

# LAWYER AS PUBLIC CITIZEN

## Collaboration, Civics, & Civility

*Lessons and Cases from the Cornerstones  
of Democracy Commission Grant*

*Made possible by the AAA-ICDR Foundation*

November 2025



AMERICANBARASSOCIATION

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	3
INTRODUCTION	4
CASE STUDY #1	11
CASE STUDY #2	21
CASE STUDY #3	25
CONCLUSION	34
SOURCES CONSULTED	43
APPENDIX	44

*The views expressed herein represent the opinions of the authors. They have not been reviewed or approved by the House of Delegates or the Board of Governors of the American Bar Association and, accordingly, should not be construed as representing the position of the Association or any of its entities.*

# FOREWORD

When I was serving as president-elect, I began to think about what message I wanted to convey to ABA members, lawyers in general, and the public. My career as a lawyer and arbitrator provided me with the opportunity to collaborate with a diverse group of people with various backgrounds and experiences and listen to their views on different subjects.

All of this centered on our justice system, the foundational documents of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and our democracy. How did the foundational documents influence our daily lives and how did these pillars form the structure that has enabled us to address many challenges over the course of history.

Thus, the vision of what the cornerstones are is in essence the foundation of a durable and sustainable democracy grounded in the rule of law. And, as I entered the office of ABA president I requested the ABA Board of Governors to authorize the creation of the Cornerstones of Democracy Commission – Civics, Civility and Collaboration. I assembled a diverse group of dedicated individuals to undertake the development of initiatives to fulfill the mission. I selected now U.S. District Court Judge Adrienne Nelson to serve as chair and William Weisenberg as vice-chair, both longtime ABA members who had served on the Board of Governors, the House of Delegates, and in other ABA leadership capacities.

We recognized early on that basic civics education needed to be examined and perhaps refreshed, that civility in how we engaged with one another had to be addressed, and that we needed to emphasize

collaboration between and among diverse communities and constituencies. We needed to encourage everyone to tone down the rhetoric and live by the maxim that just because we disagree doesn't mean we have to be disagreeable. We needed to learn better how to listen and thus listen to learn.

Our collaboration with the National Conference of Bar Presidents was essential and over the past three years we presented programs to address these fundamental principles. We were fortunate to receive a generous grant from the American Arbitration Association-International Centre for Dispute Resolution Foundation that enabled us to provide grants to seven state, local and affinity bar associations for specific programming that is described in the report.

Our democracy and the Rule of Law depend upon the active engagement and participation of our populace. As retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer responded when asked what he thought the Founding Fathers were thinking when they departed the constitutional convention in 1787, he replied, “if you don’t participate, it won’t work.”

Cornerstones set the stage. Democracy is durable and sustainable only if we all participate.

Respectfully,

Deborah Enix-Ross, Former ABA President

Judge Adrienne Nelson, Chair ABA Cornerstones Commission

William K. Weisenberg, Vice-Chair ABA Cornerstones Commission

# INTRODUCTION

## The Three C's

In 2022, following the 2020 Presidential election that culminated in political violence on January 6, Deborah Enix-Ross, at that time the President of the American Bar Association, spearheaded a Presidential initiative she termed the Cornerstones of Democracy. Enix-Ross outlined three conceptual and practical pillars that she considered foundational to American democracy – collaboration, civics, and civility. With these “three C’s,” Enix-Ross sought to motivate lawyers to engage with the public to “bring down the temperature” of national discourse, and, in so doing, shift the political culture away from mistrust and fear.”

The three C's are a set of intersecting, democracy-reinforcing practices. As Danielle Allen, Professor at Harvard University and Director of the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation, would ask – how do we get from “I” (private) to “we” (public)? The work of the Cornerstones Commission elevates the concept of democracy as a participatory sport, one that prioritizes the collective and holds that democracy works best through collaboration and coordination. And that successful collaboration is dependent upon civility and respect. And civics only truly works when we think about it as an ongoing practice rather than the passive transmission of knowledge.

With the Cornerstones initiative as a backdrop, in 2023 the AAA-ICDR Foundation awarded a \$200,000 grant to the ABA to help bar associations across the U.S. strengthen democracy and the rule of law. Seven state,

local and affinity bars were selected to receive grant funding for programming with the stated goals of fostering community dialogue, improving understanding of the rule of law, and helping to restore confidence in our democratic processes.

### *Why Bar Associations?*

Each of the selected bar associations represents an organizational space for “doing democracy” through practicing collaboration, civility and civics. All seven bar association projects have helped move people out of their private concerns (I) and into the public concerns of their communities (We).

U.S. civil society is experiencing significant stress today, as donors are deterred from contributing to causes that are seen as too political, public grant funding is cut, legal restrictions on activities are passed, specific organizations may be targeted and investigated, and public trust in the non-profit sector is undermined by partisan politics. Given these challenges, professional trade associations – by virtue of their membership numbers and their financial strength through membership dues – can be both a leader and an ally in strengthening horizontal ties across organizations.

Membership organizations are rooted in social relationships, or what Martin Luther King Jr. referred to as “inescapable networks of mutuality.” People join organizations because they believe that they will receive some kind of benefit; but what motivates the members of an organization primarily concerned with the self-interests of their trade or industry to choose to act on behalf of larger societal concerns? And how can those commitments be sustained over revolving leadership and changing political environments?

For bar associations, part of the answer to these questions lies in the professional identity of lawyers. At a time where our information environment is polluted with misinformation, disinformation and bias, we need associations to leverage their professional credibility and trusted expertise to reinforce the core pillars of democracy.

In addition to professional identity and enduring commitment, the actions of these seven bars reveal the importance of people (leadership that inspires action), institutions (governance structures that sustain loyalty, coordinate functions, and strengthen engagement), and place. Indeed, the locality of the bars' work is critical to understanding the type, impact, and sustainability of the projects.

***“Lawyers have a responsibility to explain why due process isn’t just a right, it’s the foundation of trust in democracy.”***

***“We need new ways to talk about justice that resonate beyond legal circles or political tribes.”***

### *Why Lawyers?*

For President Enix-Ross the way to dial down the temperature of our political climate is to change behavior and attitudes through rebuilding trust. And through their training, public-facing work and understanding of civics, lawyers are ideally suited and situated to do this work. The work of these seven bar associations seeks to dismantle the myth of lawyers as distant elite professionals, who are often seen to be (and frankly may often be) overly formal, even elite, relative to the general public. Lawyers need to actively earn the trust of communities and ensure their voices are not drowned out by populist political influencers.

Each of these seven bar associations place lawyers on the frontlines of practicing democracy, work essential to the duties and ethics of being a lawyer, as informed by the Preamble to the American Bar Association Model Rules of Professional Conduct, that lawyers are *“public citizen[s] having special responsibilit[ies] for the quality of justice.”*

These projects highlight what happens when lawyers – through an organized bar – choose to sit with their communities, to ask questions, and to listen and learn first. The grantees demonstrate that when lawyers approach community projects and programs through engaged, sustained partnership and ask how their communities encounter and experience public institutions, they can rebuild trust in institutions, civil liberties and democratic values in the face of partisan differences.





## The Awardees (and their projects)

Bar partners were invited to generate projects that engage the public with democratic institutions in a peaceful and respectful way (civility), to engage from a standpoint of constitutional knowledge (civics), and to act in concert with others, because many voices are more powerful than one (collaboration). The ABA particularly encouraged programming that builds community bridges and resolves disputes, and is grounded in local solutions to strengthen democracy.

The core issues the grantees sought to address were: low institutional trust amidst high conflict; low civic knowledge and engagement; lack of civil discourse in an environment of disinformation; and how weakened trust in institutions and in one another has led to a retreat from public and civic life. These bars sought to take their organizational ties and social capital and expand outward to the broader public.

Seven state, local and affinity bars were selected and the following projects were funded for two years: July 2023- June 2025:

### □ **National Asian Pacific Bar Association (NAPABA)**

Invest in a cohort of Indiana-based AAPI community leaders by training them on the legal parameters of advocacy and lobbying.

### □ **National Native American Bar Association (NNABA)**

Empower native communities to exercise and protect their voting rights through fostering connection and collaboration across regional and national networks of native lawyers.

### □ **Oakland County Bar Association (MI)**

Expand law-related educational programming for students and voters.

### □ **Omaha Metropolitan Bar (NE)**

Hold town hall meetings to showcase examples of civility for the Omaha legal community and in partnership with local civic, faith, and higher educational institutions.

### □ **Ohio State Bar Association**

Paid digital media campaign to drive Ohio voters to Judicial Votes Count page and to educate the public on the role of judges and courts.

### □ **State Bar of Montana**

Expand public access to the Citizens' Law School, a statewide program designed to elevate understanding of the legal system and increase civics.

### □ **Washington County Bar Association (PA)**

Design and implement programs in collaboration with local and national organizations, to help educate the community and build bridges, as they try to return to "Civiltown."

## Our Observations

This report includes discrete case studies as to how each of the above grantees deployed AAA resources to achieve the grant outcomes. However, before diving into these case studies, we want to share a holistic observation of the projects and how we might learn from these projects in aggregate, as the purpose of these pilots is to see what we might propagate in similar organizations and types of environments nationally.

It is important to note that we observe all three C's in all the grant-funded projects. Indeed, it is the three pillars taken together that we posit can lead to substantive change. Taken as a whole, we can observe the following outcomes from these seven projects:

- **Expanded access for marginalized communities to participate in civic and political life**
- **Enhanced collective action of civil society groups**
- **Amplified democracy-strengthening behaviors**
- **Increased resilience to information manipulation**
- **Amplified democracy-strengthening narratives (and attitudes)**

## COLLABORATION

When lawyers and bar associations COLLABORATE they demonstrate how Americans listen to each other and accommodate differing views. Cross-organizational collaboration is a prophylaxis to polarization and conflict. Collaboration generates consensus formation, norms which reinforce representative democratic government. Through the grant pilot programs we have found that collaboration is most effective when:

- Collaboration is grounded in both community and membership needs and can flex and adapt to evolving circumstances.
- There are deliberate strategies for ensuring event turnout (e.g. through sharing across networks or CLE offered through an event.)
- Local bars collaborate with a wide range of partners across a high-density environment of civic organizations.
- National affinity bars facilitate networking across and between their affiliate groups (foundational for collaboration and for capacity building at the local level).
- There is consistency and durability in public engagement over time, sustaining engagement not only during times of crisis or duress. The key supporting factors here are leadership to set norms of engagement and governance structures that mobilize collective action.

## CIVICS

Enix-Ross' conceptualization of CIVICS is rooted in the critical thinking skills of lawyers. When done right, according to Enix-Ross, "Civics education provides grounding in critical thinking and fact-based debate,

core elements of a successful democracy. It trains students to challenge misinformation and gives future adult citizens the tools to engage effectively and constructively with opposing viewpoints. We find that civics is most effective when bars:

- Meet the moment and address how an environment rife with rumor and disinformation undermines how democracy works.
- Teach how to “do democracy” through civics education for adult communities, educating where and how groups and individuals can get a seat at the table.
- Target civics education to specific audiences on discrete aspects of engagement, particularly in highly divided states with intense political polarization. Citizens’ problems tend to be local and involve community-specific problems. Those communities may be geographically focused, or may be a common demographic. While national organizations may lobby the federal government, they also understand the critical importance of mobilizing “from below” in marginalized communities.
- Link civics to a civic action or specific tasks. They are not only learning how the system works, but on how to effectively engage with the system.
- Focus on legal expertise, building capacity via partner civil society organizations through legal education and training or local politicians. Expanding social and organizational networks beyond bar membership helps sustain MLK’s network of

mutuality - we care about each other and for each other.

## CIVILITY

How do we engage critically with differing viewpoints? With CIVILITY. For Enix-Ross, the day-to-day work of lawyers – whether as mediators, arbitrators, negotiators or courtroom advocates – offers a model of civility that can and should extend into our communities. “Our legal system is built on the foundation of debate, negotiation and consensus-building. As lawyers, we must model the behavior we wish to see in our communities.”

