

BRICK BY BRICK

DECARCERATING TODAY, BUILDING TOMORROW

IMPACT REPORT

2024

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

When I was a teenager
locked in a solitary
confinement cell, I read a
book about Hannibal
crossing the Alps on
elephants. I remember going
to sleep promising myself
that I would climb those
peaks one day despite being
sentenced to die in prison.



In 2023, that dream became a reality. I stood on a mountaintop in Switzerland while in Geneva with a delegation of formerly incarcerated people. We were there to urge the United Nations Human Rights Commission to call on the U.S. to end Death by Incarceration (DBI) sentences (life without parole) and other human rights abuses. After our testimony, the UNHRC formally issued the momentous recommendation that the U.S. should pursue alternatives to detention, the cash bail system, and mandatory minimum sentencing; end the use of solitary confinement; and institute a nationwide moratorium on DBI and executions.

We — those most directly affected by imprisonment, policing, and other forms of state violence — made this happen, just like we're making things happen at home. And in 2024, the start of ALC's second decade, the stakes couldn't be higher.

Pennsylvania is a key battleground in the fight against the surging extremism that's stripping away our hard-won rights, and regurgitating the "tough on crime" agenda that has snatched up so many Black and Brown folk and siphoned vital resources from our communities. Advances we make here contesting power and dismantling carceral institutions, create models that can be replicated anywhere in the country.

When the state told me that I was going to die in prison, I never accepted that. I resisted, rebelled, and made it out because of the movement we on the inside and our loved ones on the outside, built from the confines of solitary cells and DBI sentences. Along that journey I also used the models from the anti-apartheid and other social justice movements that my late mother instilled in me to take accountability for my actions and find redemption.

Today ALC is the embodiment of that resistance and redemption. We're part of an abolitionist family that's fighting, with support from our allies, for our own liberation.

I invite you to learn more and join us.

Libert Solom foll &

Robert Saleem Holbrook, Executive Director

ABOUT US



The Abolitionist Law Center
is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, public interest law firm
and community organizing project.
With bases in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, we work mainly
in Pennsylvania, the birthplace of solitary confinement.

We engage in class action and impact litigation, grassroots advocacy, research and public education, legislative lobbying, pressure campaigns, media outreach, and other strategic communications.

We use these tools to build a mass movement to dismantle the racist, classist criminal legal system, and protect the rights and wellbeing of people who encounter police, the courts, jails and prisons, and other forms of legal supervision.

Across our many lanes of work, our priorities include:

- freeing people from incarceration and advocating for their wellbeing while they're behind bars
- suing institutions like jails, prisons, and police departments, and redistributing their resources, via legal settlements, to people impacted by the criminal punishment system and
- building power among, taking our leadership from, and being accountable to people who are directly impacted by capitalism, state violence, and mass incarceration

Our work results in fewer and less discriminatory arrests and less police violence; fewer people becoming incarcerated; shorter stays for those who do get locked up; and safer and more humane conditions for people while they're inside.

INCARCERATION IN PENNSYLVANIA

Pennsylvania has some of the most severe carceral practices in the country, and is ground zero for the explosion of mass incarceration, extreme conditions of confinement, and excessive sentencing.



Far from being the cradle of liberty, Philadelphia was home to the first penitentiary and the first prison built based on solitary confinement. The city and state have a long and shameful history of racist and repressive policing, prosecuting, and imprisonment, including attacking Black Panthers and Black Liberation Army members, MOVE, and other BIPOC communities and resistance movements right up through the present (and ALC has fiercely represented members of all of these groups).

Wins in Pennsylvania not only impact hundreds of thousands of people here, they also create road maps to similar victories elsewhere in the country. In 1991 PA had **14** state prisons. Today there are **24** state prisons.

More than **5000** people are serving death by incarceration sentences (life without possibility for parole) in PA. a

possibility for parole) in PA, a higher number than any other U.S. state except Florida, which has almost twice as many residents.

In 2023 a total of **244,000** people were under correctional control in PA on an average day, at least **170,000** different people passed through the state's jails throughout the year, and PA's two largest counties alone caged around **6000** people on a typical day.

OUR MOVEMENT

ALC is part of a movement ecosystem, a network of interconnected groups, many of which were formed by and for currently and formerly incarcerated people and their loved ones, including ALC's executive director Robert Saleem Holbrook.

