



2021 Annual Report



LETTER FROM OUR CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS

In 2021, organizing won big for low-income New Yorkers. We mobilized 3,453 VOCAL-NY members to 443 actions, developed a consistent leadership of 150 and grew our team to 46 staff. The incredible dedication of staff, leaders, and members paid off -- 2021 was our most winning legislative session ever, with VOCAL-NY unions helping to pass 7 bills that were signed into law, and playing a critical role in winning progressive tax reforms that generated billions to reinvest in the everyday needs of New Yorkers.

Through multiple moves, a global pandemic, and the worst rates of overdose ever recorded, our harm reduction services continued providing life-saving health care to people who use drugs. And not only that, but our peer delivery syringe exchange significantly increased the number of syringes they distribute, from 150,000 in FY 2019-20 to 260,000 in FY 2020-21.

We fought hard in 2021, and we won. But our work is far from done. While preparing this report in January 2022, we witnessed another COVID-19 surge, the expiration of the eviction moratorium, and a new mayor in NYC that wants to double down on "tough on crime" policies that drive mass criminalization and worsens the situation at Rikers.

We know there is much to do, and we are committed to this work. Our victories in 2021 and our 23-year history highlights that we do not back down. We will continue to fight for low-income New Yorkers and we will continue to win.

In Solidarity,
Alyssa & Jeremy

BY THE NUMBERS

5,400

New Contacts

3,600

People Mobilized

1,013

New Members

443

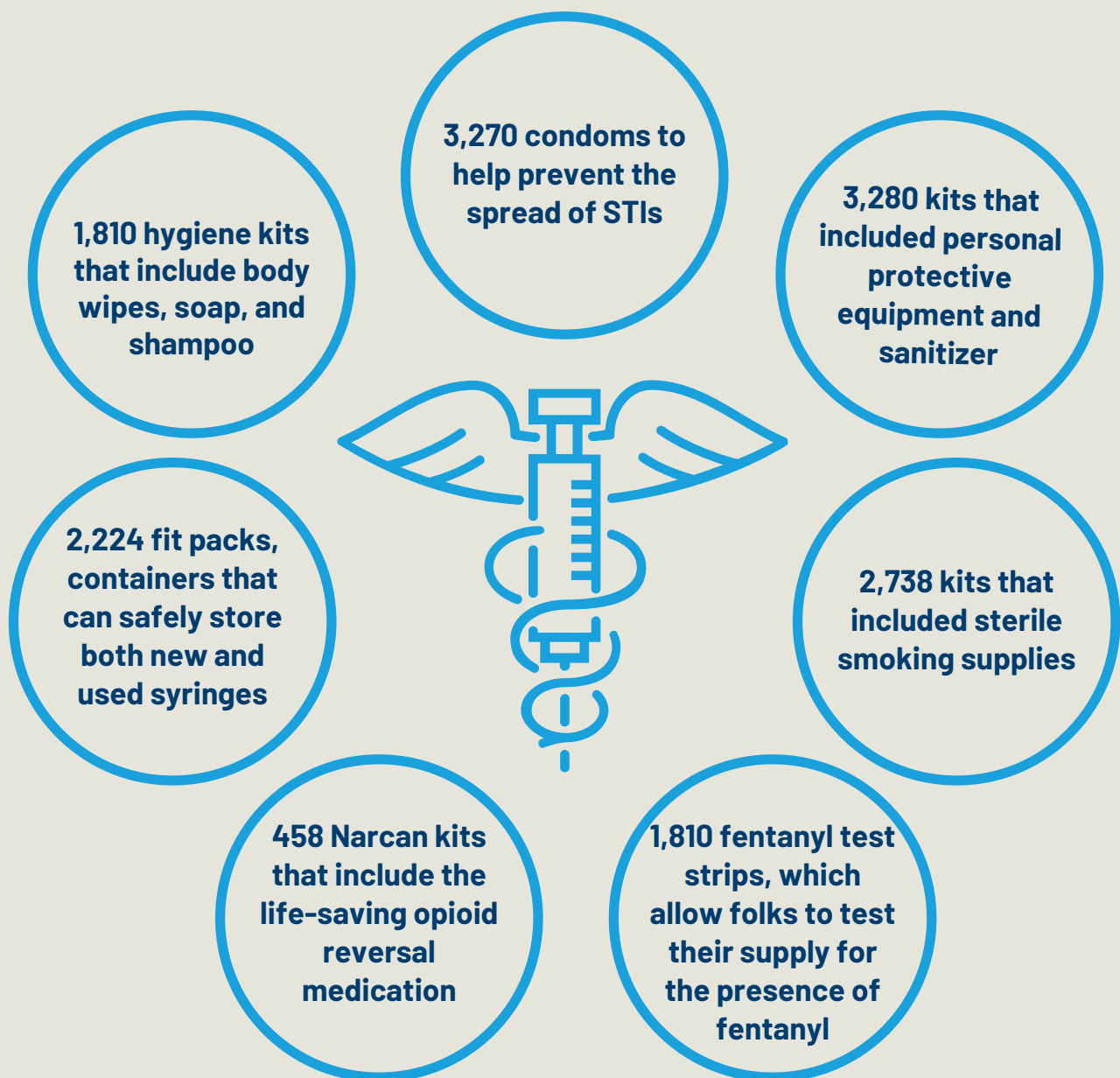
Actions

***ACROSS 6
DIFFERENT
CHAPTERS***



BY THE NUMBERS

In 2021, VOCAL-NY's harm reduction services distributed more sterile syringes to people who use drugs in Brooklyn than any previous year in our history. Through multiple moves and a global pandemic, our team distributed 387,672 syringes. Other stats include:



ACCOMPLISHMENTS & HIGHLIGHTS

In 2021, VOCAL-NY had the most legislative victories in the history of the organization. Here's what we won:



ACCOMPLISHMENTS & HIGHLIGHTS

*Nation's First Supervised Drug-
Injection Sites Open in New York*

**City Council Votes to Raise Value of
Housing Vouchers for Homeless
New Yorkers**

Seeking to Influence Mayor's Race
and Solve Social Issues, Advocates
Offer 'Caring & Compassionate New
Deal for NYC'

On World AIDS Day, Let's Remember AIDS in
New York State is Not History — It's a Lived
Reality

STATE OF THE ORGANIZATION

VOCAL-NY continues to address the intersecting issues of homelessness, mass incarceration, HIV, and the War on Drugs. We do this by organizing and mobilizing directly-impacted and low-income New Yorkers in every corner of the state, across four unions and six different chapters.

