

# *Life After Release*

**2023**

# **IMPACT REPORT**



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# Freedom ISN'T 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.”

Today, I find myself compelled to discuss a topic that is deeply ingrained in our collective consciousness and shapes the very fabric of our existence - freedom. Freedom has been a constant pursuit of humanity throughout history. It is a powerful concept that defines our individuality, allows us to express our thoughts, and embrace our true selves. But what does freedom truly mean? Is it merely the absence of physical constraints or something more profound?



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To me, freedom represents the fundamental right to explore, create, and make choices without undue influence or restraint. It is the ability to chase our dreams, overcome obstacles, and determine the course of our lives. Yet, freedom also comes with great responsibility. It necessitates respect for the rights and freedoms of others and an understanding of the impact our choices can have on the world around us. In a world where conflicts, injustices, and disparities persist, the quest for freedom remains all the more significant. It is a beacon of hope that inspires movements, ignites revolutions and drives us to fight against oppression. Throughout history, brave individuals have stood up for their beliefs, challenging the status quo and demanding the rights and freedoms they so rightfully deserve.

However, it is important to acknowledge that freedom is not absolute. As members of society, we are bound by certain laws and regulations that maintain order and protect the rights of all. The balance between individual freedom and collective responsibility is delicate but necessary for a harmonious coexistence. As I contemplate the concept of freedom, I am reminded of the work that still lies ahead. While many of us enjoy various degrees of freedom, countless others continue to face oppression, discrimination, and systemic barriers. It is our collective duty to strive for a world where every individual can experience the true essence of freedom.

As I conclude this letter, I am filled with a sense of gratitude for the freedoms I possess and a renewed commitment to champion the cause of freedom for all. However, the work must continue. We must stand in the gaps for the people who are most impacted by the injustice of this system. We will, we must, fight tirelessly to ensure that every person, regardless of their background, can live a life of dignity, equality, and freedom.



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## Community Outreach

- Celebrated LAR's fifth anniversary with 160 community members at our Grand Reopening in July and mobilized 17 volunteers, 12 speakers, and 10 partner organizations to help make the event a grand success
- Conducted 30 record expungements and three brake light repairs on site for community members at LAR's Grand Reopening
- Launched our Food in Jails campaign to increase the quality of the food served in jails. As part of this work, we have surveyed approximately 100 formerly-incarcerated men and women to gain their perspectives
- Graduated 11 formerly incarcerated women from the Justice and Liberation Institute (JLI) program
- Led a United for Justice Advocacy Day at the state legislature in Annapolis along with 10 partner organizations and youth to advocate for kids being kids and becoming educated on bills that impact their lives
- Completed 20 mutual aid requests, helping to increase our community members' independence and self-reliance
- Invested \$60,924 back into the community over 2023 to support Black women, Black families, and Black communities in the DC-Maryland-Virginia (DMV) area

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*“They are our loved ones. They are people. They are men, women, youth that are caught up in this ugly web of the injustice system.”*

*-Dr. Carmen Johnson*

## Courtwatch Prince George's (PG) and Judicial Accountability

- Contributor of the report “In Custody Deaths in Maryland” via The Washington Post
- Sustained eight working committees with more than 20 people across the groups working diligently to hold the criminal legal system accountable
- 68 people completed orientation to become a court watcher
- 22 people were engaged active court watch volunteers throughout 2023
- Delivered our 500th accountability letter to elected officials and agency heads in October 2023
- Collaborated with 10 universities and their law students, such as American University, Howard University and the University of Texas
- National Court Watch Hub with about 30 members as of November 2023
- Featured and promoted our work via The Zealous National Cartoon Video Project

# Community Organizing & Advocacy

- Built a volunteer base of 117 people. Volunteers support our Black Mama Bailout, Advocacy Days, weekly jail support, Back to School drives, and more!
- Spearheaded the Fair Chance in Housing Act in partnership with the Justice in Housing coalition, which consists of eight member organizations fighting for access to housing for returning citizens
- Played a vital role in several coalitions ranging from police accountability to housing justice, such as the Maryland Equitable Justice Collaborative, Expand the Ballot, and Connecting Families
- Deepened our national organizing connections and strategy by partnering with national organizations, such as the Movement 4 Black Lives (M4BL), to push for true justice across the nation





## Development and Operations

- Retained 7 full and part-time employees. The majority of our staff continues to be Black and directly impacted by the systems we seek to change

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A photograph of three people in professional business attire standing outdoors. On the left is a man with long dreadlocks wearing a dark pinstriped suit. In the center is a woman wearing a light-colored suit and a patterned scarf. On the right is a man with a beard wearing a dark suit. They are standing in front of a stone wall with a bronze statue to the right. The wall has the letters 'D' and 'L' visible, and the year '1908' is inscribed on the right side. A semi-transparent purple overlay covers the entire image.

