

VOTE

BALLOT

VOICE OF THE  
EXPERIENCED  
**2022**  
IMPACT REPORT

## OUR MISSION

VOTE is a grassroots organization founded and run by formerly incarcerated people (FIP), our families, and our allies.

We build power through community organizing, policy advocacy, and civic engagement. We are dedicated to restoring the full human and civil rights of those most impacted by the criminal (in)justice system.

**Together** we have the experience, expertise and power to improve public safety in Louisiana and beyond without relying on mass incarceration.



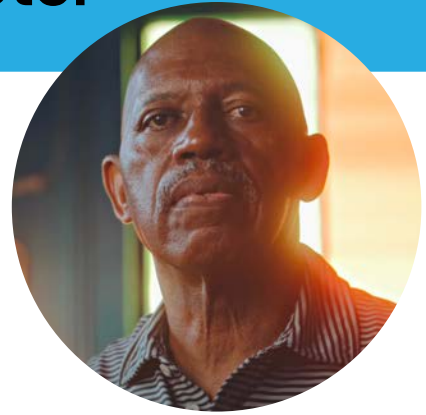
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# A Letter from the Executive Director

**2022 was our year of reunions.**

We spent nearly two years separated. Due to the pandemic and building renovations, we had no place of our own to congregate together.



We opened 2022 with celebrations not just of the new year, but of the grand opening of our new VOTE home. Just like the big family reunions, friends and family we hadn't seen in years came to New Orleans to be there when we cut the big blue ribbon.

We rejoined partners, collaborators, and allies in the spring for the first full legislative session since 2020. The session was tough this year, and we spent almost as much time testifying to not overturn a previously passed measure as we did to add or change new ones.

We invited the whole VOTE family over on Memorial Day. We hosted over 200 people for a backyard cookout, fellowship, and karaoke open mic at our headquarters in New Orleans. Checo was our master griller that day, a role he exceeded if his food line was anything to go by.

And, in the fall, we participated in the FICPFM 2022 Free the Vote national convening after four years apart from our larger coalition family. We spent a whole weekend collectively strategizing and building power with nearly 700 people as we prep for the elections and superelection in 2024. Collectively, we touched 97,523 people in our outreach that day.

It was a coming together. Each one. A reunion to be back in the community with our movement builders and shakers. **To put it simply, when we gather, we make things happen.**

In 2023, I will have been home for twenty years. This work, in that time, has expanded twentyfold. Into national convenings. Changes in state and federal laws. Owning the VOTE home and a new transitional home for women. **When our people show up and show out together, we create disruption, change, and impact.**

Thank you for being a part of the VOTE family. We look forward to hosting you soon.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Norris Henderson'. Below the signature is the printed name 'Norris Henderson'.

