



OHIO ORGANIZING COLLABORATIVE

2020 ANNUAL REPORT



ABOUT THE OOC

Ohio Organizing Collaborative (OOC) is a grassroots people-centered power organization. We unite base-building community organizing groups, student associations and faith organizations, with labor unions, and policy institutes throughout Ohio. It is our mission to organize everyday Ohioans, building transformative power organizations for racial, social, and economic justice. Our vision is to build a democratic, multiracial, and populist governing coalition in Ohio.

At the local and state levels, our priorities are centered around:

- **Economic justice**, such as raising wages, healthcare, income support, safety net, and access to affordable quality education from pre-K through college
- **Criminal justice reform**, such as bail reform, police and prosecutor accountability, community reinvestment and drug policy reform
- **Structural democracy reform**, by expanding voting rights

We do this through three key strategies

Grassroots community organizing for power

- Our grassroots organizing membership projects are led by inclusive leadership teams that run impactful local and statewide issue campaigns and leadership development programs

Large scale civic engagement

- We build independent political power for our communities by expanding the electorate and engaging no-to-low propensity voters, especially young voters and voters of color in the civic process.

Narrative change and strategic communications

- We construct strategic public communications campaigns and infrastructure with a Race Class Narrative framework that advances our world view, values and the issues we care about and amplifies our leaders in the public arena.

The OOC is made up of grassroots organizing membership projects and campaigns that span a broad range of leaders, communities, and intersecting issues: students, people of faith, people directly impacted by mass incarceration, unemployed workers, child care providers and the families they serve, and people working in the care economy. Our organizing centers people of color, women, and young people in a multiracial, intergenerational organization.



2020: AN UNPRECEDENTED ELECTION YEAR

2020 was a year of many firsts for the OOC. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the deep, long-lasting fault lines of structural racism, inequality, and poverty in America -- and how Black and brown people have been forced to carry the undue amount of these burdens. The devastating impact of the coronavirus - coupled with the especially unique threat to our democracy - made traditional organizing challenging but our grassroots leaders stepped up to the plate.

Absent our usual door-knocking, our leaders successfully ran one of the largest relational organizing campaigns in the country, reaching millions of Ohio voters during a historic election year. We conducted a statewide campaign to organize unemployed Ohioans

towards a people-centered economic recovery for our state and pushed our elected officials to release incarcerated Ohioans from COVID-infested prisons and jails. In the meantime, we have continued our core work around transforming community safety and introduced a new strategic communications project to change the narrative around race and class in Ohio. From socially-distanced direct actions to scaling up new digital tools for civic engagement, Ohioans went all in for our families, communities, and our democracy the entire pandemic year.



OOC Board Chair Rev. Michael Harrison, Pastor Union Baptist Church in Youngstown and President of the Ohio State Baptist Convention meets with President-Elect Joe Biden.

2020: AN UNPRECEDENTED ELECTION YEAR

EXPANDING THE ELECTORATE

Our leaders rose to the challenge of organizing during a pandemic by leveraging the power of their personal networks. [Building on the successes of previous testing on relational organizing by The Analyst Institute](#), we successfully organized thousands of our families, friends, and acquaintances to participate in local campaigns and vote in this year's elections. Because we already knew the voters in our networks, we typically had a higher contact rate, better contact data, and more personal and impactful conversations with our fellow voters. Our relational organizing program and phone bank outreach constituted over **41,000 conversations**, and our text program, voter registrations, and mail efforts **reached another 798,902 voters**. Overall, the OOC made about **2.7 million attempts** to reach voters, leading to **Ohio's largest voter turnout since 2008**.



THE POWER OF RELATIONAL ORGANIZING

1 million text messages | **410,000** phone calls made | **10,000+** voters registered

Our civic engagement program reached hundreds of thousands of voters through regular phone- and text-banking people around Ohio. We sent **more than 1 million text messages**, made **more than 410,000 phone calls**, and registered **about 10,000 people to vote**. More importantly, we held over 492,000 conversations with Ohio voters about community safety, healthcare, child care, and the economy. (These numbers would have been significantly higher had we conducted an on-the-ground voter registration campaign.)

Based on impact analysis by the Analyst Institute, relational contacts are up to 42% more impactful than the average cold voter contact. Our 28,000 relational contacts equaled the impact of 14 million cold texts or 23 million calls.

