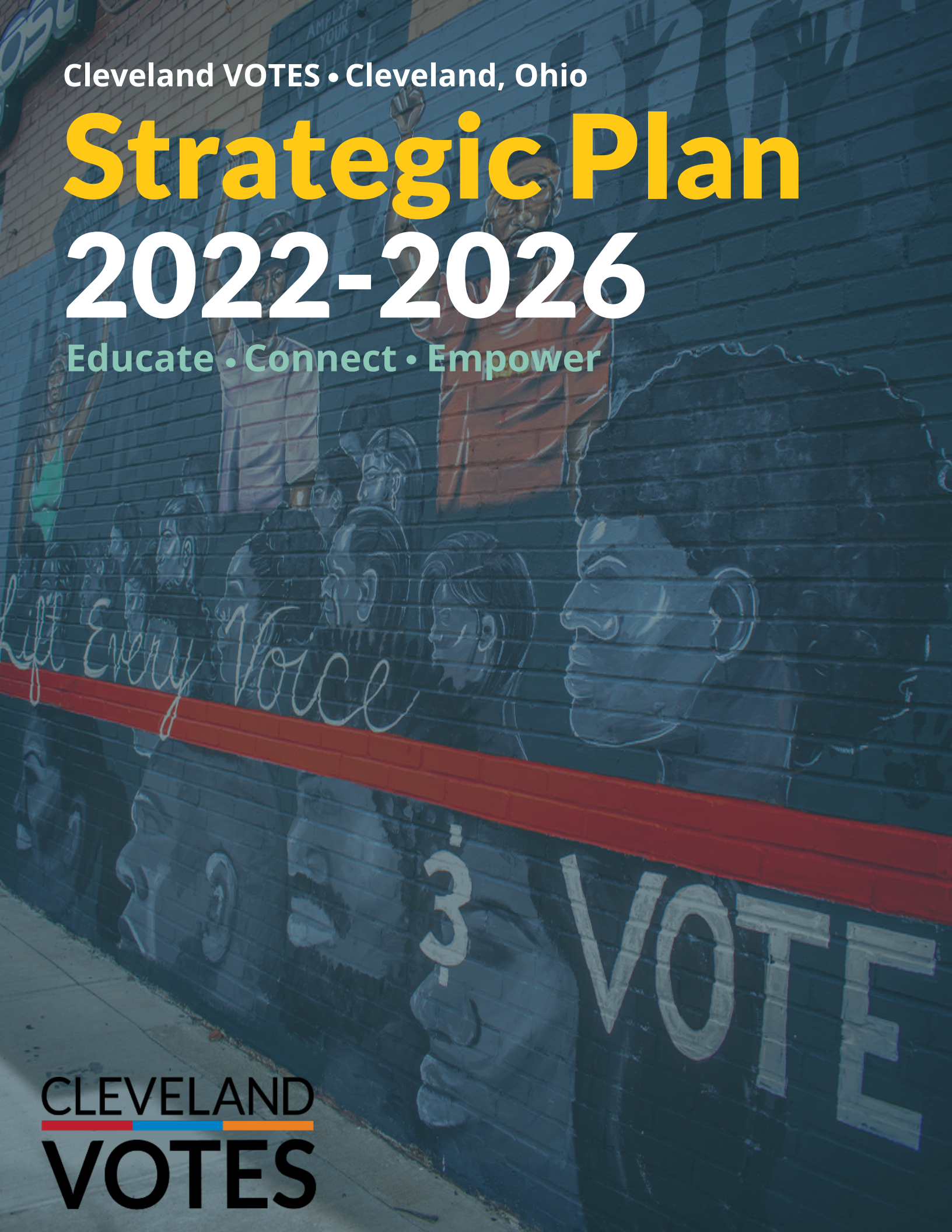


Cleveland VOTES • Cleveland, Ohio

# Strategic Plan

# 2022-2026

Educate • Connect • Empower



CLEVELAND  

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**VOTES**



# A Letter to Our Community from the Executive Director

The path to a more equitable democracy starts with us reclaiming joy. Joy must be felt by all, therefore it's our collective responsibility to do our part to realize this joyful spirit in ourselves first, and together with our fellow community members. As Lauryn Hill so eloquently asks, "How we gonna win if you ain't right within?" Acts of joyful expression can take many forms, from simple acts of compassion, empathy, and forgiveness to grace, kindness and respect. However, too often even these simple acts seem insurmountable to most people. We know all too well and witness far too frequently the ways in which systemic racism and the wicked problems of our nation create division, disparities and despair. These harms have been deeply pervasive since the founding of this nation and consistently (re)manifest in ways that may lead us to believe that true liberation will not be realized.

