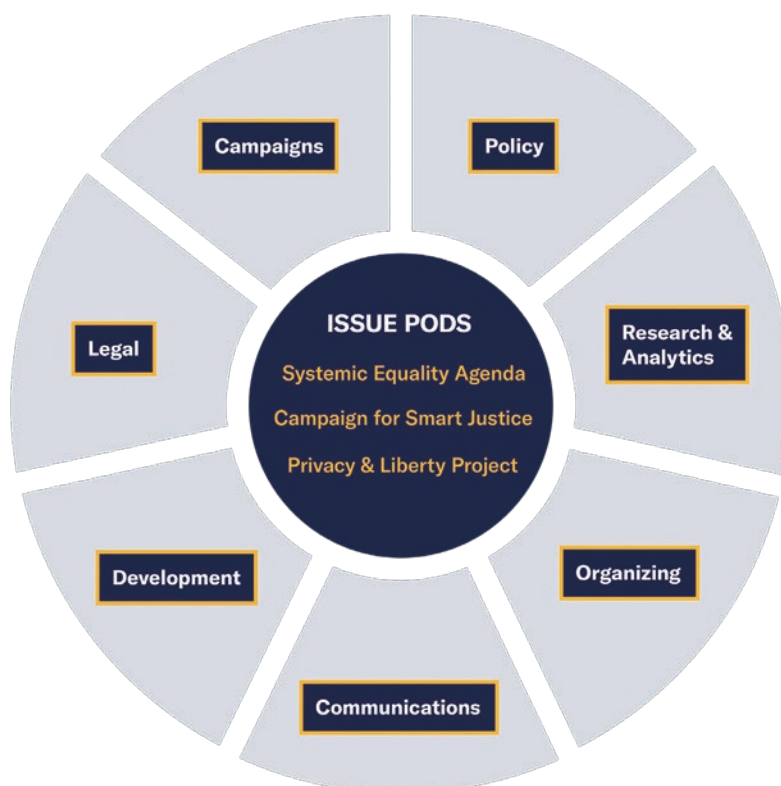
The most important component of the ACLU of Colorado’s 2023–2026 Strategic Framework is **you** — our members, supporters, activists, partners, allies, and donors. With you at our side for the next three years, we can achieve remarkable systemic changes advancing democracy, racial justice, civil rights, and civil liberties for all Coloradans.

# ACLU of Colorado 2023-2026 Strategic Framework

## Dismantling Systemic Inequality



## Integrated Advocacy Model



## Letter from the Executive Director

As ACLU of Colorado prepares to commemorate 70 years of advancing and protecting civil rights and civil liberties in Colorado, we acknowledge the work since 1952 advocating for reproductive freedom, immigrants' rights, racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights, privacy, and freedom of speech. In the past four decades, ACLU of Colorado and our partners have won *Ramos v. Lamm* (1980), resulting in the restructuring of the Colorado prison system; prevailed in *Romer v. Evans* (1996), overturning Amendment 2, an unconstitutional attack on the civil rights of LGBTQ+ Coloradans; and repealed Colorado's Death Penalty (2020).

We have persisted in the courts, at the Capitol, and through ballot initiatives. In 2020, we collaborated on the defeat of Proposition 115, a ballot initiative to ban abortion later in pregnancy. In 2022, we advocated for HB22-1279<sup>1</sup> the Reproductive Health Equity Act; HB22-1131<sup>2</sup> Reduce Justice-involvement For Young Children; and SB22-099<sup>3</sup> Sealing Criminal Records.

ACLU of Colorado looks to the courage and wisdom of Coloradans with the lived experience of injustice and oppression to inform our three-year strategic plan. Together, we can provoke the conscience of the nation and ensure that America's promise of liberty is fulfilled in our state.

To that end, in August, we released our [Expanding the Table for Justice](#) report, the product of a year-long listening tour across the state. During that tour, ACLU of Colorado staff listened as Colorado residents defined the injustices they experience here, shared their visions for equal rights in their communities, and vocalized the changes needed to assure the protection of these rights. Finally, we heard how we at ACLU of Colorado could partner with our fellow Coloradans toward the fulfillment of that vision of liberty and justice for all.