What happens when lawyers model professional civility outside the legal community? Cutting through populist nationalist narratives is challenging. They are inherently designed to position every issue as zero-sum; you are either a winner or a loser. In settings of toxic polarization civility is not just about being nice or getting along, it is the bridge or lifeline towards understanding the other and consensus formation. The findings from bar associations’ work on civility are:

- While foundational to civics and collaboration, civility is the “c” whose impact is hardest to measure.
- During the course of the grant the political environment severely deteriorated – trust deteriorated and it became that much more difficult to just get people in the same room.
- There is a cause and effect problem with institutional trust – we can’t strengthen trust in political institutions only through political civility; political institutions must also engender trust and uphold the social contract.

We need to actively engage and participate in institutions to build that trust.

- It is key for lawyers and their associations to be grounded in the realities of and have deep knowledge of their communities. They must also recognize the limitations of their organization.
- To promote civility, we must engage with individuals and our communities in non-hierarchical/non-elite ways.

*People, Place, Institution*

You will see that we have dedicated more “real estate” to two of these seven projects (Washington County

and NAPABA) because these certain grantees were ultimately the most impactful, used the resources intentionally, and provided the most constructive models for scale and/or reproduction in other venues. We like the pairing as one represents a bar that is local and the other is national. And they are also the clearest demonstrations of the 3C's operating in tandem to reinforce the values of democracy and democratic institutions in the face of increasing political polarization and mistrust of these very institutions.

In the case studies that follow, we have attempted to use specifics of people, place, and institution to contextualize the project and note how each contributes to its relative successes and challenges.



## With Appreciation



AMERICANBARASSOCIATION

The American Bar Association's longstanding mission is to defend liberty and pursue justice. Together, we are shaping a profession that is fairer, more inclusive and committed to the ideals that define justice and the rule of law. At this critical juncture for democracy in the US, the ABA stands firm in its commitment to supporting the rule of law, advocating for government action that is orderly, transparent, and respectful of all people. By doing so, we ensure our democracy stays strong and individual rights are protected.



This work would not have been possible without the generous support of the AAA-ICDR Foundation. In 2015, the American Arbitration Association-International Centre for Dispute Resolution Foundation® (AAA-ICDR Foundation®) was established by the American Arbitration Association® to fund projects that promote conflict resolution and prevention in communities across the country and around the world. The AAA-ICDR Foundation supports innovative work that promotes access to justice and strengthens the field of dispute resolution.



The work of this grant was overseen by Rachel Ellett, Associate Director of Research and Evaluation at the Center for Bar Leadership. The mission of the Center for Bar Leadership is to serve as the primary link between the ABA and state, local, specialty and affinity bar organizations, to raise the visibility of the ABA at the grassroots level, and to build the capacity of all bar organizations.

Please direct all inquiries regarding this project to Rachel Ellett, Associate Director Research and Evaluation, Center for Bar Leadership. [Rachel.Ellett@americanbar.org](mailto:Rachel.Ellett@americanbar.org)

## Case Study #1

# From Crazytown to Civiltown: Engaging Community, Restoring Trust, and the Art of Associating

**Project goals:** Design and implement programs in collaboration with local and national organizations, to help educate the community and build bridges, as they try to return back to “Civiltown.”

*“I am as firmly convinced today as I was in those lonely days of my solo practice, that the organized bar is as important to the community as it is to its lawyer members.” — (Charles Keller, Former President of the Washington Co. Bar Association)*

Washington County is a microcosm of the broader United States. Rural and urban/suburban divides highlight gaps in health and prosperity. Fracturing of the working class, with shrinking heavy industry and subsequent loss of union political power and the accompanying economic and social upheaval have ruptured previously stable political coalitions.

When we see the splintering of the public, we see a breakdown in communication as partisans peddle misinformation and distrust of the other, exploiting already heightened emotions and weakening civil discourse. This ultimately weakens support for institutions, and potentially leads to political violence. Nine individuals from Washington County were convicted for participating in the January 6th Capitol riot. Many were politically inactive before 2020, suggesting the pandemic may have catalyzed their radicalization and highlighting how radicalization of politics globally and nationally reaches down into local politics in western Pennsylvania. As one local politician

exclaimed at a Republican County meeting, “Don’t listen to all this crap that’s out there. ‘Cause none of it is true.”

The overarching outcomes of the grant to Washington County Bar Association are to address three interconnected areas:

- *Enhance collective action of civil society*
- *Amplify democracy-strengthening narratives and behaviors*
- *Prevent conflict through modeling civil discourse and conflict resolution through education and community bridge building*

This case study on a small Pennsylvania bar highlights how a highly engaged local bar with a strong track record of community partnerships represents an archetype of Deborah Enix-Ross’ 3C’s. First, we conduct an environmental scan of Washington

County, highlighting the underlying conditions and the impact of broader national and federal dynamics. Second, we look at the organizational history and current organizational strengths of the WCBA. Third, we describe and evaluate the programs supported by the AAA-ICDR grant and their potential for reproducibility and scalability.

## ***Background***

Washington County is older and whiter, with a slightly lower median wage across occupational groups, than the state of Pennsylvania as a whole. Mirroring national trends, Washington County residents' lifespans have shortened due to opioid-related deaths and chronic disease, but the number of high school graduates and college-degree holders (especially vocational degrees) has increased substantially in recent decades. While diversity is slowly growing, there are pockets of exception. Charleroi, a community of around 4,000 has a high poverty rate of 25%, more than double the state. Immigrants were recruited to work in warehouses and factories and for the first time in decades the town's population began to grow. Charleroi was the community foregrounded in the last election cycle for its large Haitian immigrant population.

Washington County is a microcosm of rustbelt America, having experienced an extended period of deindustrialization in the 1980s, when power plants and steel mills were shuttered and people moved away. Historically, the major industry was coal mining. By the 1980s, automation, globalization and the collapse of heavy industry led to high unemployment and today manufacturing jobs represent around 10% of the county employment sector.

Unlike other rustbelt regions, Washington County, sitting on the Marcellus Shale, stabilized economically through natural gas hydraulic fracking (Washington County is one of the most heavily fracked counties in Pennsylvania). Some farmers have come out ahead by leasing their land, but overall, oil and gas extraction accounted for just 0.1% of wages and benefits and has limited impact on public investment. Moreover, health and environmental burdens seem disproportionately borne by the poor.

The population of Washington County peaked around 1980, declined around 3% through the 1990s, and has remained stable since 2000. Again, there is wide variation across the county; the boroughs of West Alizabeth and Braddock experienced over 20% population decline between 2010 and 2020, while Jefferson Hills experienced a 16% growth rate. We also see suburban expansion in areas like Peters Township and Southpointe that have grown due to lower taxes and proximity to Pittsburgh, attracting younger families and professionals. As Tara Putnam observes, "Working-age adults are still disproportionately likely to be unionized, but for the majority this is not through the Steelworkers and United Mine Workers. Rather, it is pink collar (female-dominated jobs) and public sector unions as well as the building trades that are currently helping pay the mortgages in much of Pennsylvania's southwest." For the WCBA, lawyers moving to these areas are often corporate counsel and tend not to be as engaged.

From a political perspective, between 1950 and 2016 the state of Pennsylvania leaned Democrat. But the Democratic share of the vote began to steadily fall in the 1990s, and in 2016, for the first time, Pennsylvania leaned Republican. For Washington County the transition came earlier in 2008 when the county voted

52% for McCain, 47% for Obama. In subsequent years, the rightward shift has accelerated and in the most recent 2024 election Washington County voted 62% Trump, 37% Harris.

Since Washington County's founding there have long existed, to use Robert Putnam's terms, networks of "organized reciprocity and civic solidarity." These civic networks formed the foundation for industrialization and development. By the mid-twentieth century the networks centered around membership associations and board membership; bodies typically dominated by professional, white males – fraternal organizations, veterans' groups and professional organizations. This was also true of the WCBA, as Kathy Sabol, Executive Director of the WCBA, notes, until the late 1980s wives and women lawyers who came to the annual bar banquet were forced to eat separately in the mezzanine, looking down on the male lawyers eating in the ballroom. Civic leadership was the preserve of those who had the resources and the time.

Yet, while demographically narrow, these groups had cross-partisan reach and helped build both civic skills, political advocacy and help increase community solidarity.

Washington County was "home to a dense associational life: a civic world of lodges, churches, and shop floors in which precinct-level Democratic Party organizing and active union locals went hand in hand." Since the 1980s, class and partisan political identity have decoupled. The traditional blue-collar constituencies of southwest Pennsylvania have moved right. Labor union membership has declined by over half and there is only one unionized coal mine in the region today. Veterans' halls and civic club membership has declined, and catholic churches have

merged due to declining attendance, leading to tensions within newly combined parishes. In 2025, the Washington Lions Club shuttered, but the local Masonic group is still active and collaborates with the WCBA in supporting the Wills for Heroes program. The program is held in their building and they promote the program among their members and networks. Local non-profits tend to focus on serving specific communities today, such as the youth or unhoused populations. Place matters.

Declining union membership and increased disenchantment with elected officials accelerated the rightward shift in locally elected positions, and by 2019 the Washington County Commission had flipped to Republican control followed by other 'row office' positions - district attorney, sheriff, recorder of deeds. The county saw intense political activity during and after the 2020 election, including "Stop the Steal" protests and demands for election audits. Civic engagement peaked around 2020–2022 but according to several community leaders, it has since tapered off. One community leader noted that local government meetings or school board meetings are often inaccessible to younger professionals due to inconvenient scheduling times. Recent years have seen increased politicization of school board politics, especially around curriculum and parental rights. Tension in the community has run high as local government offices are now led by Trump followers.

In a 2023 Bloomberg piece "GOP Election Deniers Are Gunning Big for Pennsylvania Local Government" the columnist Francis Wilkinson applied the "crazytown" moniker for Washington the first time. The piece explored how election denialists had increasingly targeted local government offices in Pennsylvania, particularly school boards, county commissions, and

election boards. Wilkinson claims that after failing to overturn national election results in 2020, many election deniers shifted focus to local offices, where they can directly influence election administration, public education, and local policy.

Conspiracy theories, misinformation and eroded trust make Washington County a challenging environment for bar association civic engagement and collaboration. A local newspaper op-ed recently listed a series of what the author referred to as recent “embarrassing headlines” in the news:

- “*Clerk of Courts Davis held in contempt, sentenced to jail*”
- “*Attorney General investigating Clerk of Courts Davis*”
- “*Audit finds ‘significant’ issues in Register of Wills office*”
- “*Register of Wills accused of taking gun into courthouse*”
- “*Prothonotary Hough under fire for use of background check database*”
- “*Roman accused of threatening employee at Register of Wills office*”
- “*Register of Wills could be held in contempt due to delayed adoption filings*”
- “*Judge strikes Register of Wills’ report from public record*”
- “*Washington County controller cited for harassment at GOP Christmas party*”

The bar has a policy of not issuing public statements, but when the Register of Wills completely shut down

following a computer system outage, the WCBA President and Chair of the Public Offices and Records Committee wrote to court officials requesting information and greater transparency.

Local journalists are fewer in number today, and while the Observer-Reporter is the main newspaper, social media platforms have become the primary space for public debate. The Observer-Reporter used to be owned by a local family but was sold to conglomerate Ogden newspapers in 2018. The local newspaper has and continues to be an important collaborator for the WCBA, covering WCBA events and promoting Law Day contests and prize winning essays.

For the WCBA the consequences of ideologically-driven candidates entering row officer positions at the court has represented a major challenge for a non-partisan organization. How do they continue to uphold the rule of law? How could they stay true to Tocqueville’s original conception of civic engagement – pushing private concerns into common public concerns and how do they build back bridges of collective civic engagement?

### ***Small Bar, Big Agenda***

Not all bars wholly and completely prioritize collaboration, community engagement, and service; Washington County Bar Association (WCBA) does. And it goes beyond typical bar educational outreach on the justice system. Chartered in 1892 for the purpose of “maintaining the honor and dignity of the profession of the law, of cultivating social relations among its members, and increasing its usefulness in promoting the due administration of justice”, the bar likes to refer to itself as the “small bar with the big agenda.”



The WCBA's offices are housed in an elegant residence constructed in 1850; across the street from the 150-year-old college Washington and Jefferson, two blocks away from the County Courthouse, two blocks from the 'Peace Pole' in the Main Street Community Pavilion, one block away from the Elks Lodge, three blocks from the LeMoyne Youth Center and half a mile from the Washington Health Services Teen Outreach – Academy for Adolescents. The institution is central to the community.

