



# LIFE AFTER RELEASE

## ANNUAL REPORT

# 2022





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**LAR is dedicated to...**

# LIFE AFTER RELEASE'S 2022 ACCOMPLISHMENTS AT-A-GLANCE

These accomplishments have occurred over several years up to 2022

**COMMUNITY OUTREACH** 483 mutual aid requests received and filled

**\$100k** invested into the community through community stipends, food, temporary housing, transportation, and other supports

**COURTWATCH PG** 5,600+ court hearings observed

**426** accountability letters sent to administrative and chief judges, management at Prince George's County jail, state's attorneys, pretrial services, the chief of police, the Prince George's County Council, the Judiciary Committee of the Maryland House of Delegates, and the Senate Judicial committee

**over 100** law students trained nationwide via individual and class trainings

**10** law schools hosted our lectures on the criminal legal system

Advanced House and Senate bills in the Maryland State Legislature to ensure permanent zoom access in courts in PG County

## POST-CONVICTION MOVEMENT

**32** new voters registered to vote, **18** of whom were incarcerated,

in collaboration with the Expand the Ballot/Expand the Vote coalition. Our collective efforts increased voter engagement and produced record-breaking turnout in the 2022 Maryland General Election.



## PARTICIPATORY/COMMUNITY DEFENSE

**35** people kept from spending a combined... **1,544** years in cages by...

 **3** acquittals **12** cases dropped **2** convictions  
 **15** plea deals **1** reconsideration **2** sentence modifications

**65+** court cases attended to support community members facing criminal cases | **1,000+** physical and virtual letters sent to people behind bars

## DEVELOPMENT AND OPERATIONS

**\$1,000,000** budget fundraised and moved!

This represents a **52% increase** from our 2021 budget and a **6,566% increase** from our initial budget of \$15,000 when we launched in 2019, made possible by our funder briefing in June and aggressive fundraising tactics year-round.

**3** new staff added to our core team, moving from 5 to 8 members. | **10** new funders added to our portfolio, helping to move LAR from a nimble start-up to a sustainable movement organization

# UNTIL WE ARE ALL FREE

## Dear Community,

I would like to take a moment to honor the spirit ancestors who came before me, upon whose shoulders I stand, in this fight for freedom. I want to call on the Black Woman Organizing Spirits of Ida B. Wells, Harriet Tubman, and Fannie Lou Hamer. Ida B Wells famously said that “ There must always be a remedy for wrong and injustice, if we only know how to find it.”

My freedom vision is to build a post-conviction movement that addresses the blatant disregard for fair and just prosecution that exists within our criminal legal system. By systemic design, Black people, people of color, undocumented people, those living with disabilities or addiction, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those without sufficient income to survive are over-policed and then railroaded by and prosecuted for “crimes” they may or may not have committed.

4.5 million Americans are living with a conviction and over 2.3 million are being warehoused in cages. A staggering 95% of felony convictions in the U.S. are obtained through guilty pleas.

The law is not about keeping the public safe. Every day, lawmakers across this nation are creating “tough on crime” laws designed to criminalize the behaviors, experiences, and mere existence of Black and brown people in this country.

**We can not in good faith talk about ending mass incarceration without first addressing the millions who have been wrongfully convicted, illegally sentenced, and unjustly prosecuted over the last half a century. We can no longer afford to sit back and passively allow the threat of injustice to cripple our people. The cost of inaction and silence is the loss of future generations and civic death to those who attempt to have a life after release.**

**We must become unapologetic in the liberation of our people! Folks, we must rise up in love and protect one another against injustice. We must continue to divest from the criminal legal system and invest in the lives of formerly incarcerated and directly impacted people! Our investment in our community spans from mutual aid to power-building organizing strategies across the DC-Maryland-Virginia region. Since our founding, we have increased our funding for directly impacted leadership and on-the-ground power building by 300%. To all of our partners, allies, and co-conspirators, we thank you! Come join me in this fight.**

**- QIANA JOHNSON**





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# ABOUT US

Life After Release (LAR) is a formerly incarcerated Black woman-led and guided organization that is building a movement among Black women and families to abolish the criminal legal system, rebuild our devastated communities, and keep each other safe through community safety alternatives.

