

theDefender

FALL 2026



James Duff Lyall
Executive Director



ACLU Vermont

DEMOCRACY depends on all of us

As we approach Election Day, our country is being tested like never before. The Trump administration wants us to lose faith in elections, in the courts, in the power of protest and in each other. As frightening as this moment is, we must remember that one of the keys to resisting authoritarianism is an engaged and informed electorate.

The ACLU is in every state fighting for fair elections, so that every voter who wants to vote can do so, with the facts and information they need, and every vote is counted.

For all the justifiable concern about this election outside of Vermont, there is difficult work to do right here at home. Over the past several years, too many of our elected leaders have not held to the values, priorities, and needs of our communities—and it's hurting all of us.

In poll after poll, the people of Vermont have been clear about what we need. We need communities in which everyone's fundamental rights are respected. We need our neighborhoods to remain free from masked federal agents. And we need state leaders to be unified in opposition to the Trump administration's abuse of power.

We need the wealthy to pay their fair share in taxes, because a country in which the richest 1% control 32% of the nation's wealth is no longer functioning as a true democracy. We need to end mass incarceration and racial profiling. We need everyone—working families, renters, people struggling with homelessness—to have a place to live.

This is what Vermonters have been saying for years, and still, many of their elected leaders fail to act on it. This past biennium, presented with so many opportunities to make Vermont a better place—to unmask ICE, or strengthen tenant protections, or fund emergency shelter, or raise taxes on those who can most afford it—too many leaders disregarded their constituents' needs, to the detriment of our communities and our democracy.

These are life and death issues—Vermont has one of the highest rates of homelessness, the worst racial disparities, and the least affordable healthcare in the country. Especially at a moment when democracy is in question, we need our elected leaders to represent us—all of us—and not just the wealthy few.

This Election Day, it's not enough to simply look to the R, D, or P next to someone's name. We need to educate ourselves about the candidates, vote our values, and hold our elected representatives accountable.

PHOTO CREDIT: LYNSEY WEATHERSPOON / WILL MARTINEZ

in the State House

ACLU-VT advocacy team members Falko Schilling, Alex Karambelas, and Jordan Souder

JOIN THE ACTION TEAM

Be the first to hear about opportunities to lobby leaders and advocate for change in your community.

VISIT
acluvt.org/team
to learn more.

When President Trump was elected in 2024, we published our plan for building a Firewall for Freedom—a set of policy changes that would better protect Vermonters from federal abuses of power and intrusions into their rights and liberties. Building on our past successes enacting some of the first and/or strongest protections in the country with our police use-of-force policy and ban on facial recognition technology in 2020, the Reproductive Liberty Amendment in 2022, and shield laws for patients and providers of gender-affirming and reproductive care in 2023-24, we knew that the 2025-26 legislative biennium was going to be a critical window of time for shoring up our rights.

Across the last two years, we have fought hard to secure protections for immigrants, protect people's privacy, keep our neighbors housed, and raised revenue to fund essential services. In 2026, we helped pass the Constitutional Accountability Act—a key law enforcement accountability law that will make it easier for people whose rights are violated by ICE to have their day in court. We also pushed legislation that will help people access essential services and locations, like schools and hospitals, without fear of being assaulted by federal immigration authorities. These new laws will help protect our communities from abuses of power by the federal government.

This year, we were proud to be joined by community advocates in the State House for our inaugural ACLU lobby days. We were especially excited by the youth lobby day. Students from two high schools joined us for a day of sitting in on hearings, learning

about the legislative process, and speaking with lawmakers about the issues they care about most.

As part of the ACLU's 11th annual National Advocacy Institute, 10 Vermonters joined 900 fellow youth activists from across the country in Washington, D.C. in July, to lobby to Congress for the passage of the Dream and Promise Act. These students participated in intensive advocacy training before taking part in a Day of Action on Capitol Hill, meeting directly with lawmakers to demand protections and a pathway to citizenship for immigrant communities.

Our advocacy does not end when the legislative session comes to a close, and our team is already planning for the next biennium. If you want to get more involved in our efforts, consider signing up for the Action Team! You will be the first to hear about opportunities to show up for your community, key updates about our initiatives, and upcoming events where you can connect with fellow ACLU supporters. Visit acluvt.org/team to learn more and sign up today.



Youth activists at ACLU National Advocacy Institute

PHOTO CREDIT: BOBBI LOCICERO/ GABRIEL CALAMBA

community support **POWERS** OUR WORK

We are deeply grateful for the outpouring of support from community members who hosted fundraisers to support our efforts this spring. Whether it was a percentage of sales by a local business or a social event, what matters most is that our community is showing up for this work and for each other more than ever before. Thank you for your support.



