

VOICE

VOICES ORGANIZED IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Report to the Community



2023

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sflansburg.iaf@gmail.com or 405.503-9944.**



A year of reorganizing and rebuilding

In this first *VOICE Report to the Community*, we celebrate our work and progress! This year we mark 11 years of existence as a legally established organization, and 15 years since we first began to envision a broad-based organization of faith-based and civic institutions in Oklahoma City.

After three years of working mainly online during and immediately following the COVID pandemic, we determined in January that it was time to again meet and gather together in person. We also knew that it was time to do some disciplined listening in our institutions. From January through June, we carried out listening sessions across all of our institutions, and through those, listened to many stories and brought in new leaders.

In July, we held our third Delegates Assembly of the year, a gathering of all member institutions with their core teams of leaders. At that assembly, we shared stories and priorities, deliberated, and identified five areas of work moving forward. Our 2024 Citizens' Agenda of

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We shared stories and priorities, deliberated, and identified five areas of work moving forward.

Issues includes

- criminal justice-related fines and fees
- ending predatory lending
- housing security
- access to mental healthcare
- improving public education

We also stand ready to again take up issues previously worked on should opportunities arise, including utility rates and expanding access to driver's licenses for ITIN holders.

In this report, we summarize our work in 2023, but also provide some highlights from our 11-year history.

After all, much of our success this year builds on the groundwork already laid. We do this in six stories, stories that illustrate different aspects of how and why we organize.

In terms of building, we are excited that in the first nine months of 2023, we added four new member institutions, increasing our member base by almost half from 2022 - and growth continues.

VOICE is poised for exciting and action-filled 2024. You'll be hearing more!

VOICE Boards & Organizer



MEMBER INSTITUTIONS

Central Oklahoma Labor
Federation

Crown Heights United Methodist
Church

Disciples Christian Church

First Unitarian Church

Greater Mount Olive Baptist
Church

Joy Mennonite Church

Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma
(affiliate member)

Mayflower Congregational United
Church of Christ

Mercy Sisters and Mercy
Associates

Mosaic Church

Penn Avenue Redemption United
Methodist Church

St. Charles Borromeo Catholic
Church

St. Patrick Catholic Church

Membership as of Oct. 31, 2023.



Building Power Together

VOICE leaders understand that our ability to get things done in the community depends on our ability to build power among our institutions. Organizing work means that we are building power with others, or in other words, relational power.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous quotation on the conjugal nature of love and power is at the core of how we approach our work: "What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice."

The strength of VOICE also depends on the strength and health of our member institutions. Therefore, we work to help them be strong and relevant to their members. Some of that work is to help our members learn the discipline of asking their families the big questions, and listening - really listening - to their responses. In that process, looking for new leaders and helping them develop is key.

Trainings for VOICE member institutions are offered regularly. Sessions on the role of individual meetings and how to develop that art, as well as facilitating effective small group

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Organizing work means that we are building power with others, or in other words, relational power.

listening sessions are provided on demand.

This Year

In April, VOICE brought in IAF Senior Organizer Elizabeth Valdez to do a half-day training for all members on power and organizing. We also sent three individuals to national IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) training in July.

Another example of institution building has been a series of trainings entitled Recognizing the Stranger (RTS). Arising from a national Catholic Campaign for Human Development grant to the West/Southwest IAF, this project has allowed VOICE to host multiple trainings a year in Oklahoma City focused especially, but not exclusively, on Catholic parishes.

In June, over 100 leaders from six parishes participated in the latest RTS training session, including approximately 70 Spanish and 30 English speakers, 3 priests, and 2 representatives from Catholic Charities of Oklahoma City. Four organizers from Texas and Colorado came to offer sessions in both Spanish and English on ways listening and organizing can help parishes fulfill their mission to build relationships



In June, over 100 leaders from six parishes participated in the latest RTS training session.

with, and care for, all neighbors. Archbishop Paul S. Coakley addressed the gathering and voiced support for VOICE and how organizing work is the work of the church. ■



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Listening & Researching: *Criminal Justice Reform*

Back in 2012, many predominantly white churches in Oklahoma City had little clue that in addition to coming out of prison and trying to re-establish housing, job, family ties, and all the rest, many people were forced to return back to the community under the burden of thousands of dollars of debt.