Our organization began behind bars. In 2017, incarcerated Black mothers began organizing to address deplorable prison conditions and build a hopeful, self-determined life after release. With a lack of state-provided transitional support and services, we understood that it was our responsibility to build a movement with directly impacted community members to change the inequitable systems that trapped us in a cycle of policing, supervision, and incarceration. Our work is based in the DC-Maryland-Virginia (DMV) metro area, but it extends far beyond – setting a leading example for community-based safety and care alternatives on a national scale.





# MEET OUR TEAM

Our nine team members are all either formerly incarcerated Black individuals or loved ones of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people in Prince George's County, MD, where we are based. Our work is not possible without their diligence and dedication. There is more to come!



**QIANA "OCHA WAYE" JOHNSON**  
Founder, Executive Director



**ALEXISS KURTZ HOGGARD**  
Director of Operations



**DR. CARMEN JOHNSON**  
Director of Court Watch



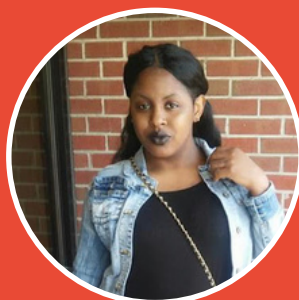
**BIANCA "BOOM" MILLS**  
Director of Community Outreach



**AFENI EVANS**  
Organizer



**RITA GRAY**  
Grants Administrator



**TROYA BAGBY**  
Community Engagement  
Coordinator



**WILLIE HAMILTON**  
Participatory Defense  
Fellow

# THE NEED FOR A POST CONVICTION MOVEMENT

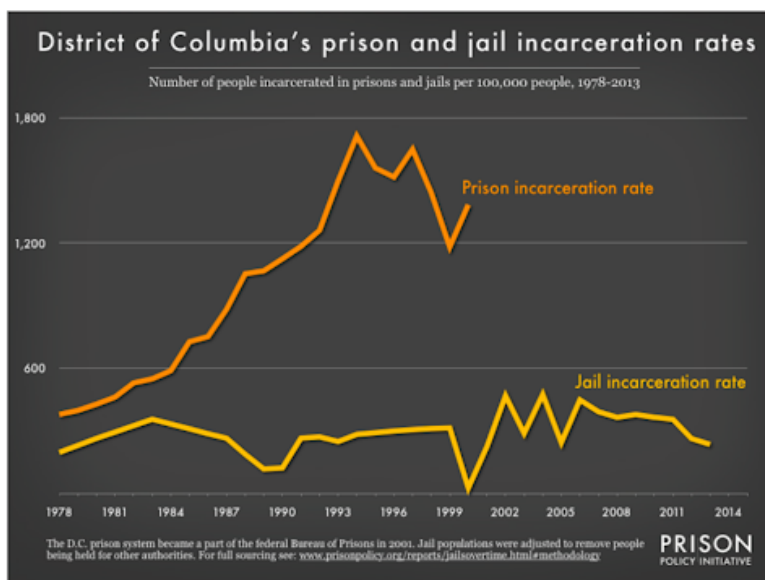
## IN UNITED STATES:

The need for a post-conviction movement is a nationwide issue. The US, the supposed land of the free, has the highest prison population in the world, with almost two million people currently incarcerated (World Prison Brief). This culture of punishment has not and is not working, especially for Black and brown communities living with low incomes. LAR's priority is to provide life-saving resources and services to our communities instead of mirroring the criminal legal system's approach of doling out punishments.

## IN THE DMV REGION:

LAR's work is based in the DC-Maryland-Virginia (DMV) where we see some of the same cultures and patterns of excessive punishment and imprisonment.

Throughout the DMV region, we see the continued legacy of racism and racial discrimination in the racial composition of the prison population. "The DC jail population is almost exclusively Black—87.4 percent of male inmates are Black and 79.6 percent of female inmates are Black" (True Justice: The Disturbing Truth about Incarceration in D.C.).



SOURCE PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE

## IN PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY

More closely, LAR has roots in Prince George's (PG) County, Maryland, which is the state with the highest rate of Black people who become imprisoned (Report: MD Has U.S.'s Largest Rate of Black Prison Population). Specifically, PG County, MD is a nationally recognized hotbed of hyper-criminalization and police misconduct, harassment, and abuse. As such, every year in the DMV, we see thousands of Black community members arrested and criminally charged based on false or insufficient evidence.