Cadwell family members at Barn Dance Fundraiser

Barn Dance Fundraiser

Longtime ACLU supporters, the Cadwell family of Pittsford, VT, hosted their first barn dance fundraiser at their family farm in 2017. This year, on a beautiful May afternoon, 100 friends

and neighbors kicked up their heels with music by Vermont party band, The Grift. The barn dance raised twice the amount the family hoped to, making it the most successful community fundraising event in our affiliate's history.

Dance for Democracy

The Montpelier Performing Arts HUB was the venue for Dance for Democracy, hosted by DJ Ivy. The vision was to create community through dance, to "revitalize your soul and transform your angst" with proceeds supporting ACLU-VT.

Pottery Fundraiser

In March, Potters for Justice hosted a pottery sale at Burlington Beer Company with 100% of proceeds going to support ACLU-VT. Dozens of artists donated their work to the sale, raising thousands of dollars for our organization. Art is resistance, and it is the power of community that will see us through these challenging times.

Interested in hosting your own community fundraiser? Contact Development Manager, Stephanie Hunt at shunt@acluvt.org.



Big Girl Company featured in Potters for Justice

PHOTO CREDIT: ADDIE CHRIS

GIVE TODAY

Help us defend the freedoms we're fighting for every day.



Donate Online

WAYS TO GIVE

Thank you for your commitment to making this work possible. Your continued support ensures we have the resources we need to defend our democracy and protect the rights of everyone who calls Vermont home. Please consider making a gift to the ACLU of Vermont Foundation today. For full details, visit acluvt.org/give.

DONATE BY MAIL

Checks can be mailed to:
ACLU Foundation of Vermont
PO Box 277, Montpelier, VT 05601

MAKE A TRIBUTE GIFT

Donate in honor or memory of someone special.

LEAVE A LEGACY

Include the ACLU in your will, leaving a legacy of liberty for generations to come.

MAKE A GIFT OF STOCK

We accept gifts of appreciated stocks or other marketable securities.



For any questions about your support, please contact: Development Manager, Stephanie Hunt at shunt@acluvt.org or call 802-223-6304 x 119.

The ACLU Foundation of Vermont is a 501(c)3 organization that supports the ACLU of Vermont's legal and education programs. Contributions to the Foundation are tax-deductible to the extent permitted by law.

A botched ICE raid and our fight for accountability.

AT OUR DOORSTEP

The lack of accountability in law enforcement harms our communities. That reality is now evident on a wide scale, with ICE scaling up attacks on cities and towns across the country, from Los Angeles to Minneapolis to Portland, and countless communities in between. We have all seen the violence perpetuated by this rogue agency and the continuous threats to the safety and well-being of citizens and noncitizens alike.

The ACLU remains steadfast in our insistence that law enforcement officers at all levels—state, local, and federal—must be held accountable. A botched ICE raid in South Burlington provides yet another window into why that matters—and what we and our partners are doing about it.

A neighborhood became a war zone

Clearly, Vermont is not immune to the federal government's anti-immigrant agenda. The events of March 11 were yet another violent display of federal overreach, this time with the complicity of Vermont's own law enforcement agencies.

The actions of ICE and local police on March 11 were widely condemned, and yet six months later, Vermont law enforcement leaders continue to draw all the wrong lessons from that day. Rather than take responsibility for facilitating unlawful ICE arrests—condemned by three separate federal court judges—or for using excessive force against protesters, Vermont police leaders unilaterally absolved their agencies of any wrongdoing.

Vermonters are not fooled. Public testimony at the State House and before the Burlington City Council included multiple accounts of protesters being choked, pepper-sprayed, and dragged by masked state and local police at the March 11 raid. The events of that day and its aftermath show yet again that our work to keep local police out of the deportation business is not finished.

A new tool for accountability

Back in December, with the federal government escalating attacks on American communities, our team started talking with lawmakers about how to close a giant loophole in our legal system that lets federal agents off the hook for violating constitutional rights. Under federal law, a person cannot sue any federal agent for violating their rights in federal court. But

that doesn't mean states can't create a legal pathway for people to do so under state law—and that's exactly what Vermont did, with our help.

