



Welcome to the winter issue of The Vigil, the print newsletter of the ACLU of Tennessee. As 2026 continues, Tennesseans are facing renewed attacks on public education, free expression, bodily autonomy, and democracy itself.

Thanks to your support, we're meeting this moment head-on in the courts, at the legislature, and alongside communities across the state.

LOOKING AHEAD: 2026 Legislative Session

Tennessee lawmakers are now in the heat of the legislative session. They will meet from now until around the end of April.

After analyzing hundreds of bills, our policy team has created a list of legislation that we plan to monitor and take action on throughout the session. Our community engagement and the communications team have also been hard at work to form partner coalitions to strengthen our efforts at the legislature.

We are ready to defend civil liberties in the legislature, mobilize communities, and challenge unconstitutional laws in court.



**VISIT OUR
LEGISLATIVE
WEBPAGE**

THE FREEDOM TO LEARN

PROTECTING STUDENTS' FREEDOM TO READ

133 books have been banned from Rutherford County school libraries, particularly those addressing LGBTQ+ rights and racism. **In April 2025, we filed a lawsuit on behalf of three families and PEN America to restore these books to library shelves and defend the First Amendment.** By September 2024, board members indicated they were relying almost exclusively on a far-right website to target books for removal rather than reading them. **In June 2025, we hosted a town hall in Murfreesboro** to discuss the case and engage community members in the fight for the freedom to read.

FIGHTING FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

In November 2025, **we filed a lawsuit challenging Tennessee's universal private school voucher program as unconstitutional.** The law diverts public funds to private schools that can discriminate against students with disabilities, LGBTQ students, and students of certain religions — discrimination that would be illegal in any public school.

Parent plaintiffs include a mother of nine who has raised all her children in Shelby County public schools, a Hamilton County preschool teacher, a parent of a student with Down syndrome, and a former teacher who fought to get her children into Rutherford County Schools because of the quality of education.

In January 2026, **we filed a successful motion to intervene in a federal lawsuit to block the creation of a religious charter school in Knoxville**, in an effort to protect the separation of church and state.

CONTINUING THE FIGHT IN WEST TENNESSEE

OPPOSING UNCONSTITUTIONAL MILITARY DEPLOYMENT IN MEMPHIS

In **October 2025**, we filed an amicus brief, along with **Memphis-based community organizations**, in a lawsuit challenging Governor Bill Lee's deployment of Tennessee National Guard troops to Memphis. The governor violated the Tennessee Constitution and state law by deploying soldiers without legislative authorization or local request — echoing a troubling historical pattern of using military force to intimidate predominantly Black Memphis communities.

Eleven community organizations signed onto our brief, including Advocates for Immigrant Rights, American Muslim Advisory Council, The Equity Alliance, Just City, MICAH, Memphis For All, OUTMemphis, Stand For Children Tennessee, TIRRC, the Transformative Justice Initiative of the University of Memphis School of Law, and the Free The 901 Campaign.

MASON'S CONTESTED ICE DETENTION CONTRACTS

In August 2025, the Town of Mason tried to push through contracts with CoreCivic and ICE for a for-profit detention facility.

More than 150 area residents spoke out in protest. When the vote came, only three of seven aldermen voted in favor — short of the majority required by the town's own charter. We immediately sent a letter demanding officials halt activities related to the unapproved ICE and CoreCivic contracts.

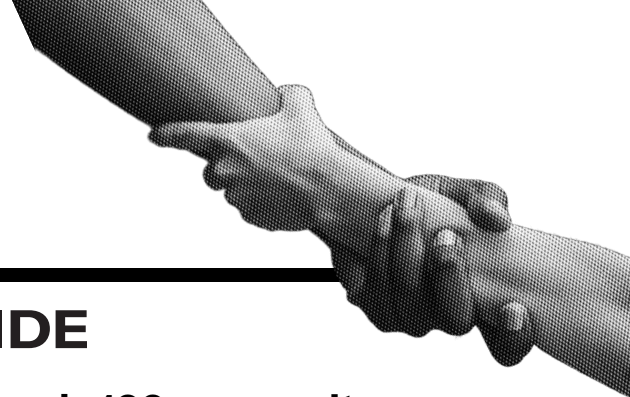
In October 2025, **we co-hosted a Community Vigil for Justice and Due Process in Mason** alongside West Tennessee For The People and other partner organizations, joining dozens of other gatherings nationwide as part of the Disappeared in America Day of Action.