In the early years of VOICE work, however, several predominantly African American congregations did house meetings that provided a better understanding of what mass incarceration looks like in a state with high levels of poverty and a severely underfunded criminal justice infrastructure.

After hearing those stories and identifying leaders who were committed to working on change, VOICE's next step was to research fines and fees related to the courts and incarceration. At that time, many city and county officials seemed not to be aware of the extent of the fees being charged, and the thousands of dollars that poor Oklahomans were carrying at the "end" of their involvement with the system. In other words, officials would be somewhat aware of court fees if they were connected to the courts, or of jail fees, if they approved the bill collection contracts that the Sheriff's Department worked with – but not what that

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After hearing those stories and identifying leaders who were committed to working on change, VOICE's next step was to research the fines and fees related to the courts and incarceration.

accumulation looked like for individuals as they tried to re-establish their lives.

VOICE leaders researched fees and put together a groundbreaking presentation that explained the areas in the criminal justice system that were charging fees and showed how the massive cost of incarcerating at one of the highest levels in the country was being pushed down from the state budget that underfunded every aspect, to counties and cities, and ultimately to individual Oklahomans. A presentation based on that research was given at

institutions around the city, culminating in Restorative Justice Sunday in Jan. 2016 with preaching on the topic in member churches, followed by an assembly together in the afternoon to commit to action.

That first VOICE work led to an in-depth study of fines and fees by the Oklahoma Policy Institute, as well as meetings with the Vera Institute and Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce. Criminal justice-related fines and fees are now on the map because of VOICE's early work, as our state works on much-needed criminal justice reform.

*“If we love God, we
will undoubtedly love our
neighbor also.”*

~ Catherine McAuley



VOICE has additional wins in criminal justice reform:

- We worked in 2016 to get State Questions 780 and 781 passed, reducing low-level drug and property crimes from felonies to misdemeanors, with a requirement that savings be invested in mental health and addiction services.
- VOICE got then Sheriff P. D. Taylor to agree to form a citizen’s advisory board in 2019 and advised him during its creation.

This Year

VOICE’s Criminal Justice Action Team, chaired by Sr. Diane Koorie of Mercy Sisters, has presented on the issue in 12 sites across Oklahoma County, recruiting new leaders and institutions to VOICE work.

We are investigating the collections procedures on fines and fees and how to address breakdowns occurring in communications about procedures and recording of payments.

As we work to build support toward reform and to win improvements in procedures, we are clear that the state legislature must adequately fund the court system with public money, rather than off the backs of a largely indigent population. ■

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Our church is a new but proud member of VOICE. We feel the work of VOICE aligns with our values.

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UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“

Our lives begin to
end the day we
become silent
about the things
that matter

”

Martin Luther King



**Mosaic
Church**



Showing Up: *Utility Rates & Energy Costs*

VOICE work has saved Oklahoma consumers - residents and businesses - over \$1 billion in proposed utility rate hikes from OG&E, and won greater transparency and accountability from both regulators and those who are regulated by the Corporation Commission.

When OG&E requested a massive rate hike in July 2011, VOICE leaders jumped into action. A skilled team of leaders from several member institutions dug into the public financials of OG&E, and compared that information against that of similar public utilities in the region. At a forum in fall of that year, VOICE leader Jim Tappan, a financial planner, told the group, “As I looked at OG&E’s current financial ratios and their recent stock performance, I was shocked at how well OG&E is doing compared to other companies and large utilities.”

The team discovered that while the largest companies averaged 2.9 percent growth, an OG&E stockholder earned more than eight times that over the same period. While we support healthy business, we also believe a public monopoly has a special duty to protect consumers.

“

Under scrutiny by VOICE and its allies, in July 2012 the Oklahoma Corporation Commission approved a drastically reduced settlement of just \$4.3 million, nearly \$70 million less than OG&E’s original proposal.

When hearings began at the Corporation Commission, VOICE turned out a group of leaders daily to listen and give testimony on both how an increase would impact families and why an increase was not justified. Commissioners told us that hearings were rarely attended by citizens.

Under scrutiny by VOICE and its allies, in July 2012 the Oklahoma Corporation Commission approved a drastically reduced settlement of just \$4.3 million, nearly \$70 million less than OG&E's original proposal.