*About Us*

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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.

For the past six years, our organization has been on an astounding journey of growth and evolution. As we've grown, missteps and lessons have been inevitable. Over the past year, our communities locally and globally have experienced mass grief, and mass injustices. But the strength and dedication of our team– held and uplifted by our beloved community– keeps us moving ever forward.

*Special Recognition*

## PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY COUNCIL PROCLAMATION



Notably, in 2023, LAR received a proclamation from the city/state's attorney office and council member at large, Calvin Hawkins recognizing us and thanking us for our service in the community. We are proud that our work is making a noticeable difference. Together, we're not just repairing broken systems– we're reimagining new worlds.

# PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY STATE'S ATTORNEY'S OFFICE CITATION



*Special Recognition*

Life After Release is proud to be the recipient of a Citation of Appreciation from the Office of the State's Attorney in recognition of our collective commitment to community service and our active involvement in the 'Our Streets, Our Future' gun violence prevention initiative. This accolade is a testament to our dedicated team and community partners, whose tireless efforts aim to foster safer environments and advocate for meaningful change. It reinforces our mission to empower, heal, and unite our communities, proving that together, we can create a lasting impact and pave the way for a future free from gun violence.

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# Guiding Values & Commitments

At LAR, our guiding value is LOVE.

Leadership

Ownership

Vision

Empathy

This guiding value ensures that we center the leadership and liberation of our people without recreating harmful capitalist structures.

## Our Four Commitments

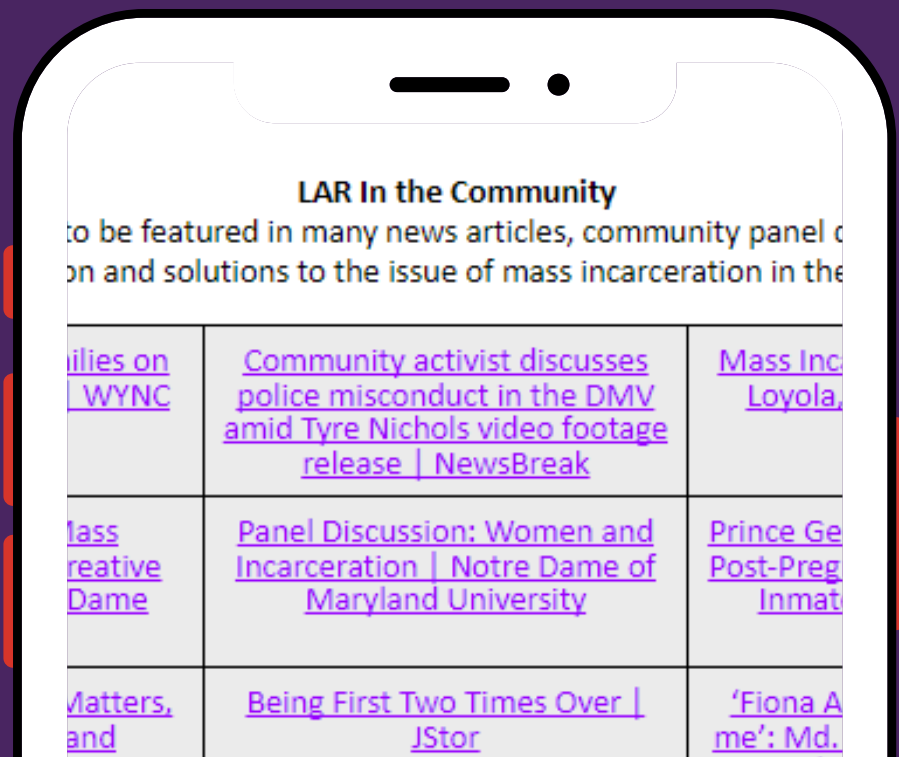


1. Supporting the comprehensive, holistic needs of formerly incarcerated people re-entering their communities.
2. Empowering and centering Black women through our range of programs that help them navigate life after release.
3. Teaching impacted people grassroots organizing and advocacy skills to shape legislation and policy that affects their lives.
4. Reducing recidivism rates, reforming criminal policies, and improving public safety in Prince George's County.

# Want to LEARN MORE?

In 2023, LAR was proud to be featured in many news articles, community panel discussions, and events that are bringing attention and solutions to the issue of mass incarceration in the DMV.