The 460-member bar, while relatively small compared to neighboring Allegheny County (Pittsburgh) with 5,558 members, has thrived in recent decades, roughly doubling its membership. And while the overall budgets of the Allegheny County Bar and the Pennsylvania state bar are larger, around \$4 million and \$13 million respectively, when calculated per capita, the Washington County Bar has a budget twice that of the state bar and around a third larger than Allegheny County Bar. The bar has a staff of three and the Executive Director Kathy Sabol has led the organization for 30 years. High bar association capacity

is a function of membership size (and commitment), professional staff, and the depth of financial resources. WCBA is strong across all three dimensions.

Many of the recent bar presidents were born and raised in Washington County and have deep local roots and ties, providing a sense of organizational continuity and sustainability. In addition, the Community Engagement Committee plays a key role in forging alliances and building sustainable community impact.

Smaller local bars tend to have a higher percentage of solo or small firm practitioners and, at least historically, have tended to be more professionally cohesive and socially embedded in local norms and values. Rural lawyers typically have a higher rate of participation in civic organizations, greater ties to other businesses or sectors, but they may also feel greater pressure to conform to local norms and social expectations. The dense networks of community ties can be both strengthening and limiting as it relates to civic engagement.

As the boroughs adjoining Allegheny County become more suburban and developed (e.g. Southpointe, Canonsburg) there is potential for a higher number of younger lawyers to join the WCBA to network and access the community. In the past the WCBA has identified general counsel or "imported firms" as places to increase bar recruitment. In-house counsel (particularly oil and gas counsel) have never been a large segment of WCBA membership. Turnout at the annual bench-bar conference in 2025 represented over three quarters of their membership. In membership surveys conducted by the ABA in 2019

and 2024 over three-quarters of membership characterized their engagement as 'somewhat' or 'very involved' with the WCBA. This level of engagement is higher than other comparably situated bars. There is also consistent and stable support for the civic engagement work of the bar; the top profession concern listed by membership in 2024 was: "Lack of public understanding and confidence in the judicial system."

Current membership of WCBA is almost 1/3 young/new, 1/3 mid-career, and 1/3 "senior" (60+). Overall membership is stable but aging, with few young attorneys starting solo practices in the area. The Bar Foundation plays a strong supportive role in civic education activities. There is strong overlap in board representation in a small community like Washington. In the words of the executive director, "the Foundation is us and we are the Foundation." This provides a consistent source of funding for community programs. Post-Covid, like many membership organizations nationwide, the bar has experienced a drop in engagement and participation. They've had to cancel

CLE's and reduce monthly meetings. This drop in attendance leaves Executive Director Sabol worried that bar members are not having "the conversations they used to." For example, the bar has historically had free lunch roundtables and 30+ people would show up, now it is only 4 or 5. They're trying to ramp it back up again.

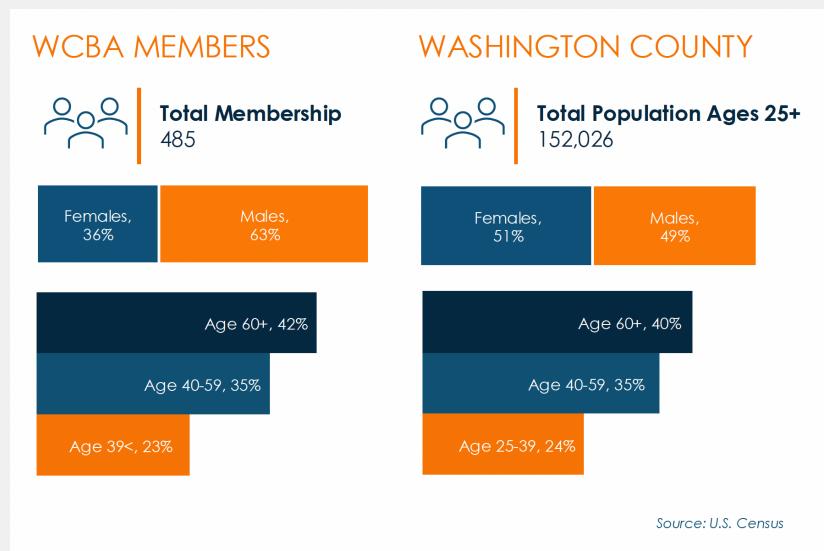
There are fortunately strong relationships among the Pennsylvania bars – strong networks between local bars and regular meetings with the state bar association. In an era of heightened concern about organizational risk for bar associations, the strength of information sharing and collaborative bar networks we observe in Pennsylvania is critical and a positive model for ongoing engagement in public affairs and rule of law.

Moreover, the WCBA governance model is sound, and empowers the organization to be a driver in the community. According to Sabol, the bar works smoothly across presidencies, works well with the bar foundation, and the Public Relations and Service Committee is innovative, deeply rooted in the community, and prioritizes collaboration.

For some bars a new presidential year can be disruptive and move the bar away from its core mission and commitments. This doesn't appear to happen at the WCBA. There is a highly functional and effective governance structure and organizational culture that prioritizes public facing engagement.

### ***The WCBA Does Democracy***

The bar sees itself as part of the community ecosystem, builds on



community strengths, and seeks to fill gaps in either community services, education, or bridge building. Their grant request stated:

*“Our Big Idea is to design and implement programs to help nudge our community from “Crazytown” (the moniker given to us in a recent national news article) to “Civiltown.” We will launch a series of events, each geared to specific target audiences, to address each of the three Cornerstones of Democracy: increase awareness and education about the rule of law and the Constitution (civics), provide training for civil discourse (civility), and collaborate widely to bring as many partners into the conversation as possible, including many potential partners not listed specifically in this grant request.”*

Over the next two years, the WCBA sponsored or partnered with others to offer a number of events that bring to life the 3Cs and serve as a model for others to follow. We dig deep into two of these efforts, but AAA-ICDR resources sponsored numerous others. The full list is appended at the conclusion of this report.

## Rotary

In March 2024 WCBA teamed up with the local Rotary club at their annual trivia contest. The event was attended by 400 people playing trivia for their favorite charities. The contest included a dedicated round of civics questions and a bonus question for a “Hot Button Bonus Round” series of questions about civil discourse. Participants were asked: if someone with views different than yours starts a hot button conversation, what are you most likely to do? Both WCBA lawyers and the broader Rotary community were highly likely to engage constructively. The

participant responses to “What are you most likely to do if someone with different views starts a hot-button conversation?” also suggested that when faced with difficult conversations, those who are attached to their local community are less likely to remain silent and



more likely to engage constructively.

During the event information was distributed to each team about the “Debate without Hate” program developed by the Washington Health System Teen Outreach Center – a frequent partner with the WCBA – and its “Rules of Engagement” for encouraging civil discourse.

One year later WCBA teamed up with Rotary again, when in conjunction with Rotary International and the federal Congressional Office for International Leadership (COIL) they co-hosted an “Open World” team of professionals from the Ukraine. The collaborative partners worked together to provide 32 hours of tours and discussions on peacebuilding and conflict resolution topics at area teen centers, domestic violence shelters, courthouse/justice system, and nonprofit organizations. On March 11 at the weekly Rotary meeting, attended by 100 Rotarians, community members, and lawyers, Emily Holmes, Senior State Program Officer in PA for Common Ground USA’s Resilient States Project, presented

“Turning Conflict Into Community.” She discussed how the nonpartisan Common Ground USA helps communities transform conflict into cooperation.

Using a collaborative “dignity of all” approach, Common Ground USA “works to transform conflict into community by growing collaboration, connection, and trust across differences.” After the meeting, attendees participated in the planting of a Peace Pole on Main Street in downtown Washington at the Rotary Patriot’s Pavilion.

**OPEN WORLD PROGRAM**

The Open World program offers clubs and districts in Rotary a way to enjoy meaningful international exchanges while giving professionals from Eurasian countries personal experiences with U.S. democracy.

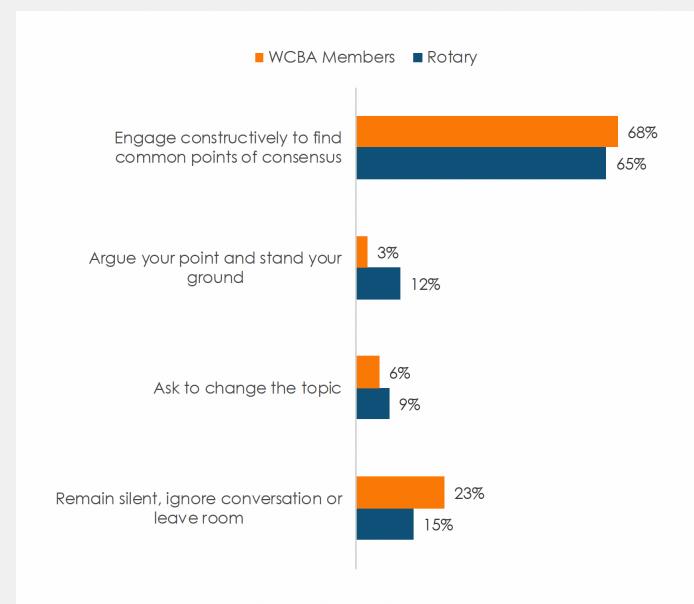
**“Rotary actively promotes world peace and understanding, and the Open World program is an excellent vehicle to accomplish this.”**

—Alvaro Pisani  
of the Rotary Club of Parkers, Colorado, USA

**Rotary**

For Sabol, the partnership between Rotary and WCBA was a natural fit. Rotary has a long history of working on peace projects, and this clearly intersected with the grant-focused work on conflict resolution and civil discourse. In addition to the cross-pollination of members, the luncheon included almost 40 WCBA

members with no connection to Rotary. This project is striking from the perspective of developing the connective tissue within and across the community. People are not just passively attending events or a presentation, but they are engaged in a range of activities that compel interaction. Lawyers are not above the proceedings but part of them. The focus on conflict outside of the United States helps generate a sense of urgency to address divisions at the local level.



## Trust Our Elections

While the Rotary collaborations were highly successful, the one event Sabol believes managed to “get new people in the room” was the “Trust our Elections” event. After an intense few years of heightened political tension and accusations over corruption and voter fraud, the WCBA made the bold decision to collaborate with Keep our Republic, a national non-partisan civic education organization focused on elections and rule of law, on a public event.

Creating a welcoming local forum for public deliberation has been and remains a critical role and function for bar associations in the U.S. The event received significant publicity because of the senior public officials presenting and, because two Washington County Commissioners backed out of participating at the last minute.

The WCBA was notified by the county solicitor just a few hours before the event was due to begin that these public officials were no longer going to attend. The solicitor cited concerns that the two commissioners and the elections director would not be participating due to concerns over ballot curing questions and a potential lawsuit that had been threatened by the ACLU. The month prior, the county decided not to allow ballot curing (correcting fatal flaws on the ballot) for mail-in and absentee

votes during the primary. Ultimately the the ACLU of Pennsylvania, Public Interest Law Center, and the law firm Dechert LLP did file a lawsuit, and in September of 2025 the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania affirmed the lower court's decision that the Washington County Board of Elections must inform voters if they have made a disqualifying error on their mail ballot packets.



The event began with a CLE seminar on the Electoral Reform Act for 40 attorneys and judges, presented by former Republican Governor Tom Corbett. A public forum with Corbett, retired federal judge Tim Lewis, county commissioners, a representative from Keep Our Republic, and moderator Jon Delano (KDKA-TV) followed, with 150 people in attendance. Ultimately, the refusal of the commissioners to participate generated far more post-event publicity than anticipated.

According to local news reports, during the actual event, questions regarding ballot curing did not come up until halfway through the 90-minute session. The panel gave careful and considered commentary on the problem. Judge Lewis, a Bush appointee, stated that [judges] "realize there is more on the line than just the dispute between parties." Former Governor Corbett, declared that to "get back to normal we

need open dialogue."

The intense public discourse around election integrity and "stealing the vote" convinced both Sabol and then President Todd Papersergi that this issue was critically important to rule of law in Washington County. The main challenge with this event (and more broadly) was to work within the strictures of the Keep our Republic

non-partisan mandate. Sabol recalls, “As we were planning this we realized we wanted a bipartisan coalition. Let’s get the Republican and Democratic committees in town to be sponsors. And Keep the Republic told us no because it’s a non-partisan organization and they felt like our event needed to be, as well. They were right.”