The Human Rights Coalition

(HRC): Started in 2001 by incarcerated people in solitary confinement, including Saleem, who cataloged the abuse they were experiencing, and corresponded about it with their loved ones outside. HRC members advocate against solitary and for voting rights for incarcerated citizens; investigate and expose toxic prison conditions, and police brutality, and produce The Movement! magazine that circulates to over 1000 people in PA state prisons, plus readers outside.



The Coalition to Abolish Death by Incarceration (CADBI) and CADBI-West:

Started in 2015 this coalition was formed by HRC, Decarcerate PA, Fight for Lifers, and Right 2 Redemption (a lifers group inside SCI Graterford). CADBI was active and engaged with juvenile lifers' resentencing in 2016-18, and has been organizing a high visibility/high turnout "Day of Action" rally and lobbying event in Harrisburg annually since 2016 to call for the end of death by incarceration sentences.

Decarcerate PA: Started in approximately 2011, this group was dedicated to stopping the expansion of prisons in PA. They organized high profile direct actions, letter writing nights, and a speakers bureau of formerly incarcerated people, before dipersing to join CADBI, the No215Jails coalition, and other movement entities

OUR MOVEMENT

Amistad Law Project: Started in 2014 by Black feminist attorneys, this movement lawyering organization fights for the rights of incarcerated people, including those with long-term/DBI sentences, and serves as co-counsel with ALC on some litigation. It's also pushing for divestment from police and prisons and into communities; helping to build a program of non-police, mobile crisis response teams in Philadelphia; promoting the No Way Home film and the Move it Forward podcast; and advocating for the PA District Attorneys Association to support elder parole.

1 Hood Media Academy: Started in 2017, they're a collective of socially conscious artists and activists who believe art is the best way to challenge injustice, raise awareness and unify humanity. Their work is devoted to addressing critical issues from the perspectives of Pittsburgh's Black diaspora while cultivating emerging and established artists, creatives, and activists.

Let's Get Free—the Women and Trans
Prisoner Defense Committee: Started in
2013, this Pittsburgh-based group is
working to end DBI, build a pathway out
of prison through commutation reform,
support successful possibilities for
formerly and currently incarcerated people,
and shift to a culture of transformative
justice. They challenge PA's outdated and
dysfunctional commutation process, have a
prison visiting program and an annual art
show, and participate in CADBI.



Eliminating Solitary Confinement



ALC has had unparalleled success challenging solitary confinement, including establishing a growing body of precedent-setting case law.

Litigation

Since our founding in 2013, we've led the legal attack against solitary in Pennsylvania.

Across more than a dozen cases that have targeted the practice, ALC has:

- Ended solitary confinement of those on PA's death row
- Won court orders releasing clients from solitary confinement from every federal district court in PA
- Set the two most important solitary-related Eighth Amendment precedents in the Third Circuit Court of Appeals
- Forced a contempt ruling and sanctions against the City of Philadelphia for its jails' failure to comply with the terms mandated in a federal civil rights class action suit that addressed solitary and other dire conditions in PA's largest jail system
- Negotiated a landmark agreement that requires sweeping changes in limiting how Allegheny County, PA's second largest county jail system, places people with psychiatric disabilities into solitary
- Provided representation in a groundbreaking class action suit, for defendants trapped in an indefinite solitary unit at PA State Correctional Institute Fayette
- Filed a massive federal class action lawsuit challenging the use of solitary in the entire PA state prison system

(cont'd)

Eliminating Solitary Confinement

More than **80,000**

people are held in solitary confinement on any given day in the U.S. More than 2,000 of them are in PA state prisons.

- Represented defendants in indefinite solitary in a PA state prison, who initially filed pro se in a groundbreaking class action suit challenging their assignment to this unit
- Filed what is to date the largest and most complex federal class action lawsuit aimed at solitary, with plaintiffs who are challenging the practice in the entire PA state prison system
- Brought a motion of contempt and sanctions against the City of
 Philadelphia for its jails' failure to comply with the terms mandated in a federal civil rights class action suit that addressed a range of dire conditions including rampant solitary confinement.



Organizing & Narrative Change

In partnership with the Human Rights Coalition's "Solidarity not Solitary" project and in other formations, ALC is working in coalition with groups across PA and around the country to build pressure campaigns and champion legislation to end the practice.