[View Our Media Coverage](#)



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[and public](#) [groups are working to bail out](#) [Justice: A](#)

# The Team

LAR is a one-of-a-kind organization because of its people. It is a priority of ours to hire and develop leaders from the communities that we hope to positively impact. Our eight team members are formerly incarcerated Black individuals or loved ones of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people in Prince George's County, MD, where we are based.

Qiana	Rita	Boom	Troya
Afeni	Willie	Aly	Carmen



## LIFE AFTER RELEASE

# Programs Overview

### 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.

### COURTWATCH PG & JUDICIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

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.

## LIFE AFTER RELEASE

# Programs Overview (cont.)

### LEGAL EMPOWERMENT & 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. Additionally, 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. In this way, we turn an isolating and frightening experience into an opportunity to connect individuals with urgent resources and community support.

### COMMUNITY ORGANIZING & ADVOCACY

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.

# COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Our Community Outreach pillar shows up for our community members, ensuring that they have the comprehensive and critical resources needed to live a fruitful life after release. In 2023, we collaborated with community partners, volunteers, elected officials—and maybe even you—to complete the following programs/initiatives:

- **Grand Reopening:** In 2023, LAR celebrated five years of service to the community during our Grand Reopening in July.
- **Food in Jails Campaign:** As of December 2023, we have surveyed approximately 100 individuals.
- **Black Mama's Bailout.** LAR successfully bailed out 1 Black Mama in 2023.



- **Back to School Event:** In August, LAR hosted our 5th annual back-to-school event at our office location in District 7 and distributed more than 300 hundred school supplies.
- **Making it Happen, Monthly Support Groups**
- **Surviving Justice Retreat:** This past year, we mobilized 55 impacted family members to the beach for our annual “Surviving Justice Retreat 2023.”



# JUSTICE & LIBERATION

JLI, a LAR Community Outreach program, provides eight weeks of life skills, grassroots organizing, and leadership skills training to a cohort of Black women. In 2023, we graduated 11 fellows. All graduates received a \$100/week stipend to reduce barriers to their full participation. Through the provision of stipends, the program infused a total of \$8,800 back into the community, fostering economic empowerment and sustainability among affected individuals.

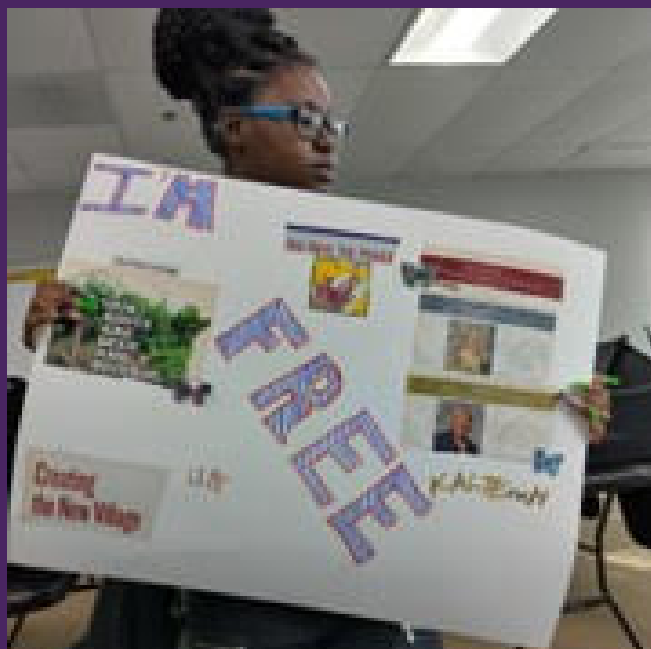
We have seen how beneficial and empowering this program is for our participants – not only do they grow more confident in themselves, but they also engage and connect more deeply with others in the community, building life-long connections and friendships.



## **Participant Highlight: Kahterah**

Kahterah is a 22 year old mother of one three year old and is currently expecting her second child in February. She was the second young woman to be referred to the JLI program after we got the news she was being held by pre-trial services. Kahterah was behind a cage for almost 8 months before her mom got connected with us through our community outreach director. We worked with Kahterah's mother to write a social bio before her sentencing. The judge read her bio page-by-page and related to her. At the sentencing, the judge also listened to community members and family speak on her behalf.

Instead of having to serve three years behind bars, she was ordered to home monitoring and to be a part of LAR's events. With this sentence modification, she is providing for her son and finishing up school to be a Phlebotomist. She is currently scheduling her clinical and has moved into her own apartment in Washington, DC. She completed the JLI program in November 2023, alongside 10 other Black women participants.