It’s not that there weren’t participants from different parties and political perspectives in the room. Quite the contrary. The key is that they focused these election integrity conversations that evening around education and the trust in institutions to provide that education. And they were courageous enough to facilitate this collaboration about civics in an intentionally civil way. When Governor Corbett rhetorically asked someone in the room “Why are we here?” someone in the audience shouted, “we care!”

Papersergi said of the event at the time, “It is geared towards education. It’s not geared towards advocacy; it’s not geared towards pushing an agenda. It is geared towards bringing both sides of the political spectrum to say, factually, that elections aren’t stolen. The people who say those things are a threat to national security. Leading with education wins the long game, even if it might upset some people on the fringes.”

Todd was asked, do you think that people who needed to hear the conversation heard it.

“I would say yes, there were a handful of people in the room who needed to hear. Did they believe the message? I think that’s another question. But my view on that is, I don’t care. We got them there, and they heard it.”

### Other Notable WCBA Grant-Funded Activities

We’ve highlighted above two strong examples of the WCBA “doing democracy.” Below please find a list of other notable activities funded by this AAA-ICDR support. For a full accounting, please see the appendices.

- Youth v. Gov
- Clean Slate Day
- Law School For Nonprofits
- Holmes Common Ground Community Conversation
- Teen Outreach
- Wills for Heroes

## Case Study #2

# Advocacy into Action

**Project goals:** Invest in a cohort of Indiana-based AAPI community leaders by training them on the parameters of advocacy and lobbying.

The goal of civic education is to understand how the system works and to teach how to effectively engage with that system. Participation requires civic knowledge, a common set of values or beliefs, and an overarching commitment to a process that centers consensus formation and collaboration on one hand, and civil discourse on the other. Civics is not simply about understanding how government works, but about engaging and doing the work. The National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA) is doing that work intentionally and thoughtfully.

NAPABA is a national affinity bar whose role is to work to build and strengthen representation of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander in the legal profession and to advocate on issues that directly impact their communities. To help advance public policy issues their strategic plan outlines two approaches:

- Strengthen relationships with members of Congress and community based organizations.
- Explore new methods to contribute to the advancement and development of ideas and

discussions within and by the AANHPI legal community.

It represents the interests of over 80,000 Asian Pacific American (APA) legal professionals and nearly 90 affiliate APA bar associations. NAPABA is a leader in addressing civil rights issues confronting AANHPI communities. NAPABA is a large, well-funded professionally staffed bar with 10 staff.

The NAPABA grant project aimed to:

- Expand access for AANHPI communities to participate in civic and political life.
- Strengthen collective action across the AANHPI community through fostering networks.
- Increase community understanding of the political system for community groups.

While the national organization lobbies the federal government, the bar leaders also understand the importance of mobilizing from below at the affiliate level. The challenges in building civic capacity at the grassroots are immense when communities have real

reasons to fear the government, when they operate in systems that seem designed to exclude them, or when the community value systems clash with local or federal laws. These slow moving structural forces have recently combined with an anti-immigrant, anti-Asian backlash, and an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes.

In response to these recent developments, rather than impose talking points from afar, NAPABA and its lawyers helped stakeholders on the ground develop their own locally-driven arguments. This approach set the stage for the creation of a NAPABA Advocacy Action Plan, which was made in direct response to criticisms related to their 2023 annual meeting in Indianapolis.

Indiana had recently limited LGBTQ+ rights and there was pressure to move the annual meeting elsewhere, as this discrimination was seen by many in NAPABA to go against the values of the organization. NAPABA responded by releasing this plan to engage the local AAHNPI community, and by holding a series of civic leader convenings in advance of and as part of the annual meeting. The goal of this project was framed as follows: “NAPABA will serve as a convenor and coalition builder by capitalizing on our presence in Indiana, highlighting the work of our affiliate APABA-IN, and our advocacy experience to bring together otherwise disparate or unconnected stakeholders around the NAPABA banner.”

The emphasis here was on collaborating with Indiana APABA and on providing a space to convene and learn civics in a civil manner. The work of the grant funded engagement was to “invest in a cohort of Indiana-based leaders with the relationships and skills necessary to raise their voices and establish a sustainable solidarity infrastructure in the state. NAPABA believes these

local organizations and advocates should meet our members throughout the year, and especially during the Convention, so that we can inspire one another in common cause for diversity and inclusion.”

The first convening of community organizations in October brought over twenty Indianapolis-based individuals together for the first of a multi-part civic engagement series entitled, “Joining Forces, Building Community and Empowerment.” Partnering with APABA Indiana, Alliance for Justice, and the law firm Dentons Bingham Greenebaum LLP, participants included local Burmese-Chin community group leaders, members of the Asian American Alliance, Asian Students Association, the Indianapolis Bar and APABA Indiana. In addition to networking and alliance building, participants received training to build awareness around policy advocacy and to learn how much and what types of lobbying non-profits can engage in. Participants also centered their discussion around building bridges between local and national affinity organizations and the value of gaining support from the Asian business community, especially as it relates to the Burmese-Chin population in Indianapolis. Place matters.

The AAHNPI population of Indiana is over 250,000. The Burmese-Chin population of south Indianapolis is 35,000. There are 37 Chin churches, the biggest of which has 3,500 members. There are over 100 Chin businesses. During the workshop participants noted the challenges of language access for the Chin community. Myanmar has 135 ethnic groups and within the Chin community alone there are 53 different languages. Without language access communities may not know their rights, or be able to access legal, health or educational services. Reflecting on these challenges, one of the core takeaways for the

workshop participants was to invest in partnerships. As one participant noted, “If we don’t know each other, we will not trust each other.”

## *“If we don’t know each other, we will not trust each other.”*

By approaching advocacy and organizing from the bottom up, the groups were able to generate several concrete areas for community advocacy and collaboration with lawyers:

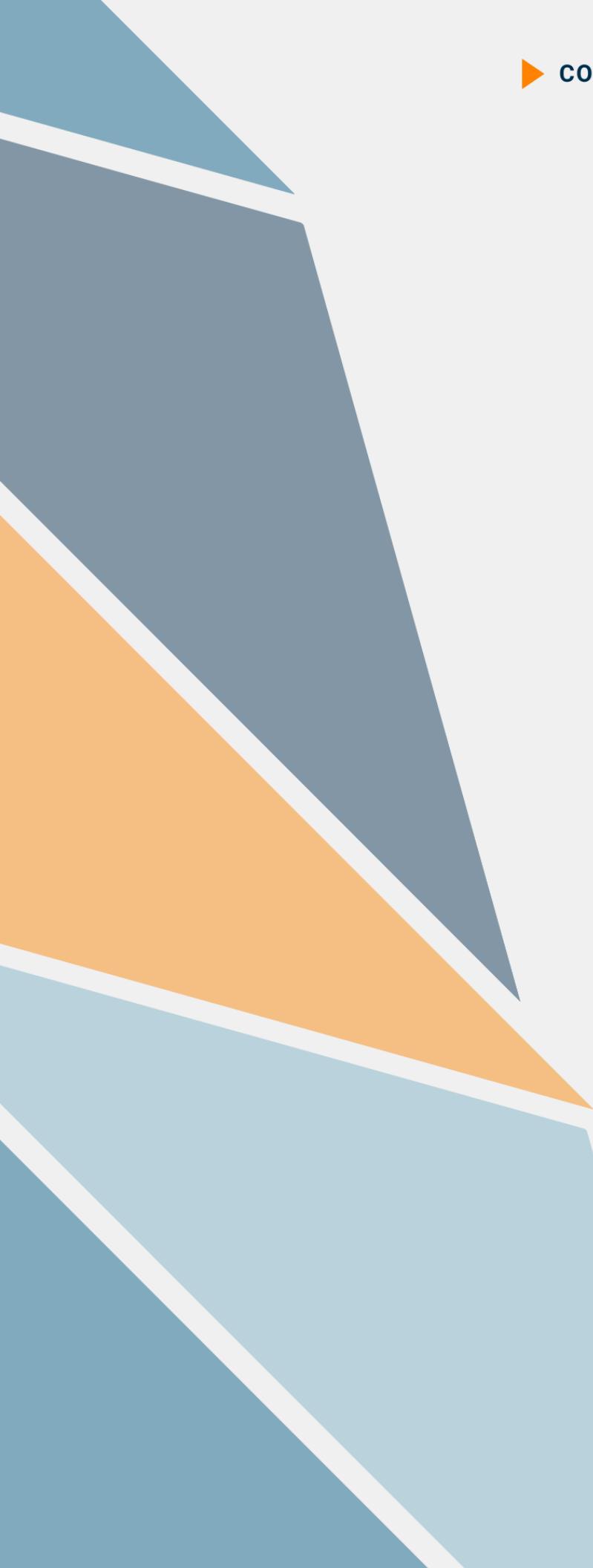
- Indianapolis Bar Association “Ask a lawyer day” – Most of the time the community doesn’t need lawyers, they just need resources or be told where to go. How to apply for government services, how to access mental health. But it helps when information is coming from lawyers.
- Pro Bono legal day for Chin community supported by Indiana Legal Aid, Indiana Legal Aid Services, Indianapolis Legal Aid Society.
- Language access for the Chin community. Identify specific materials to be interpreted – know your rights, basic law.
- Government services with attendant language access. Government officials or courts don’t offer language or dialect assistance.

- Community members should be encouraged to run for school board.
- Media partnerships (Chintv, ethnic media, social media) should be established; use Facebook short reels to educate on legal rights.
- Law students to help update local organizations' directory.

In November, at the national NAPABA convention in Indianapolis a combination of NAPABA leaders and local community leaders picked up where they left off in October with more training by the Bolder Advocacy group and a panel discussion with prominent local and national civil rights leaders. Karen Korematsu Founder of the Korematsu Institute, Bendita Malakia President of the National LGBTQ+ Bar Association, Michelle Waugh Dahl Co-Chair of AAPI Pride of Indiana came together to stress the importance of coalition building and solidarity around issues of common concern.

In January, NAPABA held their third convening virtually with continued advocacy training by Bolder Advocacy. There was strong representation from local AAPI student groups.

Taking the successful model from Indianapolis, in August 2024, NAPABA repeated the series in Chicago. The August program, “NAPABA Community Convening Advocacy in Action,” was specifically designed to help law student organizations navigate the lobbying, advocacy, and campaign rules governing non-profits during the 2024 election year.



Moving beyond the Indiana convenings, NAPABA continues to deliver non-partisan training for advocates, including those who are from immigrant communities, on how state legislatures work. They distribute materials on how immigrants can participate in advocacy, irrespective of their status. NAPABA is also flexing to expand activities at the intersection of immigration and democracy, including: know-your-rights training in the wake of mass deportations and anti-immigration rhetoric and sentiment, further advocacy training to empower these community voices, citizenship drives, and assistance for non-profit organizations on how to help immigrants improve their statuses, obtain green cards, or naturalize as citizens.

Those focused on helping non-profit organizations now better understand the rules of the road for advocacy for tax exempt organizations due to NAPABA interventions. But the most successful aspects of the activities funded by the AAA-ICDR were building relationships and galvanizing coalitions and the continuing collaboration and dialogue as an outgrowth of these activities. In fact, following the Indianapolis community convening, other affiliated organizations sought to replicate the training for their regional constituencies.

## Case Study #3

# 5 Bars Doing the 3Cs

Even when engaged in contentious politics with local officials, our citizens have typically still respected and believed in the institutions those officials represent. Today, there is a more nihilistic thread in populist discourse that encourages citizens to support the destruction of institutions rather than engagement with those institutions. It is not hard to understand why, as many Americans feel less secure and prosperous and have lost trust in the institutions they see as responsible for that security and prosperity. The interweaving threads of institutions that are seen to have failed us and those seen to be beyond repair present a daunting picture for civil society organizations that seek to strengthen democracy through collaborative civic engagement.