20,000 relational contacts = **14 million** text messages | **23 million** phone calls

Our grassroots leaders made over 28,000 relational contacts; 65% of whom were Black voters and 60% of whom were young people between the ages 18-39. Most of these voters have either voted infrequently or have no voter history. Our pivot to relational organizing effectively mobilized new, Black and young voters left out of the political discussion to turn out and practice democracy.

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VOTING RIGHTS & GET OUT THE VOTE

OOC leaders were at the forefront of protecting our democracy throughout the election season. We know Ohio's election system keeps hundreds of thousands of Ohioans from participating through convoluted rules, multi-step processes, voter purges, and reductions in early voting. The pandemic was a unique complicating factor that made our efforts more vital in an unprecedented election year. We carried out four major strategies to stop voters from being disenfranchised and to turn out low-propensity voters. First, when Ohio's primary election was postponed in a chaotic move the night before the scheduled Election Day, we pulled together a coalition of partners to reach **more than 1 million voters**.



program aiming to educate thousands of voters about the importance of voting for County Sheriff, Prosecutor, and local Judges. We're continuing to join with voting rights partners in the state to advance much-needed reforms through the state legislature and potential ballot measures.



Nearly 400 volunteers around Ohio initiated conversations with **221,000 voters**, sending well **more than 800,000 total text messages**. Volunteers in Cincinnati, Dayton, and Cleveland worked with public housing communities and small businesses to ensure residents had access to ballot applications and to distribute and collect vote-by-mail applications.

Second, we ran an extensive voter education program to get people to vote down-ballot on much-needed levies and often overlooked races. For example, in Hamilton County, our leaders ran an aggressive Get Out the Vote

Finally, after 49,000 Ohioans had their vote by mail applications rejected for frivolous mistakes, we conducted a rapid-response effort to call, text and reach voters at their doors to cure their applications and ensure they could vote by mail in the general election. We will know more after the voter file is updated, but more than 25,000 of the rejected voters successfully casted their ballot early.



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A PEOPLE-CENTERED ECONOMIC RECOVERY

In the wake of the pandemic, we launched a statewide campaign to organize thousands of unemployed Ohioans to demand immediate action to fix Ohio's broken unemployment system and to fight for federal assistance for our state. Our leaders held virtual town halls, clinics, and forums with unemployed working people who have stories with local media and elected officials, including Senator Sherrod Brown and Congressman Tim Ryan. We also conducted multiple direct actions at Senator Rob Portman's office and home. Our unemployed leaders testified about the personal impact of Ohio's outdated unemployment laws, lending a human face and scope to this overwhelming problem.



THE OOC HELPED PASS HB614

Our collective organizing efforts ultimately resulted in the passage of HB614, a bill that will reform, modernize, and improve Ohio's unemployment system. Governor Mike Dewine also issued an executive order to expand unemployment access to Ohioans unable to work because of a health concern, and Senator Portman publicly lent his support towards the extension of pandemic-related unemployment relief.

In addition, our member organization Ohio Student Association led a fight to stop student debt collection in the early months of the pandemic with our partners. Our efforts led to Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost issuing a temporary moratorium on student debt collection, providing a solid legal precedent upon which OSA can build for future organizing around student debt relief. A key part of OSA's strategy involved using local media to build support for their cause; OSA leader Jarrod Robinson penned a powerful and widely-shared op-ed in *The Columbus Dispatch* regarding the crushing impact of student loan debt while dealing with the dual impact of a pandemic and an economic recession.

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY SAFETY

COVID-19 has changed the way we organize around criminal justice issues in Ohio. In the early months of the pandemic, we quickly realized that a coronavirus outbreak in our prisons and jails could be dangerous to incarcerated Ohioans. Indeed, one of our Columbus leaders Kwanza Maxwell fought to free her ailing father from prison. We partnered with the Ohio Justice and Policy Center, ACLU Ohio, and Policy Matters Ohio to raise awareness of Kwanza's story and the life-threatening, inhumane conditions inside our overcrowded prisons and jails, garnering [significant media coverage](#) that included a [New York Times op-ed](#) by Michelle Alexander.