Key achievements include:

- playing an integral role in the effort that led to the passage of a first-in-the nation voter referendum curtailing solitary in a county jail
- coordinating the drive to establish an effective jail oversight board in Philadelphia
- initiating the first-ever hearing by the PA House judiciary committee on the topic of solitary
- building a statewide network of solitary survivors advocating against the use of the practice

Ending Death by Incarceration



ALC has a robust approach to ending DBI in Pennsylvania that includes litigation, organizing, strategic communications, and legislative lobbying.

Pennsylvania law dictates mandatory sentences of life without the possibility of parole for people sentenced under charges of first-degree murder or second-degree murder. These sentences are, in effect, Death by Incarceration, and PA is an extreme outlier in issuing them.

The prevalence of DBI sentences has also led to a sharp increase in the number of elderly people in PA prisons. Aging lifers not only pose a low risk of reoffending, but many have invaluable life experiences, wisdom, and leadership to share with their communities, where such mentoring and credible messengers are badly needed. Warehousing people from a young age with no opportunity for release is inhumane, unjust, and tremendously costly to our communities.

- More than **5000+** people are serving DBI in PA more than any other state except Florida.
- More than **1 in 10** people serving DBI sentences in the U.S. are in Pennsylvania prisons.
- Black Pennsylvanians are serving DBI sentences at a rate more than **18 times** higher than that of white Pennsylvanians.
- More people serving DBI sentences were convicted in Philadelphia County than in any other county or parish in the U.S.
- Most people sentenced to DBI are teenagers and young adults under the age of 25 whose brains aren't fully developed.

Ending Death by Incarceration

Litigation

ALC has pursued legal strategies and cases that have softened the target of ending DBI for the more than 1100 people serving that sentence for felony murder in PA. Currently we're litigating Commonwealth v. Derek Lee in front of the PA Supreme Court. An eventual win for Mr. Lee in this high profile case would be a landmark victory, as it could effect all 1100 people serving this sentence for second degree murder in PA.

Furthermore it could have national implications for the broader movement to eliminate **all** DBI sentences, as change-oriented criminal defense and civil rights litigators are increasingly turning to state constitutional litigation given the current composition of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Organizing & Narrative Change

ALC is building community power among impacted Pennsylvanians to be a potent force in lobbying for legislation to allow parole eligibility for all people currently serving DBI sentences. We've organized a statewide network of lifers and their family members whom we've enlisted in this effort. And we're shaping the narrative around DBI on many other fronts, including generating high visibility press coverage about the practice and our campaign to end it; and participating in panels, teach-ins, and other presentations and public education initiatives.

We've also produced two major research reports on the topic: one on women serving DBI in PA; and another analyzing the entire population of people serving DBI across PA.



International Human Rights

ALC is part of a coalition that is situating DBI as a human rights violation. In 2022, our group submitted a 31-page complaint to the United Nations asserting that the U.S. is committing torture and violating the prohibition against racial discrimination by condemning people to DBI.

In 2023, a delegation led by ALC's executive director Robert Saleem Holbrook and other people directly impacted by extreme sentencing, traveled to the UN in Geneva to convince that body to pressure the U.S. to end DBI. Their testimony resulted in the UN's International Human Rights Committee calling on the U.S. to impose a moratorium on these sentences.

Dismantling Deadly Jails



ALC is targeting county jails in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and elsewhere, in coalition with partners and through our legal, organizing, and communications arms.

Philly Jails

The state's largest county jail system is a human rights disaster. In the past decade, more than **135** people have died in Philly's jails, and more than **50** of those deaths have been since 2020 alone — some of the highest rates in the nation.

More than **30,000** people cycle in and out of these facilities each year, with more than **4400** people locked up on any given day. These incarcerated members of our community, 74% of whom are Black and 90% of whom have not been convicted of a crime, are being tortured, with no access to basic human rights, including medical care, showers, phone calls, meals, and visits from loved ones.