The five cases discussed below present different types of bar associations engaged in building civic knowledge, strengthening engagement and modeling civil norms and collaboration in the service of strengthening democracy and trust in rule of law. Their individual work sponsored by the AAA-ICDR grants mostly built upon existing programs and so are summarized more briefly than the case studies detailed above. However, taken in aggregate, there are multiple strong examples of the 3Cs at work, and models for future investment, scale, and project reproducibility.

### ***National Native American Bar Association (NNABA)***

**Project goals:** Empower native communities to exercise and protect their voting rights through fostering connection and collaboration across regional - nine affiliate regional bars - and national networks of native lawyers.

“Who is Native American?” For the National Native American Bar Association (NNABA): “the name Native American implies all populations indigenous to the lands which are now collectively the United States: American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.” Native Americans are represented in the legal profession at roughly the same proportion as their presence in the general population. As of 2024, less than one-half of 1 percent of all lawyers (0.4%) are Native American – down slightly from 0.7% a decade ago – while the U.S. population is 1.3% Native American.

Native people continue to experience a litany of barriers in exercising their right to vote. NNABA, its members, and leadership have a long history of advocating for the expansion and protection of access to the ballot. For example, they advocated for amendments to the Voting Rights Act and for the

passage of the Native American Voting Rights Act. Numerous NNABA members are involved with voting rights efforts in national, regional, and local organizations.

The core grant outcomes were to:

- Equip the community of native lawyers in national and regional native bars with tools, resources, and the network necessary to deliver impactful and culturally sensitive civic duty, voting rights education, and attendant support.
- Empower native communities with educational programming, materials, and support to exercise their right to vote and seek help when their voting rights are not being honored.

The central project of the grant was to sponsor a “voting rights summit” where leaders from across the country would gather to identify problems ahead of the 2024 elections. Bar leaders and voting rights experts educated attendees on models, programs, and resources that they might employ to support, and expand engagement in civic duties and Native voting.

Given limited resources, the goal was to snowball the work from the NNABA summit out to regional bars, simultaneously supporting each other’s efforts to ensure local needs are met with the power of a national network. The summit began with a dedicated deep

dive into the current state of democracy and election participation for Native people. Six attorneys (five of whom were Native Americans who work in the area of voting rights, each representing different Tribal Communities) spoke over the course of three panels

**PREPARING FOR 2024**  
Native Voting Rights Summit  
JOIN THE CONVERSATION ABOUT PROTECTING DEMOCRACY IN INDIAN COUNTRY.

**Jacqueline De Leon**  
(Isleta Pueblo)  
Native American Rights Fund

**Patty Ferguson-Bohnee**  
(Pointe-au-Chien)  
Arizona State University  
College of Law

**Matthew Campbell**  
(Native Village of Gambell)  
Native American Rights Fund

**Torey Dolan**  
(Choctaw Nation)  
University of Wisconsin Law School

**Brian Garcia**  
(Pascua Yaqui)  
All Voting is Local

**Paul Spruhan**  
(Navajo Nation)  
Department of Justice

**APRIL 3, 2024**  
8AM - 12PM MST  
IN-PERSON AND ONLINE  
Sandia Resort & Casino  
Eagle Room  
Zoom Access: <https://tinyurl.com/NNABA>  
[NativeVote \[tinyurl.com\]](https://tinyurl.com/NativeVote)

**TOPICS INCLUDE:**

- Obstacles to Voting in Indian Country
- Election Protection and the Arizona Model
- Advocacy and Litigation to Protect Democracy
- Current Threats in 2024

Program supported by the American Bar Association Cornerstones of Democracy grant, funded by the AAA-ICDR Foundation.

and also led a series of four listening sessions with participants to talk about issues in their specific communities, how they approach the problems, and exploring ways for future collaboration. The summit had about over 40 participants with 18 different tribes represented.

After the summit NNABA lawyers aided affiliates in the execution phase of their local efforts by offering a limited fund for sharing costs to conduct their programs. The NNABA 2025 annual meeting provided an opportunity to regroup and share lessons learned from the 2024 President election. Topics discussed included:

- The recent presidential election and turnout in Indian Country to discuss where Native communities are flexing their political power and where they are hitting old and new obstacles in exercising the right to vote. Overall Native American voter turnout continues to decline, and the decline is steeper in rural communities. Half of Native American voters were not contacted about participating in this election.
- The Native vote impact in non-presidential elections and how to encourage Native American voter participation in all cycles. Potential narratives to motivate the Native American population to vote included:
  - Land rights and tribal sovereignty
  - Preserving culture and language
  - Economic development
  - Native American history
  - Concern for the environment
- Ongoing threats, including conversations about the birthright citizenship executive order and the executive order on voter registration.

### *Montana State Bar Association*

**Project goals:** Expand public access to the Citizens' Law School, a statewide program designed to elevate understanding of the legal system and increase civics.

In 1972 Montana held a constitutional convention where they crafted a new constitution, one “drafted by people who were in many cases everyday citizens — ranchers, beekeepers, or homemakers — rather than political insiders.” And, “As they debated provisions over the course of the convention held in the state Capitol in the winter of 1972, the 58 Democratic, 36 Republican and 6 independent delegates seated themselves alphabetically to de-emphasize their party affiliations.” The final result of their work included provisions such as the right to a clean and healthful environment and the right to privacy, a terrific representation of civic engagement or ‘citizen democracy’.

This bipartisanship has carried through to the present day. Montana has varied highly dispersed populations who in 2016 reelected a Democratic governor but overwhelmingly supported Donald Trump for president. While this tendency towards split tickets could be interpreted as a form of independent thinking or a desire to balance the institutions of government, Montana has, over the last ten years, also felt the effects of an increasingly partisan, polarized America and many of those partisan divides are between the rural and urban populations.

Today, Montana faces “hardline Republicans empowered by the increasingly firm control of state government that Montana voters have given their party,” according to Eric Dietrich, from the Montana Free Press. There are strong currents of distrust in the federal government and a proliferation of conspiracy theories that accelerated during COVID.

The State Bar of Montana (SBM) is a unified bar organization with over 5,700 members and has made support for the rule of law a recurring theme in both its CLE programming and for non-lawyer audiences. The primary strategy for strengthening the rule of law for this mandatory bar is through education programs. For example, in order to help members of the Montana Legislature learn more about the legal system, the SBM has worked collaboratively to convene “Law School for Legislators,” a full-day program at the commencement of Montana’s biennial legislative session.

Recognizing the loss of bipartisanship, the decline in civics education and the need for an increasingly polarized citizenry to understand the legal system, in 2022 SBM launched an online statewide Citizens’ Law School, modeled after a previous successful in-person program at the Blewett School of Law in Missoula. The Citizens’ Law School is an online, eight-week program delivered via Zoom and free of charge to the general public across Montana.

The goal of the AAA-sub award was to expand the awareness of Citizens’ Law School to reach more members of the Montana public. This was the roster of topics in 2023:

- A Day in the Life of a Montana Lawyer and Judge
- Small Business and Employment Law

- Know Your Rights: Montana Constitution’s Bill of Rights
- Water, Property and Public Land
- Criminal Law
- 2023 Legislative Changes That Impact Montanans
- Family Law

Speakers included the Lt. Governor and federal judges. As for the audience, the benefits of virtual programming are the expanded statewide reach. This is critical in a State like Montana, which has the third lowest population density of the fifty states. In sum, geography, highly polarized politics and the restrictions of being a mandatory bar have required creativity within a narrower potential band of programs relative to local bars and national affinity bars.

### *Ohio State Bar Association*

**Project goals:** Paid digital media campaign to drive Ohio voters to Judicial Votes Count page.

The Ohio State Bar Association (OSBA) is a voluntary state bar with no regulatory functions. Like Montana, the Ohio State Bar operates in an environment of intense political polarization in their communities and state government and is dealing with the effects of outside money distorting the electoral playing field through the spread of misinformation, including towards judges. Both bars maintain a strict

non-partisan stance and prioritize strengthening rule of law through civics education.

The OSBA project sought to strengthen civic engagement around judicial elections. The mutually reinforcing goals were to a) improve voter turnout and prevent ballot drop off in judicial elections, and b) to educate voters on judicial candidates' biographies and qualifications. This project highlights the challenges and limitations of building civic capacity through nonpartisan education. Reaching communities, educating those communities, and then hoping this new knowledge will advance people to a more pro-democracy, pro-rule of law engagement stance is particularly challenging. For the OSBA the strategy was to expand reach using online social media platforms.



Judicial Votes Count has information on judicial races by county, profiles of judges and answers to commonly asked questions. "You'll hear from them about what their legal experience is, what their judicial philosophy is, what their community involvement has been. And you'll be able to judge a little bit more about their character as well," says Mary Augsburger, OSBA Executive Director. And though the site does include

party affiliation, Augsburger encourages voters not to give that too much weight.

Building upon work already started by the Ohio Supreme Court, the OSBA goal was to be a trusted "go-to" source for Ohio voters to learn more about candidates for judge, judicial elections and the unique role of judges in our democracy. The grant helped fund investment in digital advertising via Meta and Google during Ohio's November 2023 general and March 2024 primary elections.

The judicial profiles are voluntarily filled out by the judges themselves and OSBA had a lot of success in 2023/24. Out of the more than 140 general election candidates in November and the 197 primary election candidates running in both contested and non-contested races, over 47% of judges participated. Candidates are significantly more likely to fill out their profiles when their race is contested. Among the contested candidates, the participation rate in both elections was nearly 72%.

As for voters coming to learn, they garnered 14 million online impressions and drove 200,000 clicks to the website. This was larger than in previous years (where budgets were actually larger). The takeaway here is that strategic deployment of resources in digital advertising does increase exposure to the digital civic education bars may want to make.

In the lead up to the 2024 Presidential election, OSBA invested in Google, Meta and YouTube content, garnering 20 million impressions, including 388,000 new users. Based on available geographic data, they were able to identify users in 86 of Ohio's 88 counties.

After learning that state funding would not be coming through to support judicial votes count beyond November 2024, OSBA pivoted to continue to build out and [promotemyohiorights.com](http://promotemyohiorights.com), a civics initiative for young people. One user described myohiorights.com as “the best crash course on Ohio’s court system,” OSBA added additional content on how to evaluate judicial candidates, with emphasis on legal experience, judicial philosophy, character and community involvement over what voters might be hearing or seeing via negative advertising leading up to Election Day.

Using advice based upon the feedback received from judges and lawyers about why judicial elections are different, what some of the biggest misconceptions are about judges (and their role in our system of government), and what are the most important qualities for judicial candidates, the OSBA now talks more openly about party affiliation and why (under a recent Ohio law) it only shows for some candidates on the ballot.

In response, OSBA produced a short, animated video, geared for students aged 14-18, to increase their knowledge regarding the “least understood branch.” The video features Judge Matthew McFarland of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Ohio as the narrator. He briefly covers Ohio’s court system, the qualifications for becoming a judge in Ohio and how the judicial branch and judges are different from other branches and elected officials. Once again the content was promoted via social media and garnered 853,000 impressions and 3,200 video plays.

## *Oakland County Bar Association (MI)*

**Project goals:** Expand law-related educational programming for students and voters.

## Youth Law Conference

Oakland County Bar’s (OCBA) project was the expansion of their annual Youth Law Conference. The conference educates high school juniors and seniors about career options in the legal profession, the general legal process, and it provides tools for better decision-making. The stated goals of this 2023, grant-funded event were to a) expand access for marginalized communities to participate in civic and political life, and b) build resilience to information manipulation in the explicit service of strengthening civic knowledge, civic engagement, and facilitating civil discourse.



Keynote speaker Michigan Supreme Court Justice Kyra Harris Bolden, Michigan's first African American justice.

Students were surveyed about their knowledge of voting and election rights. The survey revealed there

was a major misunderstanding about these topics. For example, a significant majority of students (70%) thought you had to pay to vote. A smaller but still notable number of students (22%) thought you could only vote on election day.

During the youth conference, students and teachers participated in workshop sessions where they heard from prominent speakers across the bench and the bar, such as keynote speaker Michigan Supreme Court Justice Kyra Harris Bolden, Michigan's first African-American justice. Workshops such as: The Roles and Responsibilities of a Judge, Making Your Voice Heard: Civic Responsibilities, Election Laws and Your Rights, Careers in Law and Forensics, helped students understand their rights and responsibilities towards voting and political engagement. And, helped expand their understanding of the rule of law.