Norris Henderson, Founder & Executive Director

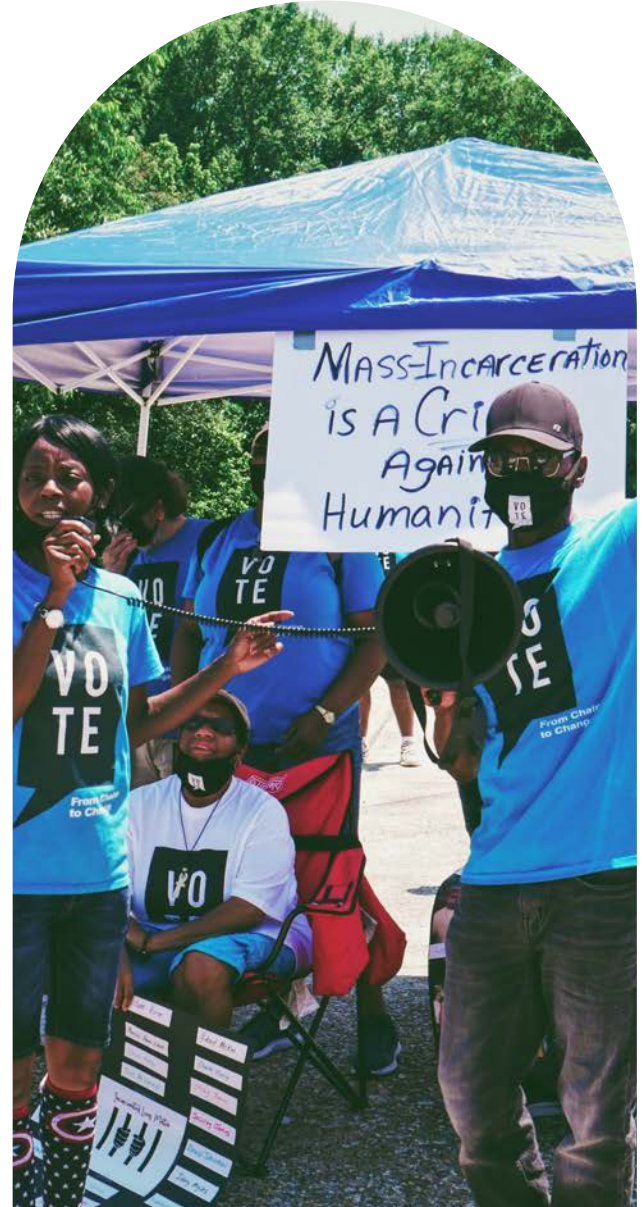
## What We Do

- Voting Rights.
- Medical Rights.
- Employment Rights.
- Housing Rights.
- Policy Reform.



## Our Impact

Changes in Louisiana state laws have, in New Orleans alone, allowed 209 people to be released from prison who were likely to eventually die in custody. 23 were children tried as adults, 79 had non-unanimous jury verdicts, and 11 were convicted prior to 1974.



**52yr**

Average age.

**24**

Average years served in prison.

**1,690**

Years of prison avoided.


**\$118m**

Lifetime incarceration costs saved.

## NEW ORLEANS CHAPTER

- Record year for member engagement: grew by 50% and collectively have recorded 655 hours and 15 mins – **nearly 82 work days!**
  - Peak months: March (119 hrs) and April (191 hrs) during legislative session
- Held their first meeting on the Westbank that 46 people attended; will start hosting regular meetings on the Westbank on the last Wednesday of the month
- Registered 100 FIPs, 150 new voters, and 60 voters who updated their registration

### JOIN US

 **Eastbank:** 1st Wed of every month, 6-8 PM

**Westbank:** Last Wed of every month, 6-8 PM



## FUTURE FOCUS

Voter registration efforts and continued community education around voting rights and access. They will also be focusing on establishing the Westbank monthly meetings.

## BATON ROUGE CHAPTER

- Held a graduation ceremony for chapter members that completed their 5-week leadership development training on relational organizing
- Had more members than ever testify in a committee hearing, in part due to storytelling training and confidence built at meetings
- Held the first *Pay It Forward* event in April - a joint convening of VOTE members, legislators, and law enforcement where members shared their experiences of incarceration and returning home to directly address the “rising crime” media narrative

### JOIN US

Last Thurs of every month, 6-8 PM



## FUTURE FOCUS

Their *Broken Systems, Not Broken People* campaign around East Baton Rouge Prison (one of the deadliest prisons in the US). This campaign sheds light on how the system pulls people in unnecessarily and keeps them for long periods of time which ultimately harms our communities in Baton Rouge.

## LAFAYETTE CHAPTER

- Held a meeting series to educate people around Jim Crow era oppression, using the book "*Building a Movement to End the New Jim Crow*," with guest speakers from the University of Lafayette
- Hosted experts in housing discrimination and homelessness in response to the housing crisis in Lafayette
- Have built up their member policy committee to 25 members, who will aid us in preparing for the 2023 legislative session and building campaigns around our legislative priorities

### JOIN US

3rd Thurs of every month, 6-7:30 PM



## FUTURE FOCUS

Building a campaign to address housing issues in Lafayette. This campaign will focus on the barriers people with felony convictions face when obtaining housing as they believe part of the homeless crisis in Lafayette is directly connected to people facing discrimination.

# PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

“

People change throughout the years from the person they once were to a person that has bettered themselves. And pray that we are not to continue to be looked at as we once were but as people who would like to show the world we have changed and regret the things we did in our past to be where we are today we just want another chance in the world today.

- Onnie Mack

”

“

If I had a chance to speak to lawmakers I would say, that when a person is sentenced to life without the possibility of probation or parole, society is saying, "what you've done is unforgivable." However, a second chance says, "you're not the crime you've committed and there is forgiveness." Second chance for lifers!!!

- Sheryl Martin

”

## JPAY

VOTE organizes on the inside at Department of Correction facilities through the prison email system JPAY. Our Mission Possible Team of formerly incarcerated staff is in contact with up to 50 people a week and even more during the legislative session.

What started as a way to determine whether our family on the inside was safe during COVID has turned into a powerful relational organizing tool. It harkens back to our roots of building power within institutions (Angola Special Civics Project) and makes us stronger together. Our 100 members on the inside engage with others around them on issues and share information to mobilize their friends and families to join the Movement. We added 70 new JPAY members and our goal is to turn them into active leaders to organize along with those we already have.