# LAR IS DEDICATED TO...

keeping our communities safe by investing in holistic, comprehensive support that keeps our loved ones out of cages. Our work highlights that:



**Safe, affordable housing** decreases recitivism rates



**Access to affordable childcare** decreases recitivism rates



**Access to culturally appropriate, nutritious food**  
decreases recitivism rates



**Transportation** decreases recitivism rates

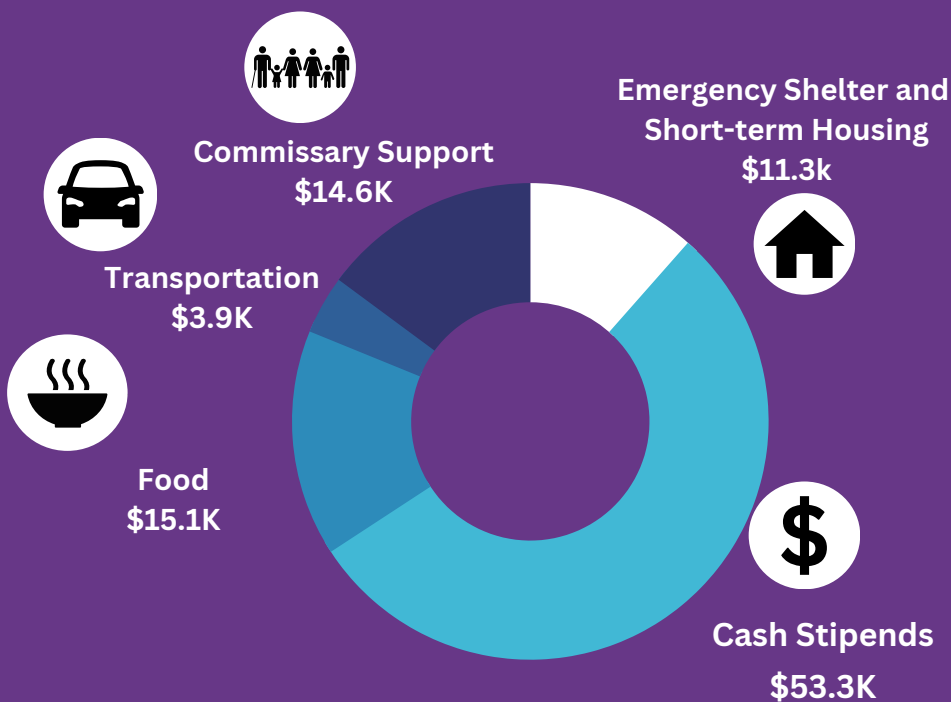


**Mental health supports** decreases recitivism rates



**Community support** decreases recitivism rates

## 2022 Life After Release Mutual Aid Spending:



Life After Release is proud to invest in our community, and has been providing mutual aid since 2019. These investments – food, temporary/emergency shelter (e.g. hotels, Airbnbs), transportation, and more – allow our community to get and remain free. In 2022, we invested \$100k into the community

# PROGRAMS OVERVIEW

LAR's strategies and pillars span FOUR main pillars of work:

## #1 LEGAL EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATORY DEFENSE

We empower the families we work with to better understand and navigate the criminal justice system for themselves and our community through our participatory defense model and legal skills training opportunities. We turn an isolating and frightening experience into an opportunity to connect individuals with urgent resources and community support.

## #2 COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Our community outreach program encompasses a broad range of services and programs that assist incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women and their families by providing critical resources and support. Our array of community-oriented programming is allowing more Black mothers to be free, gain employment, and become active volunteers with LAR, working to advocate for policy changes within the system.

## #3 COURTWATCH IN PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY

Courtwatch PG is a vehicle for community members in the DMV area and around the country to court watch as a means to expose the unjust laws, unconstitutional practices, and prosecutorial misconduct that are driving thousands of us to prison and a life of collateral consequences.

## #4 POST CONVICTION MOVEMENT

LAR's work does not end with freeing women and families from cases and cages. Instead, once freed, these individuals become a part of our powerful base advocating for systems-level change and reform, including economic justice and full voting rights. Our vision is to further the abolitionist movement through this grassroots decarceration cycle – freeing our people and then organizing to dismantle mass incarceration one jurisdiction and state at a time.