## Candidate Fora

In addition to these youth-oriented events, the OCBA also hosted a series of five Judicial Candidate Forums in partnership with the League of Women Voters (LWV) focused on contested judicial races in Oakland County. Noting that “there is a precipitous drop-off in voting when it comes to the non-partisan ballot, the leadership of the Oakland County Bar Association believed that members of the legal profession are in a uniquely qualified position to educate the voting public on the qualities and experiences they should look for when voting for a judge.”

The OCBA together with the LWV disseminated information about judicial candidates as widely as possible in their communities to encourage the active participation of Oakland County citizens to vote in judicial elections, as well as to assist them in becoming

more knowledgeable and informed voters. The forums were in person and were recorded and later broadcast on various local cable channels and YouTube.

Additionally, a local online newspaper, The Oakland County Times, conducted candidate interviews for all races in Oakland County. The OCBA sponsored the interviews and encouraged all the judicial candidates to participate so more viewers could learn about them. All but one judge took advantage.

## *Omaha Metropolitan Bar Association (NE)*

**Project goals:** Hold town hall meetings showcase good examples of civility for the Omaha legal community and in partnership with local civic, faith, and higher educational institutions.

---

State politics in Nebraska have a history of nonpartisanship. In 1937, the state adopted a nonpartisan legislature, meaning party labels were removed from ballots and legislative structures. Yet today this proud nonpartisan history is increasingly threatened by political polarization. For the Omaha Bar Association (OBA), the challenges of a divided community spill over into the profession. Their grant programming goals reflect the need to tackle incivility in the practice of law and concurrently imagine ways to bridge partisan breaks in their broader community.



## Town Halls

The first town hall with the Tri-Faith Initiative never got off the ground. The war in Gaza became an insurmountable barrier to facilitating cooperation within the Tri-Faith Initiative. The head of the synagogue and mosque were not in communication and top leadership left due to the ongoing strained situation. Sadly, Tri-Faith, which was set up to be an international leader in times of conflict and to help show the world how faiths should work together and see common humanity in each other, were unable to move forward in this heightened, polarized context. The League of Women Voters in Omaha was the pivot for Civility Town Hall given the challenges with Tri-Faith. Unfortunately, the organization was also going through a crisis, related to moving from a working board to a more traditionally staffed non-profit board, and the event did not materialize.

## Letter Writing

A key OBA civility initiative included a call for lawyers to sign up to handwrite thank you letters to: a) people in the legal profession who participants had as opposing counsel or staff, and b) people who had made meaningful contributions to the Omaha community. Writers were provided ten thank you notes, envelopes, and stamps a month. Included on the back of the thank you notes was a small label that says, "This thank you note and postage has been provided by the Omaha Bar Association and American Bar Association as part of their mission to promote civility in the profession." They distributed cards and postage to fifteen attorneys as part of this first "Civility Squad" letter writing campaign. Those first fifteen attorneys each sent thirty thank you notes – 450 thank you notes total.

## Law Day

Given the high political temperature surrounding the 2024 Presidential elections, the OBA invited Nebraska Secretary of State Bob Evnen to be the Law Day speaker, who reassured the audience that elections are safe and secure in Nebraska. In addition, the Law Day Issue of the OBA Newsletter and Daily Record (local daily legal newspaper) discussed the "Voices of Democracy" theme, and the importance of the Rule of Law as a cornerstone of our US legal system.

## CLE Workshops

In the second year of the grant, the OBA organized a free Continuing Legal Education Workshop. Speakers included members from Civic Nebraska, whose mission states that, "Decision-making and moving forward together must include debate, shared interests,

mutual respect, diverse solutions, and faith that the majority can be counted on for a wise resolution,” the League of Women Voters of Omaha, and Dan Gilbert, a local consultant and thought leader. The event was advertised as follows:

*Is the fractured nature of society having you struggle to have conversations with friends, colleagues, or even family members? Are you wanting to start/restart a dialogue with those in your life but don't know where to start? Are you missing the connection you feel with others through conversation? If you said "Yes" to any of the above, this free interactive workshop is for you. The focus will be on "restarting" our conversational abilities with those in our lives, because through discussion we can know each other better, and knowing one another better is a critically important part of our national (and local) conversations about the issues of the day, and issues in our lives.*

The event asked attendees to understand the source of their beliefs, see and inquire about the sources of those beliefs in others, and challenged them to lean into difficult conversations. Participants role-played different conversations, and were given a tool box of materials and literature to “keep the conversation going” after the workshop concluded.

## Purple

A second event in 2024 was a screening and discussion of the documentary Purple with Civic Nebraska. Purple tells the story of Americans with opposing viewpoints confronting their differences and discovering the concerns and humanity embedded in each other's positions. The audience consisted of members of the public, attorneys, and Civic Nebraska leaders. Discussion was led by Civic Nebraska, and included breakouts into small groups on Zoom.

## Civility in Government and Elected Office

In March 2025, OBA sponsored a lecture by the retired U.S. Senator, former Nebraska Governor, and OBA member, Ben Nelson. The presentation was held at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, open to the public, and recorded for viewing on YouTube. Senator Nelson discussed his approach to governing and legislating during his many years of public service, and the effectiveness of working together, across political divisions, to get things done. A big part of his strategy was to meet people where they were at, and focus on the things held in common, rather than those that separate us apart.

# CONCLUSION

## Evaluating Impact

### Addressing Low Trust in Government, Affective Polarization and Declining Support for Democracy and Rule of Law

After an hour of high-level intellectual exchange at a recent National Constitution Center panel on liberalism, Harvard Law Professor Cass Sunstein was asked what one thing we could do to move the needle on extreme polarization. In response he quoted Lincoln: “I don’t like that man. I must get to know him better.” Why? Because to identify a common foundation of liberal principles, we must build bridges across partisan differences, a practice Sunstein refers to as a fundamental “civic norm.”

Norms are not the grand ideas of our imagination, but the cumulation of many micro- actions and interactions. The work of these seven grantees has advanced civic norms across their communities through creating opportunities to interact across differences, by intentionally building collaborative skills through education and practice. In the short-term, this work has helped slow the advance of affective polarization, reduce the likelihood of conflict, and helped bridge difference. In the long-term, we

posit and hope, democracy will be strengthened by resting on a more stable social political foundation.

There are many different ways to structure and organize democracy, but the core pillars of such rest in the central tenets of liberalism: freedom, rule of law and pluralism. This is the underlying assumption of these seven projects. That democracy can only work when citizens reflect and understand these three pillars.

The foundational logic for these grantees’ work is that the very act of gathering or associating is in itself of high impact, as it pulls people away from their “private concerns” and into “public concerns” Whether or not attitudes or behaviors change as a result is impossible to tell in a short period of time. But this work is enduring.

As political contention and political violence has increased, as has the increased need to collaborate and gather.

## Short Term Programmatic Impact

### Enhance Collective Action of Civil Society

Bars have always strengthened democracy through acting as a convenor and connector. But not all bars are situated to tackle all aspects of democracy and rule of law. The work of all seven bar associations started from a set of common assumptions:

- They all share a common mission to advocate and educate on behalf of the rule of law while simultaneously holding our justice institutions to account
- They could not work alone or in the echo chamber of the legal profession
- They needed to prioritize high impact- low-cost programs
- They need to remain consistently non-partisan

At the programmatic level the work of the seven grantees achieved the following:

	TOTAL EVENTS	TOTAL < 18	TOTAL > 18	TOTAL PEOPLE SERVED In-Person/Live Webinar	ONLINE VISITS, IMPRESSIONS, VIEWS
Washington County Bar Association	18	1600	1400	3000+	-
Oakland County Bar Association	7	464	195	659	35,269
Omaha Bar Association	14	8600	1790	10,390	14,294
National Native American Bar Association	2	-	140	140 [18 tribes]	-
National Asian American Pacific Bar Association	5	-	234	234	-
Ohio State Bar Association	-	-	-	-	155,520 Views 7,553,500 Impressions
Montana State Bar Association	16	-	547	547	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>10664</b>	<b>4256</b>	<b>14920</b>	<b>7,758,583</b>

The work was funded by small sub-awards between \$13,000 to \$19,000 and therefore needed to amplify the message and maximize the impact with limited resources. The projects were designed in a way that reflected the personnel and financial capacity of the various bar associations. When we look at the project across a two-by-two matrix we can see this variation across the dimensions of staff/volunteer cost and financial cost.

	\$ Low Cost	\$ High Cost
High Personnel Cost	Washington Co. Omaha Oakland Co. (Youth Law Day)	Ohio State Bar
Low Personnel Cost	Montana Oakland Co. (Judges Forums)	NNABA NAPABA

The implications of different bar types (institutions), political environment (place), and leadership (people) created various formulations and conditions for a variety of programs. Based on existing research and on our experiences with these grant projects, while the impact in terms of attitudes and behavior is most likely to be deeper in the work of the local bars, it does have the same reach (number of people) as the larger state bars.

When the programs were generated by certain specific local “trigger” events, they tended to have deeper impact than broader “civics education” programs. While place or community may act as a trigger for action, it is also the case that leadership is key. And successful alignment between volunteer leaders and bar staff increases quality and frequency of community

interaction, as we saw in Washington County. What is clear, is that to become a key driver of community strengthening, bars need both resources and relationships to sustain over time.

The most expensive project was the Ohio State Bar’s Judicial Votes Count – the project was primarily funded by the Ohio Supreme Court and the AAA grant funds went towards amplifying the reach of the website on social media. It had expansive reach in terms of audience size and required significant staff time to conduct outreach to judges to get complete profiles for the website. The Supreme Court has chosen not to continue funding this project and the Ohio State Bar now plans to focus on targeted messaging through videos and other means.

The two national affinity bar projects had wide reach, with national networks amplifying their programming. NAPABA used their funds to support training programs for civic organizing and advocacy and to disseminate those materials. NNABA deployed their funds to help finance travel to the voting rights summits from a broad range of tribal leaders and with some small awards to voting protections efforts on the ground. In both cases, the reach of the work was expanded through collaboration and networking.

The Montana and Oakland County programs were preexisting projects and the grant funds helped augment that work. Both cases demonstrate the importance of building momentum in programming and repeating that programming. When resources are limited, it may not be efficacious or fiscally prudent to start from scratch.

Finally, the work of the local bars Washington County and Omaha demonstrate high levels of commitment from both the staff and the volunteer leaders. The Executive Directors of both local bars demonstrated

persistent personal and organizational dedication towards bridging conflict and strengthening the rule of law in their communities. But they could not do this without the support of their volunteer leadership and in this sense there is a kind of symbiotic or mutually reinforcing dynamic at work. Bar leaders need to convince their followers that it is in their interests to engage in projects serving the broader community and having a professional staff to carry out those projects is a critical component. It also speaks to the sustainability of work across bar presidencies: leaders both create *and* inherit beliefs, norms, networks of the organization.

The wide range of projects taken on by these local bars mostly fell within the high personnel, low financial burden. These types of 'high touch' projects make the most sense for local bars with a strong sense of community identity and a commitment to enduring community engagement. Volunteer engagement is most likely to succeed when the members have a direct and personal connection to the communities they are working in. It shows what can happen when bars and lawyers get on the ground.

# Intermediate, Population-level, Organizational Impact

## Amplify Democracy-strengthening Narratives and Behaviors

For the three local bars – Washington County, Oakland County and Omaha – a key factor in the success of their programs is an organizational culture and set of norms (attitudes, values, behaviors) that support and align with an enduring focus on rule of law and democracy.

In addition, the highly successful community partnerships in Washington County and Oakland County were key to ongoing successful programming. We define success here by the turnout for community events and the long-term sustainability of these partnerships. For Omaha, a smaller bar with limited staff capacity, in a large metro area, the cross-organizational relationship building was more challenging and tended to be one-off events, rather than long-term, ongoing partnerships.

We know that in order to work towards behavioral change, policy change and ultimately broader structural change, collaboration and coordination is critical. All seven of the bar projects illustrated the enhanced impact and reach that happens when organizations collaborate – whether this is bar to bar collaboration – as in the NNABA summit, or whether it is bar and community organizations, as we see with the three local bars.

When people show up – they are indicating a willingness to learn, to listen, and to connect with people. This grant uses evidence of cross-organizational

organizing and participation as evidence of strengthening impact with local populations.