Through this process, we have relied on the expertise of lived experience to inform our plan going forward. For years to come, we will continue to persist toward liberty in Colorado.

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“ACLU of Colorado looks to the courage and wisdom of Coloradans with the lived experience of injustice and oppression to inform our three-year strategic plan. Together, we can provoke the conscience of the nation and ensure that America's promise of liberty is fulfilled in our state.”

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**Deborah Richardson**  
ACLU of Colorado,  
Executive Director

## Our History, Mission, and Values

The first coordinated state efforts to defend Coloradans' civil liberties began in the 1930s, and ACLU of Colorado was incorporated as an affiliate of the national organization in 1952. For several years, staff included only an Executive Director and a part-time clerical assistant. Then, in the 1980s, we added our first Legal Director. Through the support of members, foundations, and individuals, we have grown to an organization with a \$4.6 million budget, 41,000 members, over 210,000 supporters, and many loyal staff and volunteers.

It is our mission to protect and expand the civil rights and civil liberties of all people in Colorado through litigation, education and advocacy. We envision a future where the civil rights and civil liberties of all people in Colorado are honored, respected, and upheld.

### OUR CORE ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

#### **Accountable, with Integrity**

We acknowledge ACLU's proximity to power when working with partners and communities across Colorado. We uphold integrity — both internally and externally — as we advance our statewide mission.

#### **Anti-Racist**

We recognize that every community and issue that we address is affected by a legacy of structural and systemic racism. It is not enough for our organization to not be racist—we must be actively anti-racist. We will disrupt systemic racism and join people of color as partners in their resilient anti-racist work.

#### **Committed to Equity**

We are committed to creating and continuously re-evaluating internal and external systems, policies, and procedures that are rooted in equity to reflect the intersectional needs of all people.

#### **Driven by Impact**

We are committed to using integrated advocacy efforts to create sustainable change, evidenced through tangible, improved conditions for our communities.

#### **Rooted in Community**

We center impacted communities as connected partners with shared power.



## BEING FIT TO FIGHT FOR BOTH TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE AND RAPID RESPONSE

ACLU of Colorado is making a multi-year commitment to focusing intensely on three priority campaigns — the Campaign for Smart Justice, Systemic Equality Agenda, and Privacy and Liberty Project — so that we can dedicate the bandwidth needed to achieve proactive systemic change that treats the root causes of civil rights and liberties violations. At the same time, we will also always reserve capacity to be ready to respond to unexpected civil rights crises and help partners on core ACLU issue areas that fall outside our three priority campaigns.



# Priority Communities and Issue Areas

## Priority Communities

ACLU of Colorado works on behalf of all communities and all people. In addition, some communities suffer far more pervasive and severe violations of their fundamental rights than others.

By focusing on protecting and expanding the rights of the communities most severely impacted, we can address the worst manifestations of systemic inequities while at the same time achieving advances that benefit every person across-the-board.

For this reason, we have identified three strategic imperatives to guide our work and ensure we are focused first and foremost on working in partnership with communities with the most at stake when addressing systemic inequities. Before committing to any campaign or project, ACLU of Colorado will ask how the work will further one or more of the following strategic imperatives:

- ***Racial Justice***

Will this work further racial justice by dismantling systemic and institutionalized racism, particularly white supremacy and anti-Black racism?

- ***Indigenous Justice***

Will this work help achieve Indigenous justice, including by supporting Indigenous peoples' ability to exercise their right to sovereignty and autonomy?

- ***Immigrant Justice***

Will this work protect the rights and liberties of people who are immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants and maximize their ability to fully participate in democratic, civil, and social life in Colorado?