ALC's most significant legal action aimed at the Philly's jails to date is as co-counsel in *Remick et. Al. v. City of Philadelphia*, a federal civil rights class action lawsuit filed in 2020 addressing atrocious, life-threatening conditions including insufficient out-of-cell time, delays in the provision of medical care, excessive force by corrections officers, violence among incarcerated people, and insufficient access to legal counsel and the courts. In 2022, a settlement was reached with the City of Philadelphia, designed to immediately improve conditions for people in the system's jails. In 2024 ALC and co-counsels filed and won a motion of contempt and sanctions against the City of Philadelphia for its jails' failure to comply with the terms that were mandated in the case's settlement of Remick.

ALC organizers coordinate the Prison Oversight Board Advocates coalition of 30+ local organizations and community members working to create Philly's first independent entity to monitor and investigate human rights abuses in Philly's jails.

We also work with other movement partners and impacted community members in Philadelphia to organize rallies, informational town halls, and other activities designed to bring awareness, public pressure, and engagement to the efforts to shutter city's jails and advocate for those who're trapped within them.

Dismantling Deadly Jails

We're building collective power to decarcerate and dismantle these deadly institutions; protect people who encounter them; and divest funding from jails and shift it to true public safety supports like housing, healthcare, and education.



Allegheny County Jail

Since 2020, more than **23** people are known to have perished in the custody of PA's second largest county jail system — one of the highest jail death rates in the U.S. On an average day, around **1700** people are caged at ACJ, including up to several dozen children. Many are in desperate need of mental and physical health treatment, and the majority have disabilities, but ACJ fails dismally at providing appropriate care for its vulnerable population.

Living conditions at the jail are horrible. People inside ACJ are regularly subjected to solitary confinement despite a voter referendum in 2021 that put stringent limitations on its use there. And the jail staff's brutality and negligence are literally criminal. But in a watershed legal victory in 2024, ALC and our co-counsels settled Howard v. Williams. The resolution of this major class action lawsuit requires the jail to make sweeping changes that will impact all people with psychiatric disabilities who are held there currently or in the future, and could potentially lead to a reduction of the jail's population if ACJ does not comply.

ALC's litigation, communications, and organizing teams including our Court Watch program, are battling to address these entrenched human rights abuses, decarcerate ACJ, and support those who are caged there. We generate a relentless stream of critical news coverage, maintain a vocal presence at Jail Oversight Board meetings, and provide a range of support services to people in ACJ and their loved ones.

Freeing People from Prison

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As an abolitionist organization, the objective of winning release for people in prison — both in individual cases and as a result of strategies and policies of decarceration — is the founding core of our mission.

ALC sprang from the self-liberatory efforts of incarcerated people who organized themselves, and their loved ones outside, to fight for their rights and freedom. We have a long history of litigating cases challenging unjust convictions and sentences, and of winning release for political and politicized prisoners and other people who've served many decades behind bars. Many of those we've represented in successful efforts to win release were mentored by political prisoners in the PA state prison system, including Russell Maroon Shoatz, ALC's first client.

In the last few years we've also significantly scaled up our focus on so-called "compassionate release" cases that give a pathway out of prison and into more dignified and appropriate end-of-life care for terminally ill people who meet stringent guidelines. The demand for this representation is intense as the number of aging people in PA's prisons has grown exponentially as a result of the state's draconian long-term sentencing laws. Compassionate release cases are a highly specialized and labor intensive type of litigation, and we're developing a network of other firms and entities with whom we're sharing our expertise so that more people can be assisted.

Safeguarding Rights



In addition to being places of punishment where incarcerated people are removed from their families and communities, prisons are also sites of ideological control. People live under 24-hour surveillance, and their conversation, communication, and reading materials are constantly scrutinized and frequently censored. From our beginning ALC has advocated for and with people and organizations that understand the importance of personal transformation, political knowledge, and social uplift in the struggle against the carceral state.

Our support for the political rights of incarcerated people dates back to our earliest days. It includes several of our foundational lawsuits, including one that addressed SCI Coal Township's confiscation of the mail of Robert Saleem Holbrook (now ALC's executive director) who was still incarcerated at the time; and one that addressed the so-called "Silencing Act," a law aimed directly at silencing political prisoner, journalist, and intellectual Mumia Abu-Jamal, while being phrased so broadly as to chill the speech of all incarcerated people and anyone who publishes their words.

Protecting Health



A safe and healthy physical environment, adequate and affordable health care, and access to ample and nutritious food, clean water, and sanitation supplies and services, are vital and essential human rights that are regularly denied to people in prison.