A further indicator of reach and impact is the media attention several of these projects garnered. Local newspapers covered both unique events and were ongoing partners for annual law day programming in Omaha and Washington County. In Oakland County, the partnership with the local newspaper helped transform and enrich their educational efforts around judicial elections. The media amplified messaging around critical issues related to rule of law – election integrity, judicial independence, bridging partisan difference, voter rights and more. When organizations work together and harmonize messaging, the ability to cut through the cluttered infosphere is enhanced.

Operating in a moment of extreme political contention, all seven bar associations have:

- Strengthened the internal strategic ability of their organization to engage with external populations.
- Strengthened alignment via collaboration in messaging across organizations as it relates democracy strengthening narratives, civic education and rule of law.
- Motivated the bar membership to engage in actions that serve broader communities. By engaging outside of the legal profession bar associations are more likely to connect their

fate to the well-being of the broader communities they work in.

While Robert Putnam's 'social capital' or trust is a critical piece of strengthening democracy through the

act of "joining," these grant projects also reveal the critical role of advancing and strengthening networks between organizations. We see this at the national level with the two national affinity bars and then at the local level with the three local bar associations.



## Long-Term Impact

### Prevent Conflict Through Education and Community Bridge Building

Scholars of civic life in America today lament the homogeneity of association membership, which results in a fragmentation of public life. Lawyers historically are guilty of operating as the “experts” and engaging from above, speaking for the citizens, rather than with them. The work of the local and national affinity bars has demonstrated how bars can break free from that model.

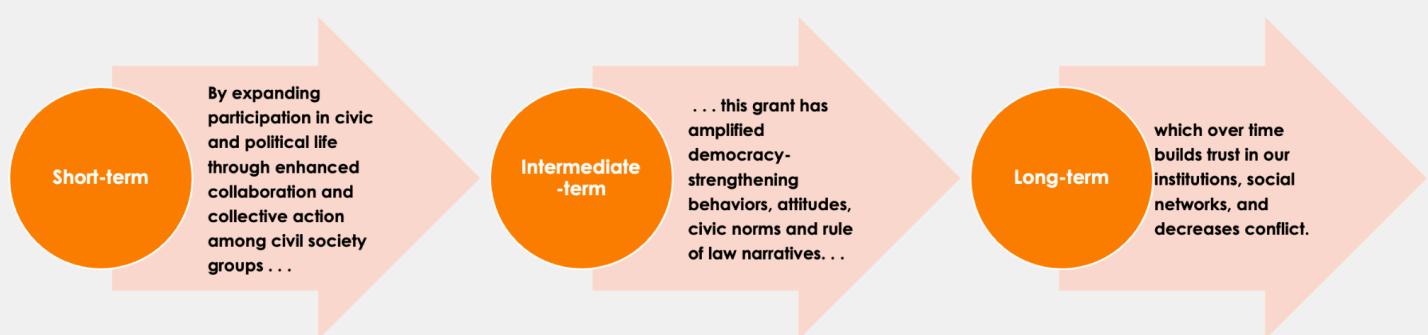
The work of the WCBA laid the foundation for increasing tolerance, enhancing cooperation – key civic norms. While their educational programming may appear to be primarily about the transmission of ideas or training – it can be a powerful tool in shaping public discourse or shaping public agenda setting (cf Youth v. Gov, Keep our Republic).

High tension and mistrust within the community and towards the institutions have impacted effective community governance. Given this political environment, a bar approaching community

engagement as a partner equally rooted in the community and invested in making institutions work for the betterment of all will help develop trust and strengthen community ties.

Measuring success through the number of events held, people served and collaborators – these horizontal ties enhance the possibility of collective action. In addition to the physical “people in the room,” coverage of the events on social media help amplify democracy strengthening narratives.

In a time of heightened political violence inoculating community members, especially the youth, is critical. In other words, breaking down barriers, humanizing points of view, understanding the roots of toxic polarization, talking out disagreements, and remembering that our institutions are there to help resolve conflict and not be the source of conflict is slow-moving, but foundational work



# Key Lessons; Revisiting the 3Cs

## COLLABORATION

We find that collaboration is most effective when:

- It is grounded in both community and membership needs and can flex and adapt to evolving circumstances.
- There are deliberate strategies for ensuring event turnout.
- Local bars collaborate with a wide range of partners across a high-density environment of civic organizations.
- National affinity bars facilitate networking across and between their affiliate groups (foundational for collaboration and for capacity building at the local level).
- There is consistency and durability in public engagement over time, sustaining engagement not only during times of crisis or duress. The key supporting factors here are leadership to set norms of engagement and governance structures that mobilize collective action.

## CIVICS

We find that civics is most effective when bars:

- Meet the moment and address how an environment rife with rumor and disinformation undermines how democracy works.
- Teach how to “do democracy” through civics education for adult communities, educating

where and how groups and individuals can get a seat at the table.

- Target civics education to specific audiences on discrete aspects of engagement, particularly in highly divided states with intense political polarization. Citizens’ problems tend to be local and involve community-specific problems. Those communities may be geographically focused, or may be a common demographic. While national organizations may lobby the federal government, they also understand the critical importance of mobilizing “from below” in marginalized communities.
- Link civics to a civic action or specific tasks. They are not only learning how the system works, but on how to effectively engage with the system.
- Focus on legal expertise, building capacity via partner civil society organizations through legal education and training or local politicians. Expanding social and organizational networks beyond bar membership helps sustain MLK’s network of mutuality - we care about each other and for each other.

## CIVILITY

How do we engage critically with differing viewpoints? The findings from bar associations’ work on civility are:

- While foundational to civics and collaboration, civility is the “c” whose impact is hardest to measure.
- During the course of the grant the political environment severely deteriorated – trust deteriorated and it became that much more difficult to just get people in the same room.
- There is a cause and effect problem with institutional trust – we can’t strengthen trust in political institutions only through political civility; political institutions to engender trust and uphold the social contract. We need to actively engage and participate in institutions to engender that trust.
- It is key for lawyers and their associations to be grounded in the realities of and have deep knowledge of their communities. They must also recognize the limitations of their organization.
- To promote civility, we must engage with individuals and our communities in non-hierarchical/non-elite ways.

*“The lawyer must aspire to be a public citizen”*

– Thomas Jefferson

# SOURCES CONSULTED

Author conducted interviews with members of the Washington County community and the WCBA in January 2025

American Academy of Arts & Sciences. *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, 2020.

Democracy Collaborative. *Enabling Conditions for Community Wealth Building*, May 2025.

Dietrich, Eric. "As it turns 50, is Montana's 'progressive' state Constitution facing a conservative midlife crisis?" *Montana Free Press*, March 21, 2022.

Enix-Ross, Deborah. "Diversity of Viewpoints: Civility turns down heat, increases light to attain results." *ABA Journal*, President's Letter, August 2, 2023.

Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley. *Bridging Differences Playbook*, 2020.

Johnson, Chuck. "The Montana Constitution, up close and personal." *Montana Free Press*, March 25, 2022.

Jones, Mike. "Bipartisan panel discusses election integrity, voter education in Washington Co." *Observer-Reporter*, May 15, 2024.

National Civic League. *Civic Index – Civic Capital*, 4th Edition, 2019.

Proctor, Christina. Op-Ed "Washington County row officers are unfit for office." *Observer Reporter*, October 19, 2023.

Putnam, Lara. "Rust Belt in Transition." *Democracy*, Summer 2020.

Skocpol, Theda; Cobb, Rachael; Klostad, Casey Andrew. "Disconnection and Reorganization: The Transformation of Civic Life in Late-Twentieth Century America." *Studies in American Political Development*, 19 (Fall 2005), 137-156.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. New York: G. Dearborn & Co., 1838.

Wilkinson, Francis. "'We Just Want Someone Sane': What Happens When a Small Town Goes MAGA." *Bloomberg/Washington Post*, May 7, 2023.

Wilkinson, Francis. "GOP Election Deniers Are Gunning Big for Pennsylvania Local Government." *Bloomberg*, May 7, 2023.

Wilkinson, Francis. "Haitian Immigrants Rebuilt Charleroi, Pennsylvania. Then Trump Attacked." *Bloomberg*, June 1, 2025.

# APPENDIX

## Key Organizational Statistics on Grant Sub-Awardees

Bar Association	Bar Type	Membership Size	Staff Size	State Lawyer Population	Tax Total Revenue
State Bar of Montana	State Mandatory	5,300	7	3,268	\$2,249,250
Ohio State Bar Association	State Voluntary	25,000	40	37,086	\$9,509,283
Omaha Bar Association (NE)	Metro	1,450	1	5546	\$281,466
Washington County Bar Association (PA)	Local	460	3	47,764	\$548,770
Oakland Co, (MI)	Local	2,300	10.5	34,199	\$1,289,003
National Asian Pacific Bar Association (NAPABA)	National Affinity	60000+	10	(national API pop)	\$371,9248
National Native American Bar Association (NNBA)	National Affinity	2640	0	(national native Pop)	\$10,4787

# Full-List of Activities Funded in Part or Full by AAA-ICDR Grant Funds

## *Washington County*

Population served:

- Over 1500 adults served
- Over 1600 children under 18

\*Does not include large public events such as Civics Quiz Prize Wheel, where attendance was in the thousands.

### **Constitution Day (9/17/23)**

Activities included reading the Constitution (start to finish) in schools and at the Courthouse, as well as civics presentations by attorneys and others in the schools.

### **Washington County Bar Association Winter Bench Bar Conference (1/19/24)**

Dr. Larry Stratton, attorney and director of the Stover Center at Waynesburg University, PA, provided a one-hour ethics seminar on the topic of “Civil Discourse Amidst Constitutional Controversy.”

### **Trivia Contest (3/8/24)/Hot Button Topics Survey**

This annual contest is held by the local Rotary Club. Contest included a dedicated round of civics questions and a bonus question for a “Hot Button Bonus Round” series of questions about civil discourse. Also distributed information about the “Debate without Hate” program developed by the Washington Health System Teen Outreach Center and its “Rules of Engagement” for encouraging civil discourse

Kids Fest (3/23/24): WCBA purchased a “prize wheel” and prizes to encourage a stop at our table. Adults who spun the prize wheel were asked a civics question -- if answered correctly, they won a “premium prize.”

### **Law Day (5/1/24)**

Provided a variety of contests for kids grades 2-12 on ABA theme of “Voices of Democracy,” and developed subthemes of a) an argument for the Electoral College (civics-focused) [the first place essay, on this subtheme, was published in the op-ed pages of the local newspaper], b) personal vs. group impact on civic participation, and c) strategies to limit toxic polarization. A two-page spread was published in the local newspaper featuring the entries and information about upcoming grant-focused civics projects.

## **“Trust in Our Elections” Seminar and Public Forum (5/14/24)**

The evening began with a seminar for 40 attorneys and judges presented by former PA Governor Tom Corbett on the Electoral Reform Act. A public forum with Corbett, retired federal judge Tim Lewis, county commissioners. Partners included Keep Our Republic, Washington County Bar Association, League of Women Voters of Washington County, NAACP of Washington County, Washington County Community Foundation, Washington Rotary Club, Washington & Jefferson College Conflict and Resolution Studies, Waynesburg University Stover Center for Constitutional Studies and Moral Leadership, the Observer-Reporter newspaper, and WJPA radio.

## **“Law Works 4 You” (Y1/Y2: 6/10 – 7/29/24; Y2: 6/11-7/30/25), LeMoyne Community Center**

One-hour programs for eight-weeks on the topics of the rule of law, civics, and civility, leading up to a performance by the kids of a Fairy Tale Mock Trial at the Courthouse.

## **Ballpark Quiz Bowl (7/7/24), Washington Wild Things Ballpark**

Partnered with Legacies Alive (which supports Gold Star recipients and families) at a Wild Things (frontier league) baseball game. With a military flyover, information table with Civics Quiz Prize Wheel, and a sold-out crowd.

## **Constitution Day and Naturalization Ceremony (9/17/24), Washington County Courthouse, Schools Around the County**

50 people participated in taking turns reading the Constitution on the steps of the Courthouse, with another 80 observing. Our largest Naturalization Ceremony to date was held, with 40 candidates. The League of Women Voters also partnered with the program, providing information about how to register to vote. The Washington Festival Chorale sang the national anthem as well as a few other patriotic songs.