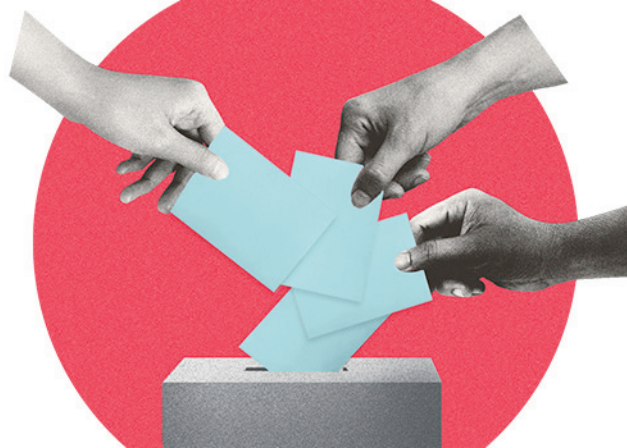


## Systemic Equality Agenda

Repair the harms of systemic racism against BIPOC communities by increasing access to housing and economic opportunity, and creating an inclusive democracy that protects and expands voting access.

The legacy of systemic racism and discrimination is woven into the fabric of American society. This broken system includes vast racial discrimination in housing, far lower rates of voting participation for historically disenfranchised voters, and unequal access to education. The disparate impacts of the housing crisis on communities of color are well-documented and can be traced back to a long history of de jure and de facto racial segregation, including redlining and discriminatory lending practices. In combination, these systemic inequities deprive communities of color of access to good-paying jobs and wealth. The rights and liberties of politically and economically disenfranchised communities are routinely violated with impunity.

ACLU of Colorado's Systemic Equality Agenda will focus on repairing the harms of systemic racism by increasing access to economic opportunities and creating an inclusive democracy that protects and expands voting access and participation. To achieve that vision, ACLU of Colorado will focus initially on the following two areas:



### *Housing Access*

- The affordable housing crisis is one of Colorado's greatest civil rights challenges. The lack of safe and stable housing preserves the racial wealth gap, denies every person the tools necessary to thrive, and leads to a cascade of dehumanizing civil rights violations visited upon unhoused people.
- To dismantle these systems, ACLU of Colorado will support transformational policy changes to **expand equal access to housing opportunities** for every Coloradan.

### *Voting Participation and Access*

- It has never been more important for Colorado to be fully prepared to **preserve our state's accessible registration and voting systems**, make improvements wherever possible, and promote it as a national model. ACLU of Colorado will also remain vigilant against anti-democratic rollbacks that may come from local or state officials.
- We will work with partners to **remove barriers to participation** for historically disenfranchised voters, including Black and Latinx voters, justice-impacted voters, and young voters.



## Campaign for Smart Justice

Build racially equitable alternatives to policing, prosecutions, and prisons that address the root causes of harm to communities of color and shrink the criminal legal system.

The government's power to police, prosecute, and imprison is one of the greatest threats to liberty and equality ever conceived. In the last century, we have seen runaway spending on police and prisons, aggressive and racist law enforcement practices, severe and rigid punishments, and the dehumanizing warehousing and surveillance of people in an ever-expanding carceral system.<sup>4</sup> The combined effect has robbed generations of families of their loved ones, and entire communities have been crushed beneath the unbearable weight of the criminal legal system.

The Campaign for Smart Justice is about transforming our approach to community safety by uplifting and resourcing community-based approaches and addressing historical inequities. Our vision for Smart Justice includes building racially equitable alternatives to policing, prosecutions, and prisons that will address the root causes of harm to communities of color and shrink the entire footprint of the criminal legal system by focusing on the following areas:

### *A Holistic and Evidence-based Anti-Violence Roadmap*

- The most effective, evidence-based approaches to reducing violence include strategies often not thought of as “criminal justice reform.” For example, affordable housing, mental health services, substance dependency treatment, job training, and after-school programs all have demonstrable anti-violence impacts while simultaneously fostering thriving communities.<sup>5</sup>
- ACLU of Colorado will work with our partners to create a **community health and safety roadmap** that will guide our members,



Community members gather for ACLU of Colorado Lobby Day on April 3, 2019.

supporters, policymakers, and the public — and we will work with diverse stakeholders willing to fight for the resources and policies necessary to realize that vision.