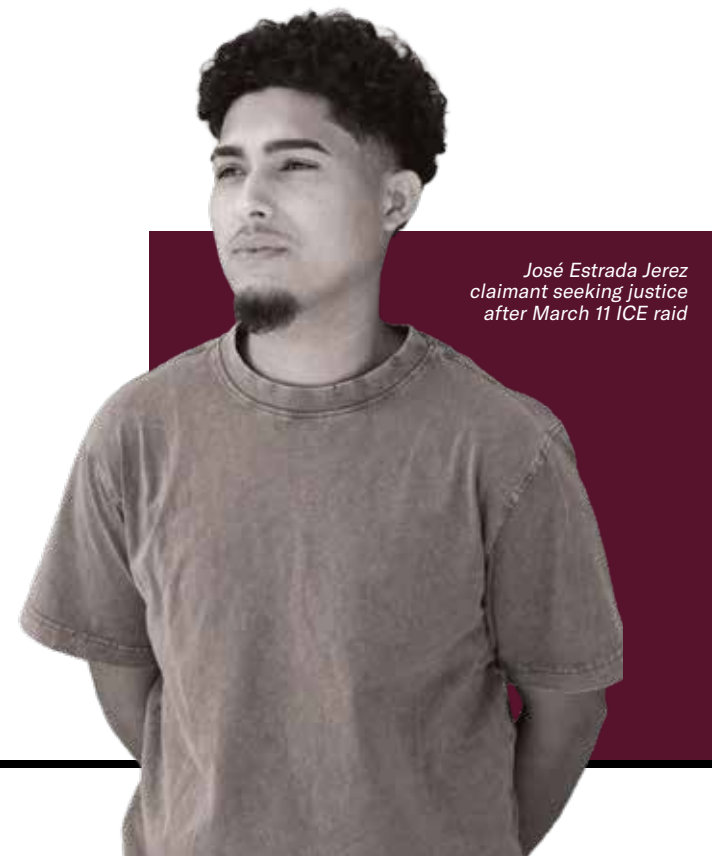
The House Judiciary Committee quickly took up our proposed "Constitutional Accountability Act." After the events of March 11, when support for the legislation skyrocketed, we helped thousands of Vermonters contact their legislators in support of the bill, helping ensure its passage into law.

This legislation applies to local, state, and federal officials, and is one of the strongest such bills in the country. We appreciate the tri-partisan coalition of legislators and thousands of Vermonters who raised their voices to make this law a reality, at a time when more accountability measures like this one are so badly needed.

SEEKING JUSTICE

The People v. Agents of Chaos and Cruelty

In July, we filed legal claims on behalf of two people inside of the home raided by ICE on March 11, Johana Patin Patin and José Estrada Jerez.



José Estrada Jerez
claimant seeking justice
after March 11 ICE raid



PHOTO CREDIT: LIBBY O'NEILL

Johana is a beloved member of her community in South Burlington, where she moved with her husband and two children, now ages 4 and 9, in 2023. She is a founding member of the advisory committee at a local family center and is described in letters of support submitted to federal court as hard-working, generous, and deeply respected by her neighbors.

José is a 19-year-old U.S. citizen and aspiring electrician who grew up in Louisiana and Honduras. He moved to Vermont with his uncle this past winter to work in the construction industry. He and his uncle shared a house with Johana and her family.

On the morning of March 11th, ICE agents gathered outside of José and Johana's home searching for a man who was not there and who was unknown to the home's residents. Agents used a battering ram to break down the door, entered with guns drawn, and moved them physically with unnecessary force. They screamed questions, threatened to deploy tear gas, illegally searched José's pockets, and ransacked the home. One agent fired a gunshot through the attic floor accidentally, terrifying the home's residents while other agents laughed.

One agent asked Johana if she had papers; she replied that she was "in the process." Despite the fact that she is an asylum seeker with valid work authorization, the agent handcuffed and detained her—without a warrant for her arrest. After Johana, her sister, and José's uncle were taken away by ICE, José was left alone in the wreckage of their home.

Johana was interrogated at an ICE office and spent the night in prison. The next day, restrained in a metal cage inside a truck, she and her sister endured hours of transport unable to sleep or lie down. Without explanation, agents eventually turned the truck around and returned Johana to prison. Johana was imprisoned and separated from her family for five days

before she was released on bail by a federal judge, who found her arrest and detention unconstitutional.

We are proud to represent Johana and José in their legal claim, two of the 54 claims the ACLU filed against the federal government, part of a coordinated campaign to demand justice for citizens and noncitizens who have suffered serious

violence, abuse, and neglect at the hands of federal agents. Each claim tells an individual story, and together, they reveal a widespread pattern of abuse that endangers all of us. And that's why we won't stop fighting for accountability and justice for our clients.