Physical and mental health care are often grossly inadequate, untimely, or altogether non-existent. The quality and quantity of food tends to be atrocious. Incarcerated people routinely experience horrendous living conditions such as high heat, extreme cold, poor ventilation, mold, vermin, and deplorable water quality. They also often lack access to basic sanitation services such as showers and working toilets, and adequate supplies of items such as toilet paper, menstrual products, and face masks.

In addition, prisons and jails are frequently situated in proximity to toxic industries or on sites that are environmentally contaminated, putting incarcerated people at an increased risk of harmful health impacts from polluted air and water.

Through organizing, litigation, and strategic communications, ALC works to mitigate all of these negative health and environmental conditions that incarcerated people encounter.

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Watching the Courts



ALC launched its Court Watch program in early 2020 to monitor criminal court proceedings in Allegheny County.

Court Watch trains and organizes volunteers to attend hearings and document their observations. Data collected by court watchers who observe hundreds of legal proceedings each year is used by our litigation, organizing, and communications teams to assist people encountering Allegheny County's courts and jail and to agitate for systemic changes to court-related policies and practices.

Court Watch also organizes other forms of aid for people (and their loved ones), facing court appearances and jail time including court packing, a participatory defense hub, post-release support, and more.



I was interested in donating after reading about your organization in a couple separate articles.
One was the call for court watchers, which is such vital work to help hold the justice system accountable and provide voters with real information about judges.



Challenging the Police



ALC engages at every point in the criminal legal system and along its carceral pipeline, and challenges all of its institutions, including policing, the system's brutal entry point.

ALC has co-counseled class action litigation on behalf of survivors of police violence in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh during the racial justice uprising in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020, including *Smith v. City of Philadelphia* that resulted in Philly agreeing to pay monetary damages totaling \$9.25 million collectively to those who were harmed — one of the largest settlements of its kind in the city's history.

We've supported families whose loved ones have been harmed by police; agitated around police budgets and attempts to (re)establish aggressive and biased policing practices; published impactful research about how apartheid policing targets BIPOC and poor people; and monitored the accountability measures for police departments that our litigation has mandated.

Abolishing Probation, Cash Bail, & Parole

Two-thirds of people in Pennsylvania's
jails have not been convicted of the
offenses for which they're being held.
They're languishing behind bars (often for weeks or months) waiting for trials or hearings simply because they're unable to afford bail, or haven't been granted the opportunity to be bailed out.
Discretionary judicial decisions around bail and are often racially biased or otherwise problematic.

At the same time, incarceration of even a few days can have enormous negative effects on those who are detained as well as their loved ones and communities. So ALC uses many tactics to address the harms of pre-trial and probation-related detention, including litigation, strategic communications, community organizing, and our Court Watch program. We've also testified at legislative committee hearings about proposed and existing legislation and presented alternative policies that could reduce needless and harmful pretrial detention.

Alongside probation, parole also ensnares tens of thousands of Pennsylvanians. Roughly 78,000 people were on parole in PA at the start of 2024 (far more than any other state except CA and TX, which both have much higher populations). More than half of the people in PA prisons are there because of parole violations.



Parole subjects people to ongoing correctional control and surveillance, impeding their everyday activities with a gauntlet of rules and restrictions. Yet data shows that parole has diminishing returns since 70% of recidivism occurs within the first three years of release. And for people over age 40, the rates of recidivism are even lower.

As part of the Coalition for Parole Justice, ALC advocates for legislation to end long-term and lifetime parole, and to create a "sunset" clause that gives people an opportunity to get off parole after three years.



Defending Democracy



Working to protect voting rights and access, ensuring the will of voters is respected, ending prison gerrymandering — ALC is involved in defending the democratic process in these and other ways, especially for currently and formerly incarcerated people, and for populations heavily impacted by the criminal punishment system.

We educate the public about issues related to the criminal legal system that are influenced or controlled by elected officials and political systems, and work to ensure that people in marginalized communities have access to democratic institutions, and that the choices they make at the ballot box are protected.

We organize and participate in forums explaining the electoral process and highlighting the positions of candidates for office. Our advocacy has supported grassroots efforts around the state to organize voter referendums challenging county jail conditions, and to establish non-police emergency/crisis response entities. And we've successfully blocked blatant efforts to undermine the will of, and outright disenfranchise voters, such as attempts to impeach and strip power from Philadelphia's progressive district attorney, whom voters in Philly's Black, Brown, and poor neighborhoods overwhelmingly supported.