This was just the start. VOICE continued to show up for hearings in 2015 on a proposed OG&E rate hike, winning a reduction from the proposed \$1.1 billion down to \$8.9 million, as well as refunds back to customers after OG&E had given themselves an interim increase. Requests to double the residential base rate and add a "demand charge," something no other utility in the country had been allowed to impose, were also refused.

Then, during the week of Feb. 14, 2021, a major winter storm hit Oklahoma. Oklahoma's public utilities spent \$4.5 billion in a matter of days on "spot" markets and then requested hikes in bills to recover those enormous expenses.

“ VOICE leaders demanded transparency . . . and called for a list of the companies that had taken extraordinary profits during the emergency situation.

VOICE leaders demanded transparency on decision making and called for a list of the companies that had taken extraordinary profits during the emergency situation - a list we got published in 2022.

This Year

Following our and others' calls to launch an investigation into the Oklahoma Natural Gas (ONG) case, Attorney General Gentner Drummond announced he was filing the largest lawsuit in state history to recover billions in natural gas costs from suppliers in spot markets.

We continue our commitment to hold the utility monopolies and their regulators accountable to Oklahoma families. ■



Staying the Course: *Improving Public Education*

Around the time of VOICE's founding, Oklahoma was demanding more and more high stakes standardized testing of children. That level of testing was impacting all students' education. Teachers were having to spend more and more instructional time prepping students for test after test, and less time on electives and enrichment activities.

"Additionally," remembers Fr. Tim Luschen, priest at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, "we learned that one-quarter of the children who failed the third-grade reading test were English language learners, and half of them were children with IEPs."

VOICE focused its attention on turning that ship around, reducing the number of required standardized tests and getting more flexibility on impacts and outcomes of the test. VOICE had major wins. Working with key allies, VOICE helped get the number of high stakes tests at each grade reduced to just those required by federal law. It also won modifications so that the third-graders who failed the high stakes reading test would not be

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Those wins didn't happen with a few emails or phone calls. They didn't happen because of the benevolence of Oklahoma's elected officials. VOICE got those wins because our leaders stayed the course over four years.

automatically held back, adding teachers and parents into the decision-making.

Those wins didn't happen with a few emails or phone calls. They didn't happen because of the benevolence of Oklahoma's elected officials. VOICE got those wins because our leaders stayed the course over four years.

The Education Action Team created and presented on the issue at more than 75 venues across the state in 2013-14, listening to families the entire time.

Heather Sparks, then chair of the VOICE Education Action Team, as well as a former administrator and Oklahoma Teacher of the Year, reflected, "We heard from parents of a third grader who had to be prescribed anti-anxiety medication because of the pressure to pass the third grade reading test. We also heard stories of students who had to abandon all elective classes like band and drama because they were required to enroll in testing 'support' classes due to previous low test scores. These depressing stories were common across the state and it was clear that the general consensus was that we were over-testing our students with little or no benefit."

By spring 2014, then State Superintendent Janet Baressi had failed to consider any revisions to testing policies. In June that year, VOICE did an accountability session with candidates for State Superintendent of Schools with approximately 1,500 people in attendance - to date VOICE's biggest accountability session. Leaders asked the candidates, including Joy Hofmeister, to commit, should they be elected, to meet with VOICE and lobby for changes to the state testing program and the A-F School Report Cards. They agreed.

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Reverend Ray Douglas
Senior Pastor**

In 2015 and 2016, VOICE leaders and by then State Superintendent Hofmeister worked to get legislation passed that ended the high stakes end-of-instruction assessments. The next year, leaders continued work and won a further reduction in the burden of state mandated tests in grades 3-12. VOICE also won changes to the rules for calculating letter grades for schools.

Since then, VOICE has continued work in public education issues, including supporting teachers during the 2018 walkout for better pay, resources, and working conditions,

and building support for the action among our constituency.

This Year

The Education Action Team was re-established in July, with co-chairs Emily Heugatter, leader with Mayflower Congregational Church, and Aaron Baker, leader with Joy Mennonite Church.