*Residents dance and celebrate at the "Lift Every Voice and Vote" mural reveal, in November, 2021 in Cleveland's Buckeye Neighborhood. The mural artists are Stina Aleah and Ingrid Miller. (Photo/Alaina Battle)*



Historically disenfranchised members of our community -- Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color, LGBTQ+, Persons with Disabilities, and women -- have taken the brunt of the systematic failures that disregard and disrespect our sense of belonging. We continue to be othered by every system. Yet, we are resilient because our ancestors have guided us with their wisdom to make a way, even in our darkest hour. Over the last several years we've seen acts of joy exhibited through mutual aid, as well as acts of solidarity. When the systems and institutions that are in the rightful position to show up fail to do so, we don't allow that to deter us. We pull together our collective assets and make a way. While trauma may be carried in our DNA, there's also royalty inside our DNA (shout out to Kendrick Lamar).

This moment calls for us to be more communal and participatory, and to develop practices that embrace accountability and solidarity. This moment calls on us to set aside performative activism, and instead create action that will lead to true change. This moment calls for us to creatively design and experiment with building the practices that uphold the desired future state many of us are so desperately working toward. Ultimately, both this moment and our future state require collective healing.

Even if this more liberated state seems impossible or unachievable, we must dig deep and remember all those who came before us. We are literally standing on the shoulders of our ancestors, who had significantly less than most of us have available to us today. Therefore, we must harness that ancestral power to propel us to be steadfast in our quest. This journey will not be absent of bumps and roadblocks. But if we can collectively co-create this vision, channel our gifts, and agree to create the space to establish trust with each other -- then we are already on the right path.



- Erika Anthony



*Erika Anthony gives a speech at the City Club.  
(Photo/Michaelangelo's Photography)*

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# The Genesis of Cleveland VOTES

Crystal Bryant and Erika Anthony started Cleveland VOTES to fill the voter registration void for individuals incarcerated and re-entering society. We wanted to both elevate returning citizens and their importance in the community, and to educate community members around the barriers to voter participation and engagement that those returning citizens face.

In 2018, our focus expanded to include an equitable civic engagement framework. As we have often quoted and shared, the Kirwan Institute report has been a guiding post for how we've envisioned our work. Below is a brief snippet referenced for context:

*Fundamentally, equitable civic engagement is about leveling the power dynamics of a place, giving voice to those previously alienated and excluded from the civic process. The importance of understanding power structures, how to build power, and how to leverage power are all vital to creating equitable civic engagement initiatives and facilitating real community change.*

*When community members come together in a healthy, empowering environment, we can engage each other in ways that not only produce better outcomes for our communities and ourselves but also produce a critical investment in civic capacity for communities. This increased civic capacity supports holistic, community-driven investments in the neighborhood, which increases social capital and helps make community development as much about people as it is about place.*

*An engagement environment that is healthy, equitable, inclusive and provides opportunities for everyone to share their gifts is the beating heart of our democracy. Through this environment, our communities can produce prosperity, freedom and limitless possibilities for ourselves, our families, and our neighbors.*



Erika Anthony and Crystal Bryant, co-founders of Cleveland VOTES. Artist/Courtney Ottrix



# Where We've Come From

Since our founding, we have been steadfastly committed to our tagline: Educate, Connect and Empower.

**We Educate through** the development and implementation of materials, programs, reports and toolkits to support the capacity and knowledge of local nonprofits organizations.

**We Connect by** investing small-dollar grants into community initiatives that commit to civic and voter engagement, amplifying critical election related information and actions for mobilization.

**We Empower with a commitment to** coalition-building through civic holidays such as National Voter Registration Day, 2020 Census and local campaigns.