“

**Please understand that people can and do change, and because this is possible when you see evidence this change has occurred please stop holding one unchangeable minute of our lives against us. Thank you.**

- Stephanie King

”

“

Endless sentences can create a person, many want to see kept captive. Second chances are successful and forgiveness is eternal.

- Brenda Thornton

”



# On Capitol Hill

By: Deputy Director, Bruce Reilly



Signed by the Governor into Law:

**29 Bills** we supported

**1 Bill** we authored (Act 646)

In the 2022 legislative session, we ended the predatory fees for people seeking medical care inside prison. Although our legislative bill failed to pass the committee, our relationship with the Dept. Of Corrections (DOC) resulted in an internal policy change. Now, the \$3 to \$6 'co-pay' is only charged to those who have over \$200 in their account. Our work on this bill is part of a larger push on medical care in prisons that includes our attempts at oversight by the medical field, and the excellent work by the Promise of Justice Initiative in *Lewis v. Cain*. We believe healthcare is a basic human right and a complex issue for formerly incarcerated people. With a new sheriff and district attorney in New Orleans that support diversion, reentry, and interventions, we are optimistic that the Formerly Incarcerated Transitions (FIT) Clinic can be expanded into the jail setting, so community health workers and VOTE members, such as Danielle Metz and Haki Sekou, can apply their talents to support this widely forgotten group of people.



Some members of the legislature set their sights on opposing anything related to “criminal justice reform,” but they also failed to pass any rollbacks of our wins. In a hearing for HB746, regarding the use of solitary confinement in children’s prisons, formerly incarcerated people testifying ultimately shifted the tone of the entire conversation. Our Policy Analyst, Ronald Marshall, who returned home one year ago, was at the forefront of this testimony, sharing his own experience with solitary confinement to the committee. The head of the Office of Juvenile Justice then openly admitted the struggles of the juvenile system in its current form. HB746 passed, and new guidelines cap solitary confinement for juveniles to a number of hours, with enhanced review processes, in contrast to previous practices of weeks to months in confinement.

The biggest update came in the form of a La Supreme Court (LASC) ruling in late October, which cements our top priority of 2023: securing the unconstitutionality of non-unanimous jury verdicts retroactively in Louisiana. In 2021, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled *Ramos v. Louisiana*, a 2020 ruling against the constitutionality of non-unanimous jury verdicts, could not be applied retroactively and gave the states the right to decide themselves. The LASC ruled that a constitutional verdict is NOT required for the 1500 people still sitting in prison, but left the door open for the legislature to offer more post-conviction relief. VOTE and our allies will pursue all possible avenues of relief to grant new trials, including a constitutional amendment campaign to go on the ballot again for the people to decide. **We see this injustice no differently than abolishing slavery, yet leaving 1500 people still in chains.**



# CHASING DREAMS & MAKING REALITY



*On VOTE's success, new address, and the community we've created along the way*

In the last half-decade, VOTE's big victories in Louisiana have elevated us to a nationally-recognized and respected organization. It wasn't always like this though, Bruce Reilly, VOTE Deputy Director, muses. "We've definitely paid our dues," he says, referencing a time not too long ago when staff was just Norris and himself, instead of the thirty people that make it up now.

The tides began changing in 2016 surrounding the election of Donald Trump. Funders' interest in criminal justice work, Bruce says, was just beginning to take root. By 2018, on the heels of our voting rights bill victory and at the height of our campaign to pass Amendment 2, our organizational budget eclipsed \$1 million for the first time. Funding started to pour in. **"We hadn't been at a place financially yet where we could really look at the next step, but for us, that was securing a building," he says.** Bruce credits trust with our funders as the secret to our sauce. We are good stewards of people's money, he says, "because we are what we do and you can trust us to get the job done."

We got a lead on our now beloved Washington Avenue home in early 2020 through the connections of our community. The then-empty warehouses bookending the 14,000 sq. foot building had a lot of potential and we broke ground on renovations soon after its purchase. In the fall of 2020, our community space was completed first and our 501(c)(4) arm, Voters Organized, used this space as their quasi-headquarters during Jason Williams' district attorney campaign. Since then, it's become the epicenter of VOTE and Voters Organized as the location of our New Orleans monthly meetings, as well as town halls, candidate debates, and community events. By spring 2021, all construction was finished on the office suite, and by summer, all staff were officially moved in. The completed space boasts fifteen offices, two conference rooms, a kitchen, a library, an intern room, and an outdoor kitchen and patio.