# COURTWATCH PG & JUDICIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

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 mission is to help make sure that every person who goes through this injustice system has a chance for all eyes to be watching to make sure the law is being followed.

Currently, we have 22 trained volunteers driving this program. With their help, we are making transformative changes to the criminal legal system and garnering national attention. Our major achievements of 2023 include:

- **Expanding the National/International Courtwatch Collective.**
- **Releasing a moving report on in-custody deaths in Maryland. Highlighted in [The Washington Post](#), LAR and its partners released an illuminating study on how many deaths occur in jails.**
- **Maintaining eight Courtwatch PG committees. These committees cover legislation, orientation/training, social media, police accountability, and much more.**





# LEGAL EMPOWERMENT & PARTICIPATORY DEFENSE

Our legal empowerment and participatory defense (PD) program fights alongside our community members who are behind bars to bring them home. As of the end of 2023, LAR has saved 56 people from spending a combined 1,704 years behind a cage.

Some additional highlights:

- **Jail Support:** In 2023, we provided jail support to 23 individuals.

LAR has continued our successful model of providing jail support for people exiting incarceration. With the help of volunteers, we made sure that individuals had access to transportation and received a care package. We also used jail support as a way to encourage recently incarcerated community members to share their experiences about food in jails.

- **Thursday PD Meetings:** More than 58 individuals attended our 36 meetings in 2023.

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. 2023 was our largest caseload year yet. We had 18 active cases that we supported. With our help, we were able to get 1 acquittal, 3 cases dropped, 1 plea deal, 2 convictions, and 1 case modification. We attended over 30 virtual court hearings to provide court support as well as 45 in-person court hearings.

- **Social Bio Workshops:** In 2023, we created 18 social bios for our community members.

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.

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# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING & ADVOCACY

At LAR, we are using community organizing and advocacy to diverge from the narratives that have been imposed on our communities and create new pathways for true justice in the DMV and beyond. To effectively advocate for our communities, we must first connect with them. Our organizing is a reflection of the deep commitment we have to advance and uphold community-centered solutions.

We are proud to share the following community organizing and advocacy results from 2023:

- **Passed the Guaranteed Basic Income Pilot**
- **Launched the Fair Chance in Housing Act of 2024**
- **Supported five bills being passed**
- **Led Advocacy Days**
- **Increased LAR's National Presence**



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# Looking Ahead

The fight is not over. While we achieved many amazing results in 2023, there is still more community outreach, court watching, legal empowerment, community organizing, and advocacy to do to realize a future where Black communities are liberated from mass incarceration.

In 2024, we are excited to:

- 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. With being in an election year, this is a priority for our organization.
- Pass the Fair Chance in Housing Act of 2024. The Fair Chance Housing Act will:
  - Remove a criminal conviction from consideration on a rental housing application if: Three (3) years have passed since the release of a formerly incarcerated individual, and there have been no subsequent convictions or violations of parole/probation related to that conviction.
  - Prohibit housing providers from advertising that applicants with criminal records need not apply for rental properties.
  - Ensure that housing providers notify the rental applicant that they were denied based on their criminal record.
- Expand Non-Carceral/Community-Based Mental Health Care. In 2023, LAR began surveying our base and one theme emerged: the need for non-carceral (i.e., fully removed from the criminal legal system), and community-based mental health services for returning citizens. As a directly impacted organization, LAR knows the impact of mental health on our base and the deficit of resources to address these issues. We will be building a campaign calling for an allocation of resources for non-carceral mental health support for returning citizens.
- Expand workforce development programming. In 2024, we hope to expand our workforce development programming, JLI and Job Club. For JLI, we will enroll over 20 cohort members for 2024 and pay for expert guest speakers to come in and lead sessions about specialized topics. As for Job Club, growing this important program will help more women find jobs. In 2024, we plan to formalize and re-launch this program and enroll 10 people in Job Club.
- Host a 2024 Post Conviction Forum. On April 25, 2024, LAR is excited to host a first-of-its-kind public forum. This forum will convene directly impacted people, experts, and resource providers to educate community members about their options and pathways after conviction including but not limited to expungement, re-entry services, and their rights as a formerly incarcerated person.
- Release reports and publications based on our court-watching findings. This year, LAR is excited to continue releasing illuminating reports, studies, and publications that increase public and political will based on the findings of court watchers.

To learn more about how you can be a part of LAR's 2024 work, please reach out to us by going to our website or call 240-200-4472.

# 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  
Center Point Baptist Church  
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  
Make Smart Cool  
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  
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