Over the last four years we have experimented and prototyped initiatives and programs that aim to realize this vision of equitable civic engagement. Working closely with an ecosystem of stakeholders that include academia, advocacy and policy, art and creative activism, civic/voter engagement organizations, community-based groups/organizations, culturally-focused entities, issue-based organizations, philanthropy, public institutions, small businesses, think tanks/solutions labs. This multicultural and multiracial network of partners brings tremendous authenticity, commitment and dedication to the audiences they engage with throughout the community. They are the trusted messengers that clients, constituents and residents look to for critical information. While we do consider ourselves a network, there are unique nuances and perspectives that allow our collective efforts to transform this vision of Equitable Civic Engagement.

Building civic muscle and shifting power necessitates ingenuity, patience and resilience. The years ahead, described in this plan, will surely test us and test our community. Nevertheless, our vision, and our commitment to each other and our more liberated future, will shape the next decade for Clevelanders and for our city.



*(Photo/Alaina Battle)*

# Civic Engagement in Cleveland as We Launch This Plan

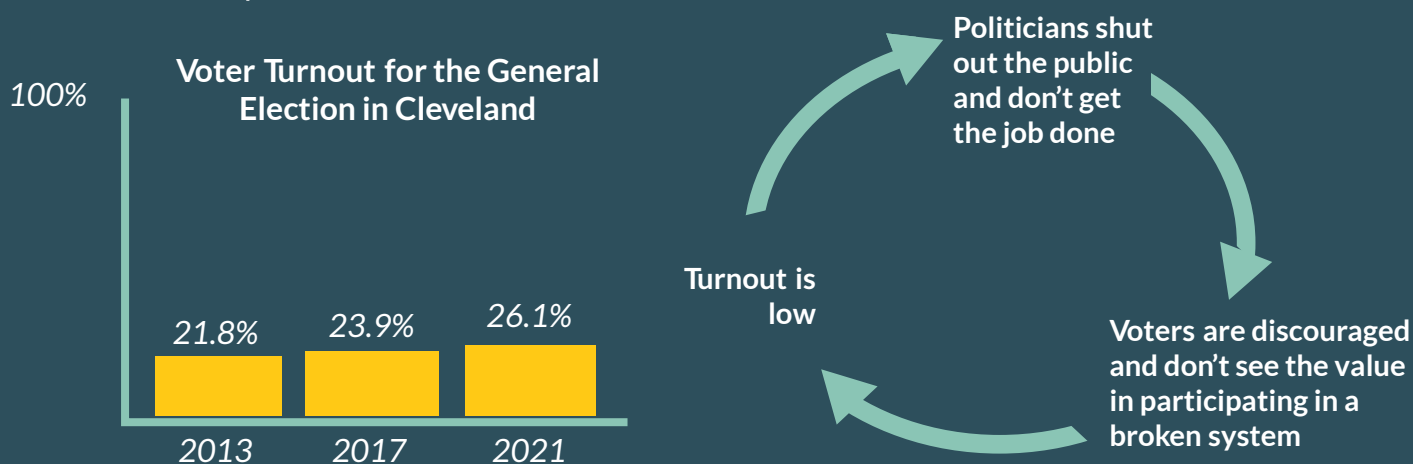
Too many Clevelanders have experienced city, county, and state government as elitist, closed to the public, broken, and uninterested in meeting people's needs.

**"Nothing gets done in Cleveland"**  
- Charles Wagner

**"There's no trust between government and communities. The city has broken the trust over the years."**  
- Portia Booker

**"Politicians will change their views to get your vote"**  
- Kayla Blake

This lack of accountability to the community, and lack of effort to engage us, leads to low voter turnout and participation, and a vicious cycle that protects a broken status quo.



But there is reason to believe that change is possible, and that if we continue to push, we can create a better reality.

**News**  
**Cleveland to offer free parking for City Council meetings**  
Published: Apr. 12, 2022, 1:17 p.m.

**Opinion**  
**Give Clevelanders a voice in their future through participatory budgeting: Molly Martin**  
Published: Mar. 25, 2022, 5:29 a.m.

**Opinion**  
**As he hits 100 days in office, Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb deserves plaudits for his hard work and transparency: Leslie Kouba**  
Published: Apr. 13, 2022, 5:30 a.m.