### *Alternatives and Accountability for Police*

- As we work to create more expansive approaches to community safety, we also must create more effective and equitable alternatives to traditional law enforcement. Not only is having a diverse array of responses to armed police more effective, it also completely prevents many of the interactions where armed police have harassed, traumatized, injured, and murdered young Black men and other people of color.<sup>6</sup>
- ACLU of Colorado will work to create **alternatives to police** while also ensuring that armed **police are held fully accountable**.

### *Dismantling Mass Incarceration*

- As we build equitable alternatives to punishment, we must also deconstruct the oppressive and racist criminal justice policies held over from the “tough on crime” era that drives racial inequities and makes communities less safe.<sup>7</sup>
- ACLU of Colorado will work to **limit or abolish the jailing and detention of people not convicted of any crime**, including people detained pre-trial and those accused of civil immigration violations.
- We will also seek to end harsh and rigid punishments, hold people accountable through restorative justice and other approaches that do not rely on incarcerating people, and push for the expansive use of **clemency**.

## *Privacy & Liberty Project*

Protect and expand fundamental privacy and liberty rights under Colorado law regardless of what happens at the federal level, including protections against government overreach and threats from advancing technology.

Even as ACLU of Colorado works to disrupt historic drivers of inequities, we must also keep our eye on the horizon and anticipate the threats to come, particularly, dire threats to our privacy and personal autonomy. Who you love and how you express intimacy; what you decide to do with your body; what you say or do in the physical or digital public realm; who can track or keep record of these things — all of this must be protected from government overreach, intrusion, and persecution. ACLU of Colorado's Privacy & Liberty Project is dedicated to anticipating and confronting these threats, with a focus on two in particular.

The first threat comes from the United States' Supreme Court, which is poised to dismantle and roll back hard-won civil rights protections. This could upend entire constitutional frameworks guaranteeing bodily autonomy, privacy and personal liberty. The second threat is posed by technologies that allow the government and powerful private actors to surveil, collect and store data, intruding upon Coloradans' privacy in unprecedented ways.

The impact of both threats will fall most heavily on communities of color. History shows that oppressed communities are more likely to experience invasive and repressive forms of government surveillance and bodily control.<sup>8</sup> We see these legacies continue today through artificial intelligence and algorithms encoded by humans and used to replicate and digitally codify racial bias.<sup>10</sup>



Community members rally for abortion rights on May 14, 2022.

### *Protecting and Expanding Personal Liberties & Rights*

As the landscape darkens at the federal level, we will focus not only on ensuring Colorado does not fall beneath the existing constitutional floor, but that we raise the ceiling. We will work to secure existing federal rights under Colorado state law before potential threats are realized. We will work to make rights more expansive and aspirational than ever recognized under existing federal decisions or statutes, including LGBTQ+ rights, the right to privacy, and the right to bodily autonomy.

### *Digital Privacy*

ACLU of Colorado will work to ensure state laws are modernized to reflect the rapid pace of invasive and racially-biased digital and physical surveillance. We will seek to implement flexible, forward-thinking policy and legal frameworks that are nimble enough to **protect digital speech, personal privacy, and bodily autonomy from government overreach, discrimination, and abuse** — regardless of the latest algorithm, device, artificial intelligence, or technological innovation that emerges.



A black and white photograph of the Statue of Liberty, showing the head, crown, and the arm holding the torch. The statue is positioned on the left side of the page, with its head tilted slightly to the right. The torch is held high, and the crown's spikes are visible. The background is white.

## SUPERCHARGING LITIGATION WITH INTEGRATED ADVOCACY

Bringing precedent-setting lawsuits to vindicate and expand civil rights and liberties will always be a core ACLU strength and key strategy for achieving our mission. Our Strategic Framework and integrated advocacy model will only increase the power and impact of our litigation by more closely aligning future legal strategies with the needs of our priority communities and by integrating our lawsuits more frequently with companion legislation, advocacy, organizing, and storytelling.