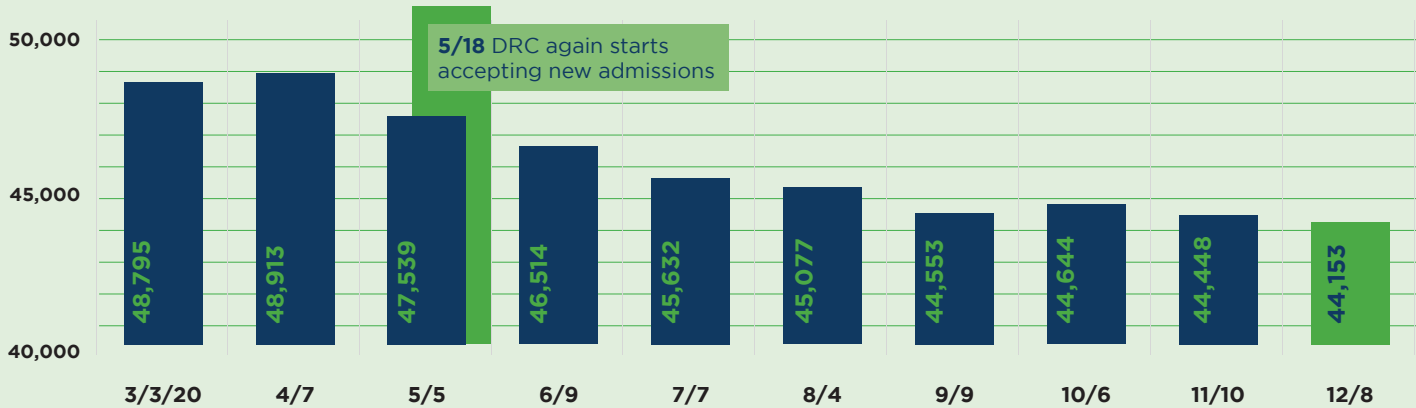
Kwanza and OJPC successfully led efforts to petition Governor Dewine and Dr. Amy Acton to release as many incarcerated Ohioans as possible while the pandemic raged through Ohio's carceral system. Kwanza's father David Watkins was ultimately granted release due to his medical condition, and Mr. Watkins is now safe at home with family. Of note, Ohio's prison population has also dropped by about 12% from the start of the pandemic in late March through the end of December 2020.



OOC leader Kwanza's dad, David Watkins, is pictured here. He was released from prison in 2020 because of a health vulnerability.

2020: AN UNPRECEDENTED ELECTION YEAR

On March 24, 2020, the prison population stood at **49,111**. It had dropped to **43,824** as of Dec. 29, a roughly **12%** decrease from the start of the pandemic in March.



Our member organization Ohio Student Association and the Cuyahoga County Jail Coalition have also been fighting to bring home as many Ohioans as possible. In 2020, our criminal justice leaders organized a Compassion Over Cages direct action at the Cleveland Justice Center and launched a digital toolkit to educate the public around Ohio's judicial release laws.

Additionally, a group of our Cleveland State University leaders (spearheaded by returned citizen Kevin Ballou) [won an influential "Ban the Box" campaign](#) on-campus that will significantly improve access to education for formerly incarcerated students at Cleveland State. Top national publication *The Progressive* [featured an in-depth story](#) on Kevin and his inspiring leadership around the issue of educational access for returning citizens.

Finally, we are leading efforts to ensure Ohioans struggling with drug addiction can receive adequate medical treatment instead of being criminalized. We are pushing for real community safety through Senate Bill 3, which will reclassify most low-quantity drug possession crimes as misdemeanors instead of felonies.

If passed, this bill will also provide Ohioans suffering from the illness of addiction with a feasible legal alternative to treat their condition instead of being sent to jail or prison. Part of our strategy included our criminal justice leader Robin Turner [shared her powerful story](#) as a formerly incarcerated woman caught up in the War on Drugs in the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*. Our faith leaders throughout the state also sent a letter to Governor Dewine and key elected officials to encourage support of the bipartisan-backed bill.



Kevin Ballou
Student Organizer
Ohio Student Association



Robin Turner
Criminal Justice Organizer,
Building Freedom Ohio and OOC

2020: AN UNPRECEDENTED ELECTION YEAR



REFORMING OHIO'S CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM THROUGH ELECTORAL STRATEGIES

Ohio is defined by grit, resilience, and a historic commitment to progressive, working-class values. Our long-term work registering over 300,000 voters, deep organizing in communities of color, and net voter turnout in our key counties helped us expand the electorate and educate our voters about races and issues that have a critical and direct impact on our communities. At the local level, the OOC was able to advance an important set of criminal justice reforms through electoral strategies:

Educated young voters and voters of color in Columbus about the candidates running for **Franklin County Prosecutor** and how their discretionary decisions impact mass incarceration and police accountability.