In addition to research actions, a forum for Latino families on bullying prevention and ways to engage effectively with schools and educators is being organized for Nov. 6 at St. Patrick Catholic Church. ■





First Unitarian Church
of Oklahoma City

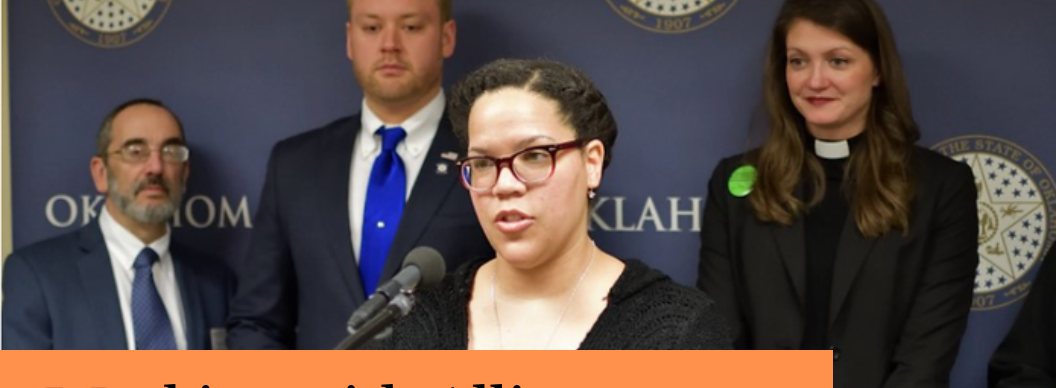
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Working with Allies: *Ending Predatory Lending*

A 2012 Pew Charitable Trust report showed that Oklahomans were the number one users in the country of payday loans per capita, and there has been no information since that time to suggest the situation is much better. These Oklahomans who are living paycheck to paycheck, with no savings to access when even small unexpected needs arise, include many people in our congregations and work places.

Why are payday and car title loans predatory? First and foremost, annual percentage rates (APRs) are astronomical - up to 390 percent a year in Oklahoma. Marketed by predatory lenders as easily accessed, short-term loans, the model actually aims to trap vulnerable people in a cycle of debt that can be almost impossible to escape.

After hearing stories from people in their churches, VOICE's clergy became especially concerned, since it goes against most every religious tradition's teachings against usury.

“

VOICE organized over 100 clergy across the state to sign a letter opposing legislation in 2017 that would have upped the number and size of payday loans borrowers could take out.

Photo: Angela Basse, VOICE leader and staff member of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church speaks out against payday loans at a news conference in 2017. (Courtesy of B.DICKERSON/Okla. City Free Press.)

VOICE also discovered that teachers were among those who fell prey to the sector.

Over time, VOICE has worked with a number of groups that have similar concerns. For example, clergy across the state have periodically joined actions, and the AARP has worked for years monitoring the ways predatory lending targets elders. We have also worked with ACTION, our sister organization in Tulsa, to focus on statewide legislation.

At a time when state legislators were

beginning to introduce industry-sponsored bills designed to expand payday lending products and reduce safeguards, VOICE began with actions to raise public awareness about the burdens and predatory nature of payday and car title loans. We organized press conferences that included allies, and educational actions in its member institutions and out in the community.

VOICE organized over 100 clergy across the state to sign a letter opposing legislation in 2017 that would have upped the number and



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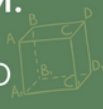
VOICE FORO EDUCATIVO



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size of payday loans borrowers could take out. After lawmakers proceeded to pass the bill, VOICE started a campaign urging Governor Mary Fallin to veto it, which she did.

Student loan debt has regularly arisen as a challenge when listening to people in our institutions. Many young people mention delaying life events like having children or buying a house due to crushing debt from student loans. National consumer protection groups began including some student loan products in their predatory loan work, since they were targeted to young people without some of the basic protections and vetting that other loan products provide.

In 2021, VOICE supported its sister organization in Tulsa, ACTION, to pass the Oklahoma Student Borrower's Bill of Rights Act, protecting students and families in a range of ways.

This Year

The VOICE Predatory Lending Action Team, chaired by Pastor Ray Douglas with Greater Mount Olive Baptist Church, is currently working to strategize local actions to curb

predatory lending, as we work towards our legislature eventually passing a statewide APR cap no higher than 36 percent.

In strategizing that work, we met with colleague organizations in other states, including a fellow IAF organization in Texas - El Paso's EPISO - that won passage of a city ordinance against predatory lenders and worked with a local lending institution to set up an alternative lending program. We have also consulted with the Woodstock Institute, which led the successful Illinois campaign to cap annual interest rates at 36 percent, and with Texas Appleseed that provided ideas on ways to move forward to protect consumers when statewide reform is not forthcoming.