# #1 LEGAL EMPOWERMENT & PARTICIPATORY DEFENSE

**"When we fight, we win."**

Our participatory defense (PD) program is the main way we help bring our community members home. The key components of our PD work include:

## **Jail/Court Support**

In 2022, we provided jail/court support to more than 65 individuals. We encourage individuals who are currently incarcerated to reach out to our staff for assistance with any challenges they might be experiencing as they prepare for court or release. Support can look like:

- Care packages (includes gift cards and other resources) given to folks as they get released
- Money added to the commissary accounts of individuals currently incarcerated so they can meet their needs.

## **Thursday PD Meetings:**

Every 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Thursday of the month, from 7:00 p.m to 9:00 p.m, we host community meetings to help justice-involved community members with their legal cases

## **Social Bio Workshops:**

LAR holds monthly Social Bio workshops on the first Saturday of every month, where we encourage family members to bring materials (photos, letters from teachers, family, or colleagues, etc) of their loved one facing time behind bars. These materials are compiled into a book, which we then provide to the prosecutor, the defense lawyer, and the judge associated with the case to show them a fuller picture of the individual before them. Experience has proven these books can have transformative, life-changing results.



**MR. WILLIE  
HAMILTON**

LAR's Participatory Defense team had a Big Win in bringing home Mr. Willie Hamilton, who was originally sentenced to life with an additional 20 years. At the time he was released, he had been in prison for 30 years. We have helped Mr. Hamilton with coming back into society. Notably, he has a job working with LAR as a PD fellow to help free and bring other long-timers home. He co-facilitates our monthly meetings and remains in regular communication with some of the men and women behind bars to guide them on their path to freedom. We are proud to share that he is currently living on his own in Baltimore, MD.

## #2 COURTWATCH PG

### "Injustice happens in an empty courtroom"

Courtwatch PG was created to combat the injustices that happen in empty courtrooms. This program holds prosecutors, judges, and the overall criminal legal system accountable to its purported purpose and reform goals. Our findings have been the basis for publicly released reports on the implementation of bail reform and a prosecutor accountability campaign against the PG County State's Attorney's Office. Currently, we have **40 trained volunteers** driving this program.

To date, Courtwatch PG has:

- Observed more than **5,600 court hearings**
- Sent more than **426 accountability** letters to administrative and chief judges, management at Prince George's County jail, state's attorneys, pretrial services, the chief of police, the Prince George's County Council, the Judiciary Committee of the Maryland House of Delegates and the Senate Judicial committee.
- Trained more than **70 individual law students** from Georgetown University Law School, UC Berkeley School of Law, University of the District of Columbia, University of Maryland, Howard University, American University, University of Michigan, University of Illinois, the University of Vermont, and the University of Texas, among others.
- Mentored two classes from Howard Law School and two classes from the University of District of Columbia on how to support and protect incarcerated individuals.
- Engaged with Howard Law School's Movement Lawyering Clinic since 2020 to observe, reflect, and report on courtroom proceedings
- Advocated for **House bill (HB647)** and **Senate bill (SB0469)** for permanent virtual access to courts. LAR is organizing our community to change state policy to make virtual court access a permanent requirement across Maryland. The extensive benefits of virtual access include:
  - Increased judicial transparency and accountability (through expanded access to court watching)
  - Reduced number of failures to appear (FTAs) thanks to reduced access barriers such as transportation, childcare, work, and more.
  - Decreased carbon emissions due to lack of transportation needs; a significant environmental benefit

**We understand that injustice happens in empty courtrooms; through Courtwatch PG we demand transparency, accountability, and justice for our community.**



## #3 COMMUNITY OUTREACH

### "Doing 'so much' for our community!"

Our Community Outreach pillar showcases how long-term, comprehensive support is critical for transforming our community members' lives. Within Community Outreach, we have a wide range of programs that provide essential services while helping our community members heal from the trauma of being incarcerated.