## **Civics Quiz Prize Wheel at “Woofstock” (9/21/24), Washington Wild Things field**

We combined promotion of our Lawyer Referral Service animal law referrals with our Civics Quiz Prize Wheel, using the wheel to lure people to our table (we threw in some animal-related case law questions into the mix of our usual civics questions). The event was attended by #300 people and hosted by the Washington County Humane Society.

## **Psychology of Toxic Polarization Seminar (9/23/24), Washington & Jefferson College**

In partnership with W&J College’s Conflict & Resolution Studies Program and Washington Health System’s Teen Outreach, we brought Dr. Samantha Moore-Berg to present a program on “Intergroup Conflict: Meta-Perceptions Drive Us Apart but Correcting Them Can Bring Us Together.” The program was open to the public and the college

community and was offered as CLE credit for attorneys. The evening concluded with a demonstration of the "Debate Without Hate" program developed by the Common Ground Teen Center and discussion about civil discourse.

### **WCBA Winter Bench Bar Conference (1/24/25), Hilton Garden Inn, Southpointe**

Professor Charles DiSalvo, West Virginia University School of Law presented "Civil Disobedience and the Law." Dr. Rachel Ellett, ABA Center for Bar Leadership presented "Lawyers as Citizens: Advocating for the Rule of Law" and presented results from WCBA's member survey questions regarding civil discourse.

### **"Peace Building & Conflict Resolution" Open World Team from the Ukraine (3/7-3/15/25)**

In conjunction with Rotary International and the federal Congressional Office for International Leadership (COIL) we co-hosted an "Open World" team of professionals from the Ukraine who visited our area. Partners worked together to provide 32 hours of tours and discussions on peace building and conflict resolution topics at area teen centers, domestic violence shelters, courthouse/justice system, and nonprofit organizations. Another key event was on March 12 at a community roundtable organized by the Literacy Council of SWPA that discussed the provision of services for refugees and a meeting with local legislators.

### **Youth v Gov (3/26/25), W&J College**

We partnered with W&J's Walter K Levy Lecture Environmental Series to bring Dr. Richard (Drew) Marcantonio, from the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame to campus for a public program. His program was followed by a screening of "Youth v Gov" moderated by Marcantonio and Rachel Lozosky, Chair, WCBA Public Relations & Services Committee. Outreach Teen Common Ground students were invited to participate in the discussion. Their questions focused mainly on how they could get involved in causes in which they believe and the operation of the legal system (what does a mayor do? How do you get elected to office? Why did the court proceedings take so long from start to finish?

### **KidsFest (3/29/25), Washington Crown Center**

Used our Civics Quiz Prize Wheel to engage some of the 3,000 attendees, asking anyone and everyone who would stop by our table questions about the U.S. Constitution (from the Naturalization Test) and other civics questions, with correct answers receiving prizes.

### **"Time to Adult!" (4/28/25), Washington Area Career and Technology Center**

202 seniors at the area vo-tech center participated in this program that addresses legal issues and civic duties faced when one turns 18. We presented this program to one other school district this year (on Law Day, see below); however,

vo-tech is attended by students from multiple school districts, and this year marked the first time we presented it to this group.

### **Year 2 Activity 11: Law Day (5/1/25), Washington County Courthouse, Area Schools**

We provided a variety of contests for kids grades 2-12 on ABA theme of “The Constitution’s Promise: Out of Many, One,” and concentrated on civic duties such as voting, obeying laws, paying taxes, and jury duty. We added a billboard contest this year, with winners displayed on a billboard on the busy I-79/I-70 highway corridor which potentially reached 500,000 drivers.

### **Year 2 Activity 12: Civics Quiz Prize Wheel (5/17/25), Pennsylvania Trolley Museum Street Fair, Washington, PA**

We enlisted a crew of Rotarians (school board members, retired librarians, teachers) to staff the table to assist with the quiz.

### ***Oakland County Bar Association***

Population served:

- Total Adults 195
- Total Kids 464
- Total Online Views 35,269

### **Youth Law Day 2023**

16-18-year-olds who may be voting in the 2024 election for the first time - election laws and weeding through the misinformation surrounding elections.

### **2023 Judicial Candidate Forum for the Oakland County Circuit Court Non-Incumbent Race**

All three candidates participated in the forum as well as completed the questionnaire and video interview. In addition to volunteers from the League of Women Voters and OCBA, about 40 members of the public attended the event live and submitted questions to the candidates, and the forum was recorded by a local community television crew and made available on their website.

## Youth Law Day 2024

A series of workshops led by prominent figures from both the bench and the bar, including Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson. Workshop sessions included:

- The Roles and Responsibilities of a Judge
- Civic Responsibilities and Election Laws
- Pathways to a Legal Career
- Traffic Stops

Two sessions incorporated interactive live polling, which offered insight into the students' baseline knowledge and perceptions before the workshops began. The polling apps also served as a dynamic and approachable way for students to participate, ask questions, and stay engaged.

In response to feedback from the 2023 Youth Law Conference, the county clerk provided sample ballots for each student. This allowed students to become familiar with ballot structure and learn how to correctly complete one. One key point highlighted was the placement of non-partisan races, such as judicial contests, which are consistently located on the back of the ballot—a detail often missed by voters who may not realize there is content on both sides.

## Judicial Candidate Forums - 2024

OCBA collaborated with the League of Women Voters Oakland Area (LWVOA) and local media outlets to present four non-partisan forums for each contested judicial race in or serving Oakland County.

These included:

- Two forums for contested District Court races
- One for the Oakland County Probate Court
- One for the Michigan Court of Appeals, Second District

The candidate video interviews produced in partnership with the Oakland County Times significantly increased the visibility of judicial candidates across Oakland County. These short-form interviews, each ranging from 5 to 10 minutes, served as a valuable complement to the longer recorded forums, offering a more accessible option for voters who may not have time to watch the full hour-long sessions.

## National Native American Bar Association

Population served:

- Total Adults: 234
- Web metrics are not yet available for online materials.

Voting Rights Summit Annual Meeting 2023 gather to identify problems ahead of the 2024 elections. Bar leaders and voting rights experts educated attendees on models, programs, and resources that they might employ to support, and expand engagement in civic duties and Native voting.

Funding to local affiliate voting projects.

Post-election Voting Rights Summit Debrief 2024

### ***National Asian Pacific American Bar Association***

Population Served:

- Total Adults 234

*Not including web views of webinars or other materials.*

NAPABA Community Convening 1.0 Building Community and Empowerment

NAPABA Community Convening 2.0 Roundtable at 2023 Annual Meeting

NAPABA Community Convening 3.0 (Virtual)

NAPABA helped stakeholders on the ground develop their own locally driven arguments. These included conservative arguments to oppose property rights discrimination out of a recognition of the diverse viewpoints of constituents.

NAPABA also began development of web-based community outreach resources including on: (1) AANHPI legal history; (2) AANHPI civil rights icons; and (3) immigration law basics, which was a natural follow-up to NAPABA's amicus brief filed in support of birthright citizenship.

[Asian American Scholar Forum](#) & NAPABA Joint webinar on latest developments affecting international students

### ***Ohio State Bar Association***

Population Served:

- 155,520 Views
- 7,553,500 Impressions

Used Meta and Google to promote [www.judicialvotescount.org](http://www.judicialvotescount.org) to Ohioans over the age of 18 in the 57 Ohio counties where there were municipal judges on the ballot.

Built out and promoted [myohiorights.com](http://myohiorights.com), a civics initiative for young people. In addition, they transferred the foundational information from judicialvotescount.org about the judiciary and Ohio's court system to the [Ohio Bar website](#). This provides a centralized depository where any member of the public can access all the information we have produced to date (and will continue to produce in the future) related to the judicial branch.

They also produced a short, animated video, geared for students aged 14-18, to increase their knowledge regarding the “least understood branch”, featuring Judge Matthew McFarland of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Ohio as the narrator. To promote the new video, they invested in targeted digital advertising on Facebook and Instagram.

### ***Montana State Bar Association***

Population Served:

- Total Adults 547

Citizen Law School Webinars 2023: This is an initiative aimed at empowering members of the community with helpful legal knowledge and resources. This program is designed to foster a better understanding of the law and promote civic engagement.

- AI & the Law
- Day in the life of a Montana Lawyer and Judge
- Employment Law in Montana
- Know your Rights – Montana Constitution
- Water, Property & Public Land
- 2023 Legislative Changes that Impact Montanans
- Criminal Law

### **Role of Lawyers in Society and Candidate Forum 2024**

All four candidates for open seats on the Montana Supreme Court appeared at a forum held by the state bar association, tackling topics from 200-year-old case law to the Legislature's continued vexation toward the courts.

- Citizens Law School 2024 – Sessions included:
- A Day in the Life of a Montana State Judge
- Family Law: Mediation, Divorce, and Child Custody
- Criminal Law: It's not what you see on TV
- Do you know your rights under the Montana Constitution?
- The Federal Judiciary in Montana
- Recent US Supreme Court Cases Involving the Presidency

## ***Collaboration with NCBP***

To sustain momentum beyond the grant, the ABA Cornerstones Commission organized three events in collaboration with the National Conference of Bar Presidents. The membership of the National Conference of Bar Presidents includes state, local and special focus bars from 53 states and territories. Individual members include past bar leaders from these jurisdictions.

These events are described below:

### **Ideas to Action: Bar Leaders Strengthening Democracy in a Time of Uncertainty 2024 Annual Meeting - National Conference of Bar Presidents**

This program featured projects generated from the Cornerstones of Democracy AAA grant; to demonstrate the variety of ways in which bar organizations can be partners and leaders in projects that protect rule of law and mobilize people to stand up for democracy.

### **Center for Bar Leadership, NCBP and Judicial Division webinar - Judicial Elections: Bars Elevating Voter Engagement**

One of the participants in this panel discussion was sub-awardee Oakland County. Executive Director Jennifer Quick discussed their bars' outreach and partnerships in strengthening voter education and empowerment related to judicial elections.

Three things bars can do:

- 1) Pipelines
- 2) Candidate Information
- 3) Candidate Vetting.

### **Lessons from Oakland County Bar Association (OCBA) Judicial Forums:**

OCBA partners with organizations like the League of Women Voters and local media outlets to host judicial candidate forums, and partners with Oakland County Times. These partnerships help amplify the bar association's efforts by providing additional communication channels for disseminating candidate information. Sticking to clear, nonpartisan communication about the judiciary's role and selection process helps avoid controversy while reinforcing public confidence in the judicial system.

## Annual Meeting 2025 Toronto – Polis Poll

The ABA Cornerstones Commission distributed a Polis poll to participants at the ABA Diversity Summit and the NCBP Annual Meeting. Polis is a real-time system for gathering, analyzing and understanding what large groups of people think in their own words and identifying points of consensus.

52 people voted | 1,426 votes cast | 47 statements submitted | 27.42 votes per voter average

**Lawyers were asked:** What are the most important conversations lawyers can engage in with their communities right now?

### What did we find?

There was broad agreement on what lawyers want the public to know, what ‘lawyers’ should do and that bar associations should be prepared to engage in difficult conversations. Here are some sample statements:

- *“Lawyers have a responsibility to explain why due process isn’t just a right, it’s the foundation of trust in democracy.”*
- *“We need new ways to talk about justice that resonate beyond legal circles or political tribes.”*
- *“Legal ethics and professional responsibility include honesty to the court.”*
- *“Independent, impartial courts are essential for fair dispute resolution and public confidence in outcomes.”*
- *“People need to understand that they have power to constructively influence the creation of laws and how laws are implemented.”*

However, there was no agreement on when the best time to speak up is, here are some sample statements with the corresponding vote responses:

- *“When is the right time to speak up about decline of “rule of law” before it’s too late to do it safely?”* [50% Agreement | 4% Disagreement | 45% Pass/Unsure]
- *“Lawyers risk seeing ourselves being disempowered & excised from being able to protect individuals & the public if we wait to act. Act now.”* [81% Agreement | 18% Pass/Unsure]

Finally, there was clear concern in the room around the role of individuals in speaking out

- *“I am afraid to engage in conversations about important topics that might be perceived as “political.”* [40% Agreement - 50% Disagreement]