Finally, VOICE has joined in the fight to preserve a strong Consumer Finance Protection Bureau (CFPB), working to educate Oklahomans on the ways the CFPB champions consumer protection, including regulating payday lenders. ■

VOICE's work in this area is supported by Americans for Financial Reform.



Local Action on Larger Issues: *Welcoming Immigrants*

One of the first issues that VOICE addressed in Oklahoma, even before the official founding of the organization, was immigration. In 2007, legislation was passed (the infamous HB 1804) whose aim was to make living in Oklahoma excruciatingly difficult for immigrants who had entered the United States illegally. In effect, it was having a chilling effect on life and work for all immigrants, their legally residing family members, and people who were trying to help families. Additional harsh legislation was being proposed.

VOICE entered that arena and worked to stave off the harsh anti-immigrant legislation being proposed that would have made the situation even worse for immigrant families. Working with allies - some publicly and others who had to stay behind the scenes - VOICE leaders organized meetings with legislators, attended committee meetings, and kept that legislation from passing.

Immigration is under the purview of the federal government, since it involves policy regarding the country's borders and who is allowed to

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Working with allies - some publicly and others who had to stay behind the scenes - VOICE leaders organized meetings with legislators, attended committee meetings, and kept that legislation from passing.

enter regardless of where in the U.S. people enter and reside.

However, as NBC News has reported, “Congress' failure to pass any meaningful immigration reform has stretched to more than two decades. Over and over, attempts have collapsed — including bipartisan efforts and those with strong presidential backing. Instead, most changes on immigration have been achieved only through funding bills, small provisions in other legislation, regulations and executive authority” (“Congress has failed for more than two decades to reform immigration,” Jan. 7, 2023).

The U.S. Congress's inaction has opened the door for - some would say forced - states to act, and in the case of Oklahoma, not always in the most neighborly of ways.

As a local organization focused primarily on the Greater Oklahoma City Metro, how could we work on immigration? We decided to focus on ways to make life for immigrants in our community safer and more connected. Led mostly by VOICE's Catholic member institutions and leaders, following are some of those actions.

VOICE created the handbook “Resources for Immigrants and Workers Rights,” which outlined the rights and responsibilities of families related to interactions with law enforcement and the courts, the difference between notaries and attorneys, recommendations for finding a reputable attorney, and other resources.

Because one of the impacts of the anti-immigrant political environment was fear and isolation for families, in July 2012, VOICE organized an Interfaith Prayer Service on Immigration, which was attended by approximately 300 people.

Over several years, VOICE organized “Recognizing the Stranger” trainings aimed primarily at Catholic parishes. These sessions were first created to help immigrant parishioners recognize that the church is their church, that they belong and are able to discuss their daily struggles and joys. We soon saw the benefits of including all parishioners and doing work that began a better integration of Spanish-speaking and English-speaking parishioners.

This Year

This later understanding was the focus of the major Recognizing the

Stranger training in July, mentioned on page 4.

In addition, partnering with ACTION in Tulsa, as well as the Oklahoma Policy Institute, VOICE leaders worked this year to support opening applications for Oklahoma state drivers' licenses to ITIN (Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers) holders, many of whom have not been able to apply for licenses. Not only would this protect fellow drivers, a license would allow people to access banking services and purchase auto insurance. The bill did not get heard

in the spring 2023 session on the floor, but we continue work. ■

New Work in Start Up

Housing Security Action Team, chaired by Michael Figgins of Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma.

Mental Health Action Team, chaired by Becky Tallent of First Unitarian Church.

Upcoming VOICE Events

Nov. 6 - **Family Support and Bullying Prevention Forum.**

7:00-8:30 p.m. St. Patrick Catholic Church. (Spanish)

Nov. 12 - **Delegates**

Assembly. 3:00-4:30 p.m.

Greater Mount Olive Baptist Church.

Dec. 3 - **VOICE Forum on**

Arena Vote. 3:00-4:30 p.m.

Location to be determined.

Jan. 25-27 - **Organizing**

Training in Tulsa. Details to come.

Visit voiceokc.org/calendar to stay informed about all events.

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Who We Are

VOICE (Voices Organized in Civic Engagement) is an organization of dues-paying congregations, nonprofits, unions, and other social mission-based institutions that have come together out of a deep sense of mission and concern about the pressures families face in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area.