Learn more about our clients' stories and this nationwide effort at acluvt.org/ftca.

"No están solos," said José Estrada Jerez. "The government is doing everything that it can to make us feel afraid, to make us feel small, and to try to push us into the shadows. But people should look at what

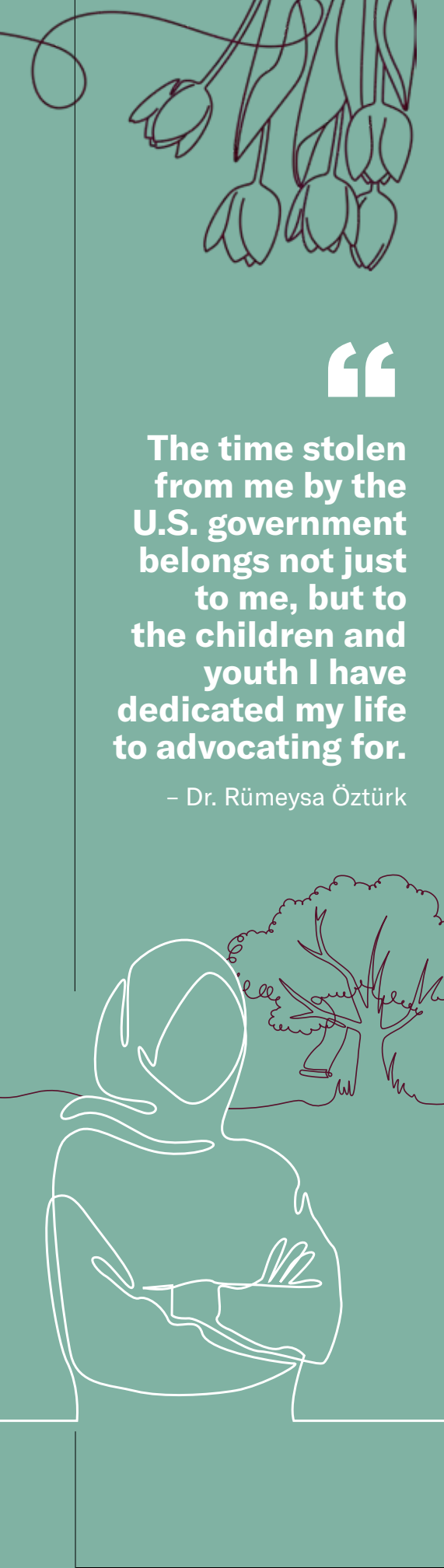
happened on March 11 and see not only the trauma we faced, but also how powerful our community is when it stands together. By bringing this claim, I hope to see justice not only for myself, but for everyone who has been hurt by these out-of-control agents."

"My family and I have built a life here," said Johana Patin, speaking through an interpreter. "We volunteer our time to support other families in our community. We work hard, we pay taxes, and our children go to school here. I hope that people who hear my story will understand that no one should live in fear that the government will separate them from their children, physically harm them, or throw them in prison based only on false stereotypes about immigrants and people from Spanish-speaking countries. I think the people of Vermont would agree that we all deserve better."

"There was no authority that we could call on for help. No police who would help us in that instance. We could only count on the support of our neighbors and I know without that support things would have gone much worse for us."

— W

South Burlington resident who was mistakenly targeted and detained during the March 11 raid



on the
DOCKET

“
The time stolen from me by the U.S. government belongs not just to me, but to the children and youth I have dedicated my life to advocating for.
– Dr. Rümeysa Öztürk

Dr. Öztürk returns home



In April, our client Dr. Rümeysa Öztürk returned home to Turkey—following the completion of her Ph.D. at Tufts University earlier this year. This brought a close to her ordeal that began last March, after the ACLU and her supporting legal team successfully defended her against politically motivated retaliation. Reflecting on this victory and her decision to leave the United States, Dr. Öztürk shares: “The time stolen from me by the U.S. government belongs not just to me, but to the children and youth I have dedicated my life to advocating for. With them in mind, I am choosing to return home as planned to continue my career as a woman scholar without losing more time to the state-imposed violence and hostility I have experienced in the United States—all for nothing more than co-signing an op-ed advocating for Palestinian rights.” Her cases have now all been dismissed.