#### Justice and Liberation Institute



Our 2022 Graduating Class of JLI Fellows

JLI provides eight weeks of life skills, grassroots organizing, and leadership skills training to a cohort of Black women. **In 2022, we graduated 10 fellows.** All graduates received a \$100/week stipend to reduce barriers to their full participation. We also provided participants with tote bags, self-love journals, pens, and tablets so they could have what they needed to join every Saturday. We have seen how beneficial and empowering this program is for our participants – not only do they grow more confident in themselves, but they also engage and connect more deeply with others in the community, building life-long connections and friendships.

#### A Note about Healing Justice:

LAR recognizes and seeks to change the entrenched trauma and mental health challenges that are barriers to our individual and community success. Even if an individual goes through the steps to attain a well-paying job, they cannot take full advantage of that opportunity if they struggle to get out of bed in the morning. To mitigate this, LAR has invested in training with trauma-informed facilitators both for our internal team and wider community to uplift and center healing and wellness. Doing this work is the first step in achieving healing justice for our community.



## #3 COMMUNITY OUTREACH

### Bailed Out Mamas

In the last two years, we have **bailed out over 50 Black Mamas** during our annual Mother's Day Black Mamas community bailouts. **In 2022, we successfully bailed out and supported 22 moms.** During our 2022 Mother's Day event, we partnered with our local ally, Herb and Temple, to provide a healing and wellness space for these mothers.



Photography by Dee Dwyer

### Surviving Justice Retreat

In June 2022, LAR brought **41 people, including children, to Ocean City, MD.** The purpose of the retreat was to strengthen our sense of community and belonging as well as strategize around how we can continue to dismantle the unjust criminal justice system.

### 4th Annual Toy Drive

**LAR collected toys between October-December 2022 and was able to distribute these gifts to a total of 19 families with a combined 51 children.**

This program shows our community that we are all, regardless of our background and family circumstances, worthy of having a happy and healthy holiday season.

One family, the King Family, brought an especially big smile to our faces. Ms. King is a formerly incarcerated Black mother with five young boys. Three years ago, she was referred to LAR by her case worker to help her leave an abusive relationship. Since then, LAR has been in constant contact with her and her family to provide them with support and stability. When we learned that the boys had been using an outdated gaming system, we felt moved to gift them a brand-new Xbox. The boys had huge smiles on their faces when they saw their gift. Their mom told LAR "they were the sweetest angels after opening the gift...you do so much for us."

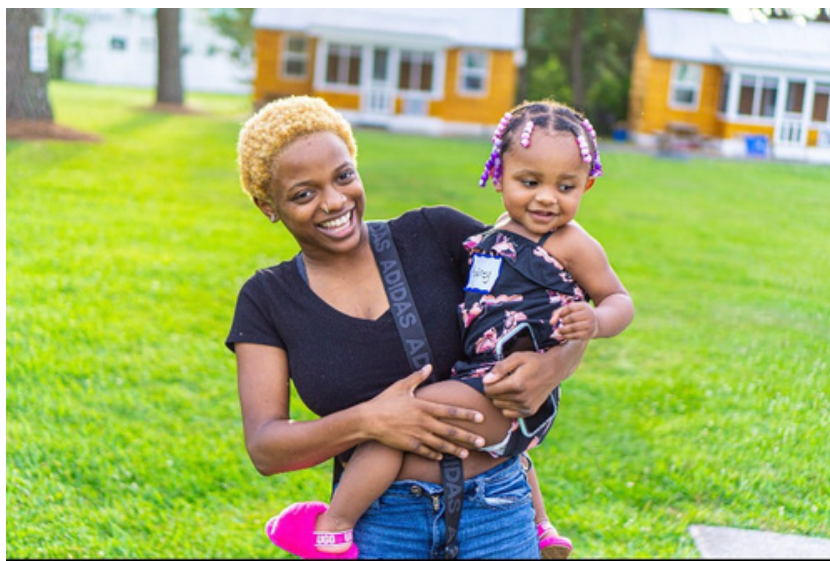


## TROYA'S STORY

In 2019, Troya saw our flyer in the detention center where she was locked up. Curious about our organization and our offer to help any individuals who needed bail assistance, she called and spoke with our Executive Director, Qiana. Once an initial connection was made, LAR was able to get Troya out within two weeks. When she was released, Troya was given flowers to make her feel appreciated and loved as well as placed in temporary housing at a local hotel. Filled with gratitude, Troya wanted to give back. Shortly after, she began doing some administrative desk work for LAR and was hired onto the team as an Executive Administrative Assistant in 2020.