Passing Issue 2 in Columbus, a criminal justice reform ballot establishing a civilian review board for police misconduct.

Educated voters about the power of Ohio Supreme Court Justices in redistricting and criminal justice reform issues.

Educated voters about the role that Sheriff, Prosecutors and Judges play in impacting our communities.

ORGANIZING FOR CHILDCARE ACCESS AND EQUITY

The future of Ohio lies through the care economy. Black women and women of color make up a significant proportion of childcare workers, but their work has remained underfunded and overlooked. Even before the pandemic, Ohio has had a childcare crisis for at least a decade. Working parents often struggle to find accessible and affordable care, and the pandemic has exacerbated these challenges due to significant cuts in capacity at care centers.

In 2020, we began a campaign called “All In For Ohio Kids” to center the leadership of women of color working in the care economy by organizing childcare providers and the families they serve. Our childcare providers and parent member leaders successfully fought to pass the Childcare is Essential Act in the U.S. House last summer. The Act provides \$50 billion to states funding childcare for providers and families. Leading up to the House vote, Ohio parents and providers made the most calls in the country to elected officials to support the act. We met with multiple elected officials—US Representatives Amy Cox, Desiree Tims, Tim Ryan, Joyce Bady, Mike Turner, and Marcia Fudge, and Senator Sherrod Brown. We also held a

series of live and virtual events and shared stories on social media under the hashtag #SaveChildCare. Since then, our child care work has been featured in top progressive national publications like [The American Prospect](#) and [Talk Poverty](#).

Winning an important ballot initiative in Cincinnati and several school levies in Cleveland to raise money for child care and education.



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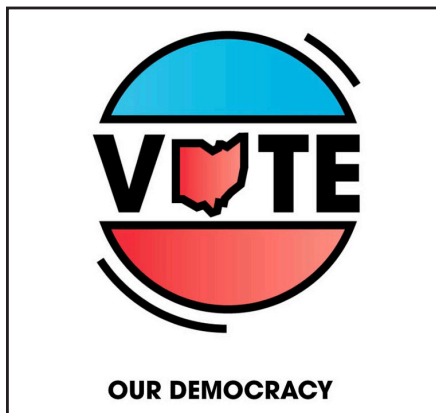
In the process, we've worked to grow the voices and participation of providers, caregivers, and allies in the policy process. In 2020, we held multiple leadership trainings to engage providers to vote in the 2020 election and develop our childcare platform. Over 200 providers and allies have joined our trainings; 67 have become members of All In For Ohio Kids; and 20 have become core leaders. To anchor our member leaders, we've launched a statewide leadership team and a set of locally-focused teams in Cincinnati, Dayton, and Southeast Ohio.

The OOC is uniting childcare providers, Black business owners and beauticians, and unemployed workers to create an economy where all Ohioans can thrive. We organized a statewide coalition of Black childcare providers to ensure their needs, safety, and economic security are being met. In Cincinnati, organizers built an alliance of Black-owned businesses fighting to #BailOutBlackBusinesses who are being shut out of crucial safety net programs. In Cleveland, we organized for federal and state stimulus funds to center the urgent needs of workers and community members.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

Ohio remains deeply divided by race and class. A state comprised of one-third Appalachia and defined by an industrial past, many white Ohioans have felt left behind by global, external economic forces. Many of our communities have been prone to racist, dog-whistle politics and embraced convenient narratives of white supremacy. To combat this, the OOC partnered with national progressive communications expert Anat Shenker-Osario and Race Class Narrative Action to conduct extensive polling and messaging research, which showed that Ohioans tended to glorify the economic successes of our past while lacking a clear vision for Ohio's future. **In response to these findings, we anchored a statewide coalition to advance a narrative campaign called ["All in for Ohio."](#) This campaign aims to draw Ohioans towards a new vision for the economy and build a multiracial democracy in our state.**

We have been leading in-state and in the Midwest region around RCN strategy & implementation since 2018. This year, we focused on enrolling the Ohio progressive ecosystem into the narrative strategy and built narrative & communication RCN infrastructure to align our narrative work, create distribution channels, and support local artists in the content creation process. **Our work with over 60 pieces of content, weekly message guidance, 12 million impressions and reached 2 million Ohioans.** Notably, we have also begun integrating the RCN framework into our overall media strategy and communications approach. So far, we have secured favorable initial coverage of our work that includes an RCN lens, and we are excited to build upon this promising foundation for our broader narrative work throughout Ohio moving forward.



ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

In 2020, the OOC expanded The Amos Project statewide with new faith leaders in Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati. We also welcomed our new Narrative and Communications Director Maki Somosot, who managed communications for two years for Bryan Stevenson at the Equal Justice Initiative and reported on inequality in Ohio and criminal justice in Louisiana.

After nearly a year of serving as interim leadership, the OOC Board of Directors also installed Prentiss Haney and Molly Shack as Co-Executive Directors. Both began their time with the OOC as member

leaders of the Ohio Student Association and have served the organization in different capacities for nearly a decade.

As the OOC continues to focus on its primary mission of organizing everyday Ohioans, we will focus on three key issue areas for our campaign program work in 2021: Democracy, Economic Justice, and Community Safety and Reinvestment. Our long-term strategy will focus on targeting several places where significant structural decisions are made, and challenging those who makes those decisions.



MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



New York Times

[Let Our People Go](#) (op-ed)

By Michelle Alexander

May 13, 2020

MSNBC

[Converting youth activism into youth voters](#)

June 7, 2020

The Guardian

[Could Dayton's Black voters turn Ohio blue?](#)

July 1, 2020

The Columbus Dispatch

[On eve of Ohio deadline, voter registration efforts adapt but still take hit in pandemic](#)

Oct. 4, 2020

PBS NewsHour

[Economy, racial injustice: Young Ohioans are turning out the vote](#)

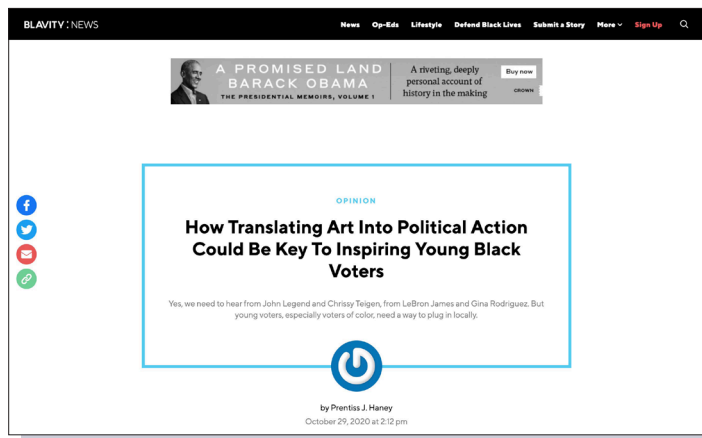
Oct. 17, 2020

The Daily Beast

[The Surprising Reason Why Ohio Is a Toss-Up State](#) (op-ed)

By Prentiss Haney and Maki Somosot

Oct. 24, 2020



Blavity

[How Translating Art Into Political Action Could Be Key To Inspiring Young Black Voters](#)

By Prentiss Haney

Oct. 29, 2020

Truthout

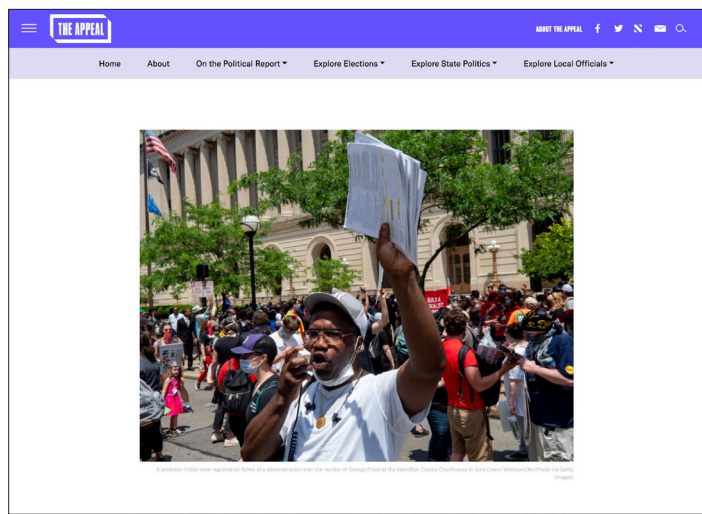
[Instead of chasing "swing voters," Ohio organizers push to expand electorate](#)

Nov. 2, 2020

Cleveland Plain-Dealer

[Heal our communities. Pass sensible drug reform now: Robin Turner](#) (op-ed)

Dec. 9, 2020



The Appeal

[How Ohio's racial justice movement won big at the ballot box](#)

Dec. 15, 2020