People





ALC's advocacy in PA's prisons, jails, and courts directly affected at least **60,000** legal-system-involved individuals in 2023, plus many of their family members and other loved ones.

Our campaigns aimed at probation and parole have implications for the combined **170,000** people under these forms of supervision in PA.

Our efforts to defend democracy help protect the rights and wishes of **tens of thousands** of voters.



People

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And our litigation has not only set many important legal precedents in the fight to dismantle the criminal legal system, it's also resulted in record-breaking settlements for our clients:

- ALC was co-counsel to class action litigation against Philadelphia's police department that in 2023 resulted in a \$9.25 million award for the plaintiffs, the largest settlement in a mass protest-related case in the city's history.
- In 2021, ALC settled a case against the PA Department of Corrections for \$8.5
 million for the family of an incarcerated person who died as a result of medical
 neglect by prison officials, the largest settlement ever paid for a state prison
 death in Pennsylvania.



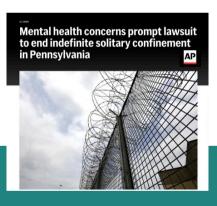
Narrative Change



In 2023 alone, more than 120 media articles used our preferred framing to cover our work while spotlighting the disastrous criminal legal system in PA.

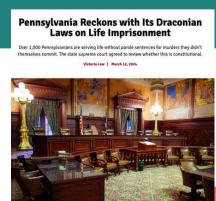






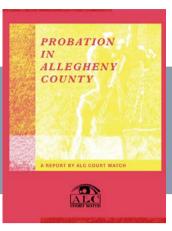


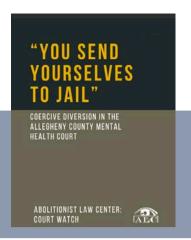




Data & Policy

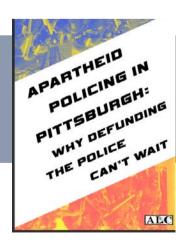
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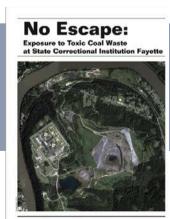


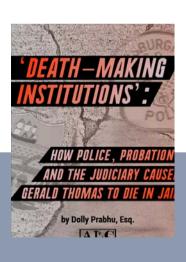


ALC regularly produces hard-hitting reports highlighting our research on various aspects of the criminal legal system. These publications contain powerful data we've collected and analyzed, and clear policy recommendations geared towards public officials and other policy makers. Our library includes reports on Death by Incarceration, toxic prison environmental conditions, racial bias in policing and court practices, and how the criminal legal system treats people with developmental, cognitive, and mental health disabilities, among other topics.









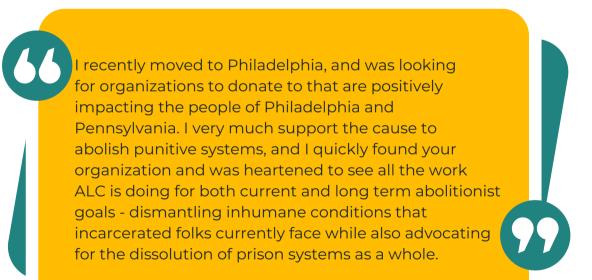
OUR SUPPORTERS

ALC is honored to receive financial support from individuals and institutions
who share our abolitionist goals and recognize our unique expertise and leadership
in this movement. We welcome their partnership and we appreciate and value every
single instance of funding, from modest grassroots donations to major gifts and
grants.

We also appreciate the valuable contributions of our many volunteers, interns, and contractors.



"I've felt for a long time that our carceral system is one of our country's worst injustices. I was looking around for criminal justice organizations to support and found the Abolitionist Law Center had a really awesome mix of community, harm reduction, and policy advocacy."



OUR TEAM

We're grateful for the passionate dedication, and savvy and relentless work of our staff, and the wise guidance and generous gifts of time and knowledge from our board of directors.



Staff



Corinne Austen, Paralegal

Amber Black, Development Director

Emily Cleath, Communications Manager

Quinn Cozzens, Staff Attorney

Al Depiro, Operations Director

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connease warren, Communications Director

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