# A New ACLU of Colorado

Accomplishing the goals that ACLU of Colorado is committing to in this plan will require dramatically expanding the organization's resources, infrastructure, and staffing. In particular, ACLU of Colorado will be focused on growing the organization's capacity in three areas:

## ***Advocacy and Strategic Alliances***

The newly created Advocacy and Strategic Alliances (ASA) department will build upon traditional organizational strengths while adding new and essential capacities like data analytics, research, campaigns, an expanded statewide field presence, and reimagined public education and Know Your Rights programs. ASA will also serve as the hub for integrated advocacy that will bring litigation, communications, and development experts into multi-disciplinary "issue pods" focused on our Systemic Equality Agenda, Campaign for Smart Justice, and Privacy & Liberty Project. Ensuring ASA has adequate staff, issue expertise, and resources necessary to succeed across all three issue areas will require a significant investment that expands capacity.

## ***Administration***

Achieving these goals requires infrastructure to ensure an inclusive and supportive environment that recruits and retains a diverse and talented staff. That must be paired with professionalized internal systems, policies, and processes that allow the organization to operate efficiently, transparently, and nimbly. ACLU of Colorado will invest in administrative staffing and systems to support growth across the entire organization.

## ***Development***

None of the goals in this strategic plan are remotely achievable without significant and sustainable growth in resources. ACLU of Colorado knows that there are many more future donors and supporters across the state who passionately believe in the vision of ACLU of Colorado. However, we must have the capacity to identify and connect with all of them. The organization's capacity growth must include investing in additional staff and systems for cultivating new ACLU members and supporters, deepening the engagement of existing supporters, and aggressively pursuing grants and other institutional funding so that the organization has the fuel it will need to succeed in achieving the long-term, transformational change in this strategic plan.



## Help Fuel the Fight

For 70 years, ACLU of Colorado has remained steadfast as the guardian of liberty for all Coloradans, thanks to the generosity and commitment of our community. Today, we are experiencing an unprecedented assault on our democracy that demands all of us to pitch in and take part. From longtime supporters to first-time philanthropists, we have never needed you more. The roadmap we have laid out to address the root causes of injustice is bold, audacious, and necessary. Every level of engagement helps fuel the fight and turns our roadmap into a reality.

Become a card-carrying member of the ACLU or renew your existing membership, and join more than half a million people nationwide in protecting and extending America's promise of freedom, fairness and equality. Your membership contribution, in any amount, supports both the ACLU of Colorado and the national ACLU. As Guardians of Liberty, your monthly contributions will directly support our Strategic Framework and proactive agenda for years to come. ACLU monthly donors also reduce our costs, meaning that a greater portion of your gift goes directly to fight injustice.

You can also support our work through tax-deductible gifts to the ACLU Foundation of Colorado which directly advance civil liberties and civil rights statewide through our litigation, research, and education efforts. Further support can be made through employer matching programs, gifts of stock, bequests and living trusts, beneficiary designations, life income plans, or through a tribute gift in honor or in memory of someone. Your gift is shared between the ACLU Foundation of Colorado and the national ACLU Foundation.

All gifts can be made online, or you can make a check payable to the ACLU Foundation of Colorado and mail it to ACLU of Colorado, Development Department, 303 E 17th Ave., Suite 350, Denver, CO 80203.

Together, we are one step closer to making transformational and systemic change a reality. Thank you for fueling the fight!



ACLU of Colorado and the Four Corners Rainbow Youth Center at Denver Pride Fest. June 2022.

## Letter from the Chair of the Board of Directors

On behalf of the ACLU of Colorado Board of Directors, we are extremely excited to present the strategic plan to the ACLU community.

This plan was crafted over a year of work that included extensive outreach; lots of discussion, thought, and consultation by the staff and Board; and excellent facilitation, allowing us to focus on how ACLU of Colorado can have the greatest impact on protecting the civil rights and civil liberties of all who are in our great state.