# Mission

Cleveland VOTES is a nonpartisan democracy-building movement that works to reconstruct and strengthen power through active participation of our collective partners. Guided by a system of networks, we promote informed, action-oriented mobilization that shifts power towards Equitable Civic Engagement and Infrastructure.

# Vision

Our collective work will power a transformation toward a more liberated future, offering access to tools that produce increased efforts in civic education, engagement and advocacy. We will work with intentionality to amplify the voices of our neighbors, ensuring we have a more informed, participatory, and cohesive community.

*Young folks pose with conveners of the "Your Voice Matters" Voter Engagement Forum on Saturday, October 9 at Cleveland's St. Paul AME Church. (Photo/Vellaure-Puritas Development Corporation)*



**This plan is about Cleveland,** the community we all care so deeply about. This plan is about Cleveland VOTES and where we're going -- as well as the projects, partners, and people who are going to get us there.

But first we've got to name, and set aside, the old story of Cleveland. The old story of our city is tired, it's stale, and it's harmful. That story, and the city it describes, is no more.

The new story of our city is being written, and it's not done yet. It's a story of elected officials who are accountable to the people, and of community pillars who embrace the value-centered future and best of us instead of the racist past. It's a story of the great grandchildren of wealthy white men using their family's resources to ensure we can all thrive. Most importantly, it's a story, still being drafted, of a rich democracy and a civically-engaged community, building a path forward together. Our story, written by organizers and artists, teachers and nurses, small business owners and workers, by people who have been here a few years and by those who've been here for generations, by high school students and seniors, and everyone in between.

Cleveland VOTES is a part of building that rich democracy and engaged community. This is our plan, for our organization, our partners, and our neighbors and community.



# Our Vision for a More Liberated Future

As we look ahead to the next phase of our organization, we aim to take our collective learning and solidify a few pathways to strengthen our contributions to the Cleveland civic ecosystem and infrastructure. For the next four years, our main pillars will include:

- **Realizing Equitable Civic Engagement:** In order to increase civic participation, as well create a more equitable democracy and cohesive social fabric, we must foster opportunities to see how democracy shows up beyond election days. We aim to expand our engagement with art and creative activists, elevate the importance of narrative and storytelling, continue to foster relationships with media and nonprofit journalists -- developing assemblies or hubs of leaders across the city that receive the necessary tools and experiment through incubation spaces while fostering equitable democracy.
- **Movement Capacity-Building:** We plan to broaden our training, development, coordination, and research and data work, and launch an incubator program that will identify, support and create opportunities for future leaders.
- **Grantmaking:** We aim to expand and evolve the Equitable Civic Engagement Fund (ECEP). We will explore participatory grantmaking practices, raise additional funds for the ECEP and embody trust-based philanthropy practices.
- **Shifting Power:** We will aim to evolve our internal practices to emulate a democratic governance structure. Together with our network of partners, we will develop a policy and issue-based agenda for action and mobilization.

The culmination of these strategic pillars will contribute to our goal of a more liberated future. This future destination is more communal, restorative and embraces a solidarity mindset. We are a Black-women-founded-and-led organization. We seek to cultivate a future destination that embraces, honors and welcomes us as our fullest selves. Leading with humility and activating anti-racist policies and practices is deeply embedded in our ethos as individuals and as an organization. This will be no easy feat, but we know that *"To be antiracist is a radical choice in the face of history, requiring a radical reorientation of our consciousness"* (Ibram X. Kendi.) We invite each of you on this journey with us.



# Realizing Equitable Civic Engagement



The artists, musicians, and storytellers that make Cleveland vibrant are **critical to our social fabric.**

We will lift up and create space for narrative art activism.

The old story of Cleveland is tired.

We are **drafting new chapters** with our partners.

Making voting matter.

We will **increase registration, turnout, and participation** through campaigns that engage people in real conversations about what matters in their lives.

We need **generational change** and that starts in schools.

We will work with local school districts and our higher ed partners to ensure students leave our schools with the tools to engage civically.

Democracy is about **more than elections.**

We will lift up, organize, and advance, ALL aspects of democracy and civic participation.