Due to a myriad of personal challenges, including loss in her family, Troya needed to step away from LAR for some time. Similar to when she first became engaged with LAR, Troya received outreach from LAR. Qiana called her to say that she missed her and wanted her to come back. Troya needed this reassurance and support. She also received help with getting housing to get back on her feet. Thanks to this compassion and care, Troya was able to return to work with LAR in late 2022. She now serves as our Outreach and Engagement Coordinator, providing assistance to other bailed-out mamas. Just as Qiana has been there for her throughout all of the ups and downs of her life, she now seeks to be a constant supporter in the lives of other system-impacted women.

# RHEMA'S STORY



Rhema came to us in 2019. She was one of our bailed-out mamas who was facing over 30 years in jail for attempted murder. With our intervention, her case was completely dropped. Once released, she was living in a very unstable and unhealthy environment with her then 1-year-old daughter. They needed to be removed as soon as possible. LAR fundraised to relocate

this young mom to a transitional home, the Denney House, for four months. Rhema then joined our 2021 Job Club, where she was determined to get the skills and training she needed to provide for herself and her daughter. In February 2022, we collectively celebrated her new job at the MGM casino. With this employment, she was able to pay her own dues at the transitional house and start to build her life up.

Shortly after graduating from the JLI program in October 2022, Rhema was in a terrible car accident that resulted in the loss of her unborn second child— she was five months pregnant at the time. She spent two weeks fighting for her life in the hospital. When she recovered and was released from the hospital, she had no place to go. LAR placed her in temporary housing for two and a half months and brought her food and diapers for her daughter. We provided continuous, compassionate support until she was able to get back on her feet. Losing her baby was devastating for her as well as for us. We are happy to report that she is now living on her own and both she and her daughter are doing well.

## POST-CONVICTION MOVEMENT

### "We are Powerful"

LAR is excited to continue growing our post-conviction movement and enhance our reputation as a respected, well-resourced, and trustworthy organization invested in ending the root causes and manifestations of criminalization and incarceration for Black women and their families in DMV and beyond. A major aspect of this work is our economic justice and voter engagement efforts.

#### Economic Justice

Economic justice is racial justice. LAR's community members are often targeted by police and the courts for crimes of poverty and circumstance such as stealing diapers, food, and underground economic work, among other things. To disrupt this trend, LAR is committed to providing rapid monetary support to our community that allows them to weather changing financial conditions.

This dedication is vital to how we build up our base and mobilize them to engage in our post-conviction movement. Our approach is to:

- **ORGANIZE** community members through the entry points of mutual aid and workforce development, reducing our community's barriers (primarily time and money) to getting involved with our movement. Once their basic needs are met, they have the time and capacity to participate in our programs and work.
- **ENCOURAGE** members to become involved with our Justice and Liberation Institute (JLI).
- **SUPPORT** members in engaging with our active base by taking on community outreach roles, assisting our campaign efforts, or, if possible, joining the LAR team as a paid staff member.



**PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT:**

# POST-CONVICTION MOVEMENT

## Voter Engagement

LAR's 2022 Get Out the Vote (GOTV) work for the Maryland General Election resulted in record-breaking, historic results and positive benefits across the state. In partnership with our Expand the Ballot/Expand the Vote coalition, we impacted councilmanic districts 13, 14, and 2 in Baltimore City, Maryland. In Prince George's County, our work impacted the areas of District Heights, Bradbury/Boulevard Heights, Capitol Heights, Hillcrest Heights, Marlow Heights, Seat Pleasant, Suitland, and Morning side. These areas are predominantly Black, working-class people that have been impacted by social and criminal injustices.



In 2022, LAR registered **32** new voters to vote,  
**18 of whom were incarcerated**

Using lessons learned from this campaign,  
we plan to register **1,000** voters for the **2024** general election.

# PARTNERS

The collaboration of our individual and organizational partners helps make this work possible. Special thank you to...