While we are pleased with the progress that has been made in Colorado, some of which has been led by our amazing team, we cannot rest on our laurels or take any victories for granted. As we have been made painfully aware, any right can be taken away. We owe it to ourselves, our children, and future generations to remain vigilant. Creating social change that will produce the kind of democratic state we all desire is not something that is done with one law, one court case, or one demonstration. It is deep work that takes years to achieve. Milestones and short-term goals must be achieved in the interim, but our fight is one that has persisted for the past seven decades of the ACLU's existence. At ACLU of Colorado, we are determined to continue to protect our democracy for years to come.

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**“We owe it to ourselves, our children, and future generations to remain vigilant.”**

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The goals in this strategic plan are ambitious, but ACLU of Colorado cannot do this alone. We invite all Coloradans who love our state, who love liberty, and who want Colorado to be a place of freedom and opportunities to join us.

Please consider this an open invitation to join us in making this plan a reality.



**Julie Reiskin**  
ACLU of Colorado,  
Board of Directors Chair



# Methodology

ACLU of Colorado’s strategic planning process was driven by the senior leadership team, with support and input from the Board of Directors Strategic Planning Committee, staff, and a consultant team.

Prior to launching the strategic planning process, ACLU of Colorado sought to capture the voices of Coloradans to understand which issues were most pressing for communities across the state. Additionally, in 2021, ACLU of Colorado conducted a supporter survey collecting 480 responses representing 39 counties.

In early 2022, our consultants interviewed a combination of individual, corporate, and philanthropic donors to capture their support for a new integrated advocacy strategy. Additionally, they spoke with ACLU affiliates across the country that have successfully implemented integrated advocacy initiatives to capture best practices and lessons learned.

The Board of Directors Strategic Planning Committee convened bimonthly with the senior leadership team and consultant to set guiding principles. Staff was engaged frequently throughout the plan’s progress.

The senior leadership team applied the Board-approved criteria for campaign selection to each of the three issue areas. Each issue area came with significant advantages, including strong alignment with the ACLU’s mission; strong appeal to the ACLU’s base of supporters; the ability to use existing capacity and expertise; potential for collaboration with other organizations in Colorado led by communities that are directly impacted by each issue area; the potential impact for systems change outweighing the opportunity costs; and clear potential objectives.

In July 2022, the Board of Directors Executive Committee authorized the senior leadership team to propose to the full board that the organization spends the majority of its capacity leading efforts in three issue areas: Systemic Equality Agenda, Campaign for Smart Justice, and Privacy & Liberty Project. The organization will reserve a portion of its time and resources for other ACLU issue areas where the affiliate may lend its brand and expertise.

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## Acknowledgments

This report was written by Taylor Pendergrass, ACLU of Colorado Director of Advocacy and Strategic Alliances; Deborah Richardson, ACLU of Colorado Executive Director; Julie Reiskin, ACLU of Colorado Board of Directors, Chair; Deanna Hirsch, ACLU of Colorado Acting Director of Philanthropy; Vanessa Michel, ACLU of Colorado Director of Communications; Monique Childress, Horizon Advisory Group, Principal; and Melanie Johnson, Ph. It was edited by Vanessa Michel, Taylor Pendergrass, Deanna Hirsch, Monique Childress, Julie Reiskin, Astra Lincoln, Stephen Meswarb, ACLU of Colorado Deputy Director, Mark Silverstein, ACLU of Colorado Legal Director and Erica Tinsley, ACLU of Colorado Communications Officer. This report was designed by Alex Cortes and Pablo de la Rosa Santiago, ACLU of Colorado Communications Associate. Research was conducted by Kelly Yue, ACLU of Colorado Research & Analytics Assistant. The Board of Directors Strategic Planning Committee includes; Carol Alexander, Arriana Salma Belkin, Carolyn Love, Ph.D., Julie Reiskin, Maurice “Scotty” Scott, M.D., and LaDawn Sullivan.

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*For a list of our current board and staff, visit our website at: [www.aclu-co.org](http://www.aclu-co.org)*

# ENDNOTES

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