We are **fighting a system** that says we don't matter and that we shouldn't care.

We will use the "public square" -- media, social media, public comment and Participatory Budgeting to turn that lie on its head and push the envelope.

Our partners and movement need the most **up-to-date and creative research and data** to engage with community and advance our mission.

We will invest in and fight for the best data and research, and serve as a hub for experimentation and pushing the envelope.

Our partners and grantees know what is happening in their community, **what is needed, and what's working.**

We will continue to use our Community of Practice meetings to learn from and lift up those doing the work.

Every year offers opportunities to **learn, grow, and build**, and to dream and plan on bigger steps ahead.

We will thoughtfully experiment and evaluate to see what we're building.

When we **develop leaders** we strengthen our partners and community.

Our training and education offerings will expand, with a focus on building a combination of hard skills, capacity and leaders that create power and impact people's lives. Alongside that expansion, we will continue to meet partners where they are, and to offer partners both general and tailored opportunities to begin, widen, and expand their equitable civic engagement efforts.

The movement we're building is **vast, diverse, and integrated** into the whole of Cleveland.

We are launching our Democracy Collective Incubator to lift up and support the next generation of organizers, funders, elected leaders and creatives.

## Movement Building Capacity





Grantmaking should be a partnership focused on **mutual interests and goals.**

We will continue to fund in ways that reflect our values: building powerful relationships, focusing on what we're building together, and supporting our grantees in every way we can.

The broader philanthropic community needs to **meet this moment** with deeper investments in civic engagement and in democracy work centered in people.

We will use our role as both a funder and a community organization to push the funding community and advocate for thoughtful and equitable funding that meets the needs of Clevelanders.

We need more true, **on-the-ground, in-the-fight** partners, and those partners need more money.

We will grow our civic engagement fund to m\$1 million/year by 2024 and diversify our funding streams so that we are able to do the work, and make the commitments our partners deserve.

Our community needs **broader, deeper, and more thoughtful investment.**

We will expand our funding to a larger and more diverse set of grantees, and will go above and beyond in supporting movement organizations and in helping grantees build power.

## Grantmaking



## Shifting Power



**Participation and engagement** must be paramount. Decisions should be made by voters and community members, not just by those with wealth and power.

We will tear down old structures and create new ones centering community.

It's not enough to participate, we need to **move an equitable civic engagement agenda forward.**

We will create, build power and capacity around, and work to pass a policy agenda centered around our voices and our votes.

Scaling up to **meet our communities' needs** requires structure and flexibility.

We will pursue 501(c)(3) status and explore additional options to ensure that we have the tools we need.

Sometimes our strength is in the halls of power, and **sometimes it is in the streets.**

We will work intentionally to ensure that Clevelanders and their voices are the focus of our democratic structures.

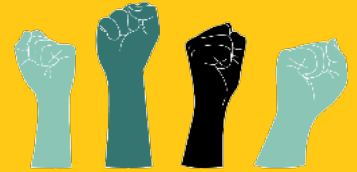
The values behind **who receives funding and who decides** are important.

We will explore social movement investment and restorative economic strategies.

## Realizing Equitable Civic Engagement



## Shifting Power



### **A more liberated future: We are not looking to settle, or survive.**

We are creating an equitable civic engagement community, and a Cleveland that is accessible, fair, just, open and sustainable.

We want more than just affordable housing or a seat at the table (although we'll take those along the way). We want to reverse decades of efforts to make decisions behind closed doors, and to create a culture and norm of engaged community members who are treated with the respect and authority they have rightly earned, and who lead, hand-in-hand with those they elect, charting our path forward.

The future we are creating is guided by organizers, civic organizations, faith groups, artists, students, seniors, and a deeply connected community that provide fruitful and evolving partnerships.

## Movement Building Capacity



## Grantmaking





# Putting Our Building Blocks in Place

## Tier 1: Rebuild + Strengthen

- Increasing staff capacity to support ongoing organizational infrastructure
- Completing strategic planning and sharing our plan out to partners, donors, and other stakeholders
- Exploring incorporating a nonprofit status and other legal structures as needed, starting in 2022
- Growing our general funding, the Equitable Civic Engagement Fund and funding for The Democracy Collective.
- Continue building on our innovative engagement efforts and programs including civic holidays and advocacy, education, consultation and planning, coordination and coalition building, and voter mobilization programs that have defined our work to date.
- The election in 2022, along with other contributing factors establish ways that Cleveland VOTES and community partners will measure progress a more equitable democracy.