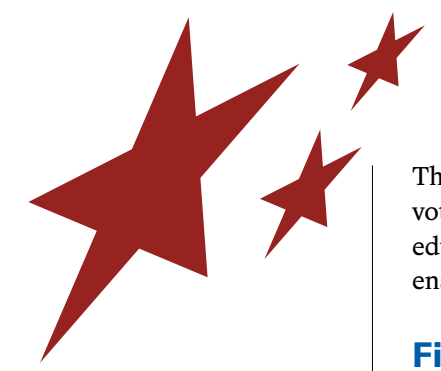
Mohsen Mahdawi’s First Amendment fight continues

The Second Circuit Court of Appeals dealt Mohsen Mahdawi a setback when a three-judge panel ruled in July that federal courts do not have jurisdiction when immigration enforcement detains noncitizens in retaliation for their protected speech. But the case did not end there. In September, after all the judges voted, the Second Circuit issued a surprise order for the entire court to rehear his case. Mohsen had spent two weeks detained in a Vermont prison when ICE arrested him during what was supposed to be his final citizenship interview, all in retaliation for his constitutionally protected speech in support of Palestinian human rights. We will continue fighting for Mohsen’s freedom and for everyone’s right to free speech.

\$150,000 settlement in police abuse case

In 2021, Burlington police needlessly and violently escalated a routine encounter with 14-year-old J.A.—and then refused to take responsibility for the harm they caused, instead blaming the victim. The City of Burlington agreed to pay our client \$150,000 to settle the police misconduct lawsuit. Although Burlington still has a long way to go to address discrimination in policing, our client welcomes this settlement as a vindication of his rights and a measure of accountability for the severe harm that Burlington officials inflicted upon him.

Mobilizing to Safeguard
2026 ELECTIONS



★
Vote
LIKE YOUR RIGHTS
DEPEND ON IT

VERMONT
VOTING
RIGHTS

Vermont has some of the strongest voter protections in the country—including same day registration, universal vote by mail, and more.

Check out our Know Your Voting Rights resources at acluvt.org/kyrvote to learn more about your rights.



The nationwide ACLU network is mobilizing to protect our right to vote and to have our votes be counted ahead of the 2026 election. From litigation and policymaking to public education and strategic communications, we are fighting with everything we’ve got to ensure that everyone who is eligible to vote has access to the ballot box this year.

Fighting for Fair Elections

The Trump administration is trying to make it harder for people to vote. Our work protecting the right to vote has already begun. **Before Election Day, that work includes efforts to:**

- Protect voter privacy in 25+ states
- Block the DOJ from creating a national voter database to surveil and purge voters
- Protect fair maps and mail-in ballots
- Challenge discriminatory ballot and ID laws



Guaranteeing Fair Votes

Our colleagues are running the largest election safeguarding program in this organization’s history to build confidence in the electoral process and set the tone for election defense in an environment ripe for crises and interference. **We’re making sure every vote counts, and that includes plans to:**

- Enlist 3,000 volunteers including 1,000 poll and certification monitors
- Staff election protection hotlines with qualified legal professionals
- Deescalate at the polls if federal agents are deployed
- Monitor election board meetings in key counties for any mischief, such as closing polling places or shortening voting hours

Enforcing the Results

By training certification monitors, working with local officials, mobilizing our grassroots activists, and drafting key litigation, the ACLU is equipped to prove and enforce the true election results. **We are prepared to:**

- Train and deploy hundreds of certification monitors
- Build relationships with key election officials to ensure they uphold procedures, including certifying results
- Manage potential mass mobilization in response to attempts to subvert election results
- File litigation to challenge any election fraud or interference

These strategies and dozens more already in motion are laying the foundation for ensuring our right to vote is protected, our votes are counted, and our elections are secure.

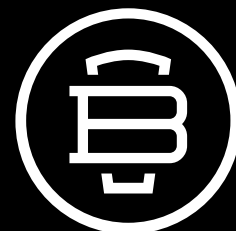
PHOTO CREDIT: ANDI RICE



ACLU of Vermont
PO Box 277
Montpelier, VT 05601

acluvt.org

ACLU Vermont Annual CELEBRATION



Join us at Burlington Beer Company on **Thursday, October 22nd, from 6 – 8pm**, to celebrate our inspiring Vermont community of advocates, supporters, and volunteers. Come mingle and hear from our team about ACLU's impact this year and plans for the year ahead.

Light fare and a cash bar available.

Please RSVP at
acluvt.org/AC26

Invite a friend to do the same!



BURLINGTON BEER CO.

180 FLYNN AVENUE | BURLINGTON, VERMONT