With this dream made a reality, we wanted to throw a proper housewarming to commemorate this occasion. After rescheduling twice for the COVID-19 pandemic and then Hurricane Ida, we finally held our Grand Opening on January 15. We hosted nearly two hundred people for a day of programming which included a luncheon and panel discussion recounting our history, as well as the dedication of our upstairs conference room to our dear friend, former Rep. Pat Smith, and some encouraging words from another VOTE friend, John Legend, over video. Financial supporters were gracious yet again soon after when we expressed our desire to finish paying off the building in full – which we have accomplished as of mid-2022.

This building is an investment in our work and in the Movement. **But the real value of our home is measured in the looks on faces of folks just out of prison walking down the halls filled with our wins as we tell them, *This is OURS.*** “This space is our prison brother and sisterhood without the guards or the fences,” Bruce says. We can and will create change here. We can and will create memories here. We can and will create camaraderie here.

**Welcome home. It’s yours. It’s ours.**



# THANK YOU, MEMBERS

# MEMBER SPOTLIGHTS

Our work is powered by our membership base who are our people and our family, loved ones and allies. Where we have action in the movement, we have our members answering the call to: canvass, phone bank, testify at hearings, serve on committees, and educate their communities about the power of voter engagement. For those who also support us financially as well, thank you for helping to build the financial power to keep our Movement going. Our voice is amplified and unstoppable because of all of you.

Thank you for your continued time, sweat, voice, and passion.

In addition to acknowledging our hundreds-strong membership base, we also wanted to recognize a few special ones! Our Chapters took the time to nominate a member in each of their locales whom they felt showed up and showed out for VOTE during 2022. These members were our superstars in power building! Thank you for committing so much of yourselves to this Movement.

## Chapter Member of the Year:

**New Orleans:** Arlease Ward; **Baton Rouge:** Turishcheva White; **Lafayette:** Jullie Yokum

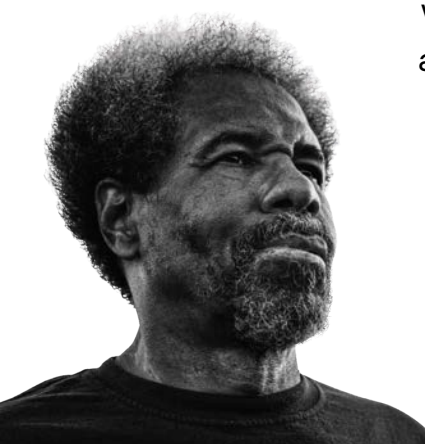


## In Memoriam

We also want to acknowledge our comrades in arms who have passed on in 2022. To our fallen soldiers and friends: we thank you for all you have done for the Movement and for your brothers and sisters in the fight.

Rest In Power.

Albert "Fox" Woodfox  
Clarence "Lil Daddy" Henderson



# SUSTAINING THE MOVEMENT

A donation towards our organization is a contribution in building our base, strategizing policy, and reforming the system. This Impact Report is only a snapshot, a single year, in what we can accomplish! Please pitch in to sustain our work into 2023 and beyond.

You can make a tax-deductible gift to us now before the end of the year on our website, [voiceoftheexperienced.org](https://voiceoftheexperienced.org), by check (mailing address on our website) or through our PayPal (QR code to the left, link below.)

**PayPal:** <https://bit.ly/votepaypal>



While incarcerated at Angola, Norris Henderson, Checo Yancy, and a group of civic-minded men dreaming of liberation, founded the Angola Special Civics Project (ASCP) in 1987. This work inspired the founding of VOTE in 2004.



VOTE PayPal QR Code

Today VOTE has a staff of over 20 people across three chapters, partner coalitions, and hundreds of members fighting against mass incarceration state and nationwide.

# Order your *Welcome Home* poster today!

Over the summer, students with the Young Artist Movement (YAM) partnered with local muralist, Nik Richard, and painted this iconic piece for the front of our building! The mural depicts Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm and Justice Thurgood Marshall overlooking the students' self-portraits holding their own artwork depicting overcoming adversity. **We are releasing a LIMITED TIME SPECIAL EDITION photo print of this mural to support the work of VOTE.**

Grab yours today by making an order through the QR code or link below. You will receive email confirmation of your order and another when it ships!



<https://bit.ly/votemuralprint>

## 2023 IMPORTANT DATES

### Louisiana 2023 Legislative Session

- Monday, April 10 to Thursday, June 8

### 2023 Election Dates

- March 25 = Municipal Primary
- April 29 = Municipal General
- October 14 = Gubernatorial Primary
- November 18 = Gubernatorial General