## Tier 2: Expansion

- Intentionally expanding relationships through thoughtful collaboration and partnerships that will elevate the vision and capacity of Cleveland VOTES.
- Upon completion of the exploration process, Cleveland VOTES and the Board will determine its independent and corporation status.
- Launching The Democracy Collective, an incubator for community-led, driven leaders. We aim to invest in the cultivation of leaders and innovative ideas to realize a more equitable democracy and stronger social fabric.
- Reaching a staff and funding level that reflects the support needed as we propagate and grow into a community staple.
- Gaining clarity on and defining the fights we want to lead on going forward, and how we'll distinguish and make decisions on what we lead and what we support.
- Expanding our speakers and training bureau to both offer a broader suite of opportunities to build power and capacity, and to develop a broader set of trainers and advocates.
- The election in 2023, along with other contributing factors, will establish the ways that Cleveland VOTES and community partners will measure progress toward a more equitable democracy.

## Tier 3: Partnerships

- Building our team to reflect the work and capacity we are working to achieve on a local and national level.
- Growing the Equitable Civic Engagement Fund to \$1 million/year annually in 2024.
- Expanding partnerships (and support for partners) to a level that meets the needs of a huge election year, while also continuing to advance and define the work we're doing beyond elections
- Creating a viewpoint that highlights our funder-to-funding landscape, utilizing several data tools.
- Ensuring that our narrative work and the way we lift up storytelling and art activism is a part of, and impacts, both the election and the story that is told after the election.

## Tier 4: Continuous Action

- Amplifying the framework to educate, connect, and empower the candidates, organizations, and stakeholders approach to equitable civic engagement as Cleveland VOTES curates a policy agenda to precede the election.
- Reevaluating our approach to sharing the narrative of the election, and impact turnout, we will work to reclaim the measurement tools for success.
- Incorporating Equitable Civic Infrastructure into our blueprint as it provides the scaffolding for all the ways people engage in public life.
- Leveraging benchmarking as a tool of accountability and as a prerequisite to the next phase of strategic planning.

Greater Collinwood Development Corporation staff and volunteers pose for a selfie at the "Collinwood Counts" opening in 2020.

(Photo/Jamar Doyle)



# Who We Are

## Team Members

**Erika Anthony**  
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## Advisory Members

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President and CEO  
Hands Across  
Cleveland, LLC DJ, and  
Host of Soundtrack To  
The Streets Podcast

**Kelsi Carter**  
Impact Director and  
Co-Founder  
Shooting Without  
Bullets

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Senior Director of  
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National Park

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Art

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MidTown Cleveland,  
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**Leah D. Hudnall**  
Director  
Ohio Climate Justice  
Fund (OCJF)

**Melaak Rashid**  
Development and  
Community Outreach  
Director  
Smart Development,  
Inc.

**Nina Holzer**  
Program Manager  
CHN Housing Partners

**Shanelle Smith  
Whigham**  
Vice President of  
Sustainability and  
Social Impact  
KeyCorp



# Our 2022 Election Toolkit



*Scan the QR code to download the full toolkit*

## + 2022 Election Toolkit #COMMIT TO CLEVELAND

Cleveland VOTES is a c3 nonpartisan organization. This toolkit is royalty-free and may be utilized with acknowledgment and credit to the source, Cleveland VOTES.



# Thank You

This strategic plan is the culmination of dozens of conversations with community partners and leaders, funders and democracy builders, and Clevelanders who care about our city. It was built on the experiences gained from eight years of work in the trenches, and with that knowledge lays out a vision for the future that we believe reflects the hope, joy, and opportunity we all want and deserve.

We were supported in producing this plan by our partners at Cleveland Documenters and M State Partners. This plan was approved by our advisory board on 05/16/2022, and we invite anyone who is invested in Cleveland and in realizing equitable civic engagement to join us to ensure our vision becomes a reality.

## **Cleveland VOTES**

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