A New Care  
ACLU of Maryland  
American Endowment Foundation  
Advancement Project  
American University  
Black Lives Matter DC  
Black Voter's Matter  
Borealis  
Bridge Center at Adam's House  
Butler Family Fund  
Charities Aid Foundation  
Citizens Policing Project  
Civil Rights Corps  
Common Cause Education Fund  
Common Cause Maryland  
Freedom Fighters  
Fully Restoring Every Son's Hope (FRESH)  
Georgetown University Law School  
Greater Washington Foundation  
Groundswell Fund  
Harriet's Wildest Dreams  
Heart Movez  
Helping Oppressed People Excel (HOPE)  
Helping Ourselves to Transform  
Horning Family Foundation (Racial Justice Initiative)  
Howard Law School Lawyering Clinic  
Howard University  
Hyattsville Mennonite Church  
If, Foundation for Radical Possibility  
James Rice & Dawn Longenecker  
Job Opportunities Task Force  
League of Women Voters (LWV)  
M4BL (Electoral Justice Project)  
M4BL Action Fund  
Maryland Justice Project  
Mass Liberation Arizona  
Mass Liberation Nevada  
Mass Liberation Project  
Maverick Investor Group  
Meyer Foundation  
Movement for Black Lives  
Movement Labs  
Mr. Carlton Ferguson  
NAACP Baltimore Branch  
NAACP  
Open Society Center  
Out for Justice  
PG Changemakers  
PGC  
Proteus Fund  
Public Welfare  
Reform Action Fund  
(re)Power  
Sarah Stoltzfus  
Silicon Valley Debug  
Solidaire Network  
Spark Point Fundraising LLC  
The Denney House Inc  
The National Council for Incarcerated  
and Formerly Incarcerated Women  
and Girls  
Tides Advocacy  
UC Berkeley School of Law  
University of California Los Angeles  
University of Illinois  
University of Maryland  
University of Michigan  
University of Texas  
University of the District of Columbia  
University of Vermont  
Zealous



# FINANCIALS & SUPPORT

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In 2022, LAR had ambitious goals to expand our programs and post-conviction movement. With the support of our generous funders, donors, and community partners, LAR moved a budget of **\$1 million** to fund our work. This funding helped maintain a nucleus of five full-time and two part-time team members and 10 contractors. We also provided a salary increase to incoming 2022 staff to allow them to weather inflation.



Photography by Dee Dwyer



# 2023

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In 2023, we are excited to advance the following initiatives:

- ✓ **Support, empower, and organize young people.** Young people are the leaders of today and tomorrow and we will continue working with them so that they know their rights and can advocate for the issues that matter to them. We plan to re-invigorate our youth organizing program to change the roots of mass incarceration: the school-to-prison pipeline.
- ✓ **Advance our bill for permanent, virtual access to courts.** Access to courts is necessary to hold courtroom actors accountable and protect our loved ones facing criminal cases. In 2023, LAR will continue working with legislators to pass and protect virtual access to courts in Maryland.
- ✓ **Register 50,000 Black and brown community members to vote.** Our organization has a five-year goal of using voter engagement tactics in collaboration with partner organizations nationwide to create a voting block of 50,000 community members directly impacted by the criminal legal system.
- ✓ **Move housing initiatives in Maryland.** LAR is continuing the re-enfranchisement of formerly incarcerated Marylanders, which includes removing the box as it relates to housing applications. This would mitigate a major barrier in formerly incarcerated Maryland residents' access to safe, affordable housing. As part of this work, we will work with legislators/elected officials to pass relevant policies.
- ✓ **Increase our staff capacity.** We plan to hire an Organizing Director and a full-time Policy Director. These individuals will move us through a campaign-building process and set us up for advocacy campaigns during legislative sessions and other key moments at both the state and local jurisdiction levels.
- ✓ **Partner and provide trainings for our member leaders.** 2023 will be a high-investment year for our team and our community. LAR will provide trainings that will help our community to base build, cut campaigns, and move protected class campaigns in Maryland.

# THANK YOU

Without the support of community partners like yourself, LAR's life-saving work would not be possible. **Please stay involved with our work via our social media channels**—this is the quickest way to stay up to date on all of the amazing work we are doing.



PS: Life After Release has moved to Creative Suitland Arts Center! Our new address is:

4719 Silver Hill Road,  
Suitland, MD 20746

**Catch us on the  
ground...  
The fight is not  
over.**