We're continuing to monitor developments in Mason and working with partners to ensure transparency and accountability around ICE detention.



BUILDING POWER IN THE COMMUNITY

ORGANIZING POWER STATEWIDE



In July 2025, nearly 100 community members from across Tennessee gathered in Murfreesboro for our Power and Purpose training. Together with the national ACLU, we learned about Tennessee's political landscape and the fundamentals of effective organizing.

Throughout the year, we mobilized Tennesseans to take action: hosting phone banks against bills targeting undocumented students, marching in Nashville for education justice, registering hundreds of new volunteers and supporters at the Memphis No Kings Rally in October, and creating opportunities for community engagement at events across the state.

Our work in Rutherford County has led to a multi-year organizing effort with librarians, teachers, and students to protect Rutherford County's freedom to read.



On February 2, over 150 community members showed up to pack a Rutherford County Library System Board meeting, fighting to stop the banning of over 2,000 books.

Thanks to the pressure, **over 2,000 books were not banned.** Instead, the board approved the library director's recommendation to temporarily relocate 400 books. While we celebrate this feat, we know the work is not over to protect the freedom to read.

We're so grateful to community members and partners for showing up and being a part of the fight. We can't wait to see how folks use their organizing skills to build power throughout 2026.

Photos by: Maria Urias





ENSURING DIGNITY FOR TRANSGENDER TENNESSEANS

Following the Supreme Court’s devastating decision in *U.S. v. Skrmetti* in June 2025, we remain committed to defending transgender youth with defiant strength and restless resolve. This painful setback doesn’t mean we’re left with no options, and the work doesn’t stop at the Supreme Court. That’s why in **May 2025, we filed a petition in *Doe v. Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security* challenging Tennessee’s decision to force transgender residents to carry ID that does not match** who they are or face cancellation of their driving privileges. In 2026, we’re also tracking several bills that make life more challenging for trans Tennesseans. **To follow our work, visit: www.aclu-tn.org/legislation-page/.**

FINAL THOUGHTS...

These wins wouldn’t be possible without you. At a moment when fundamental freedoms are under attack, your support ensures we can respond quickly in courtrooms, communities, and the legislature.

As we continue into 2026, the attacks on our rights will continue, but so will our resistance.

Thank you for being a part of our movement.



WELCOMING NEW LEADERSHIP

MEET OUR NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In fall 2025, **civil rights attorney Miriam R. Nemeth became ACLU-TN's new executive director.** Her background includes fighting for incarcerated people's rights at Rights Behind Bars, protecting employees' rights at a nationwide plaintiffs' firm, litigating police misconduct cases in Detroit, and serving as a federal law clerk on the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in Memphis.

Miriam comes to ACLU-TN with a distinguished career dedicated to protecting civil rights. Most recently, she was the deputy litigation director and chief counsel at Rights Behind Bars, a legal advocacy organization focused on eliminating inhumane conditions of confinement for incarcerated people. Her background includes roles with the Advancement Project, Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll PLLC, and a boutique law firm in Detroit where she litigated cases involving police misconduct and government abuse of power.

Nemeth's clerkship for Judge Ronald L. Gilman on the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in Memphis and her prior representation of the Highlander Research and Education Center inform her interest in ACLU-TN. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, she also served as a law clerk for Judge David M. Lawson on the Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan.



As Miriam celebrated her first six months at the affiliate, **we're energized by the strategic vision she's brought to this critical moment.** From coordinating dual actions against government overreach to supporting ongoing litigation across multiple civil liberties fronts, she's building the capacity and partnerships we need to defend freedom and justice for years to come.



Photos by: Elle Danielle

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Tennessee

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