Leadership

VOICE is governed by a team of leaders from our member institutions, who discuss, determine, and carry out all of our major campaigns and actions.

Core teams at each member institution organize within their institutions and come together at least quarterly to assess progress and strategize actions and campaigns.

VOICE Education Fund Board

- President: Fr. Tim Luschen, St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church
- Treasurer: Dr. Heather Sparks
- Maureen Harvey, First Unitarian Church
- Shawanda Rankin, Central Oklahoma Labor Federation

- Robin Wertz, Penn Avenue Redemption United Methodist Church

VOICE Action Fund Board

- President: Eric Jergensen
- Rev. Ray Douglas, Greater Mount Olive Baptist Church
- Carmen McBride, First Unitarian Church

Organizer

- Sundra Flansburg, Lead Organizer

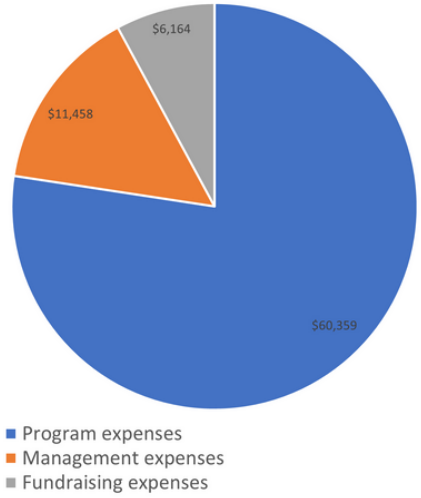
What We Do

VOICE works to better understand the pressures ordinary people in our city face by actually listening to them. We then engage those who are impacted by those pressures in better understanding the issues and learning to work effectively within the democratic process for improvements that benefit all. As a diverse organization made up of different faith traditions and missions, we focus on areas of common ground and commit to standing together. Because relationships are the glue of healthy communities, we build public relationships with each other and with those from whom we seek change.

2022 Finances

2022 Expenses

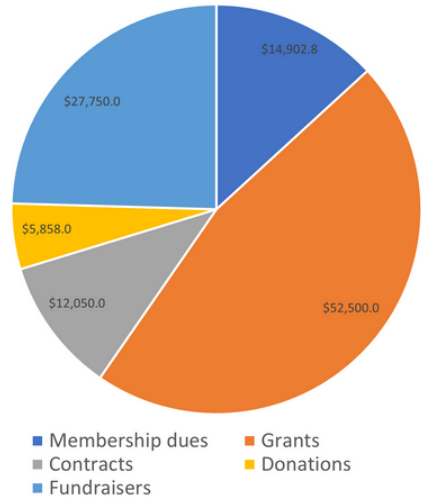
VOICE invests in people. Therefore, program expenses include training sessions; public education events and actions; a contract with the IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation, our national network of local organizations) for training, seminars, and resources; and organizer time dedicated to training and developing leaders.



2022 Income

VOICE relies primarily on grants, fundraisers, membership dues, and individual donations.

In 2022, because our then organizer’s time included a tryout period, the IAF subsidized her first three months of salary and benefits (classified as contract).



2023 Donors

We are grateful to the individuals, institutions, and businesses that support our work, including our sponsors for the 2023 gala.

VOICE Education Fund

\$50,000+

Catholic Campaign for Human Development

\$20,000-\$49,999

Americans for Financial Reform

\$5,000-\$9,999

Mary Lou Lemon Foundation

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Oklahoma City Housing Authority

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Become a Monthly Donor

Sign up to support the work of VOICE with a monthly donation at <https://www.voiceokc.com/donations>. We thank monthly donors of \$25 and up with a complimentary ticket to the following year's gala.

Buy an Ad in Next Year's Report

Contact Sundra Flansburg or a board member (page 22) to get on our contact list about the report.

VOICE (Voices Organized in Civic Engagement) is an organization of dues-paying congregations, nonprofits, and unions that have come together out of a deep sense of mission and concern about the pressures families face in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area.

VOICE provides member institutions ongoing leadership training designed to stir the imaginations of their leaders to think creatively about their mission and how to act on their values in the greater community.

VOICE helps grow courageous and effective leaders.

VOICE Action Fund
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www.voiceokc.org