Western New York

The Western New York Chapter of VOCAL-NY, based in Rochester, continued to grow and expand its reach in 2021, with community outreach projects and new campaigns. In September, the Western New York team held its first The People's Cookout to celebrate our legislative wins at the close of the session. Western New York staff, Rochester leaders, and Buffalo leaders gathered outside of a public housing building in Rochester with a grill, music, and child entertainment. The surrounding community joined the celebration and became members of our movement.

The Western New York Chapter also launched a project at the Civic Center Garage in Rochester. The team responded to a call at 7am one morning that there would be a mandated removal of chronically homeless individuals from the Civic Center Garage. The Western New York team arrived on the scene demanding that if Rochester officials removed people they must have somewhere for them to go. VOCAL-NY staff and leaders refused to leave, serving coffee and sandwiches until the county executive's office agreed to stop its plans. This led to the launch of a project to bring a healthy and sustainable permanent encampment to Rochester for the chronically homeless.



Capital Region

VOCAL-NY's Albany Chapter launched #Haircuts4HomelessNYers in the summer of 2021. Ash Radliff, Albany Community Organizer and licensed barber, launched the community outreach project to engage current VOCAL-NY members and leaders. Ash sets up outside every two weeks to provide this much needed service to people experiencing homelessness in Albany. The project also provides VOCAL-NY organizers with an opportunity to strengthen and build the Albany base, while bringing the community together using traditional grassroots organizing.



Civil Rights Union

The Civil Rights Union continued to mobilize responses to immediate issues like COVID-19 in prisons throughout NYC and Rikers Island.

During the state budget process in April, the Civil Rights Union successfully passed two bills. The first restored voting rights for people on parole through a coalition of advocates & supportive legislators, uplifting the voices of people on parole and framing the issues as both a good government and civil rights issue. This law clarifies that every US citizen 18 years old and above is eligible to vote by law.

The second was the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, ending long-term solitary confinement in NY. VOCAL was on the steering committee for this campaign and our members were fierce spokespeople, with VOCAL leaders Roger Clark and Jovada Senhouse having vital roles. Our members spoke on the torturous conditions of solitary confinement and used those experiences to lobby legislators, speak at events, and talk to the press.



We moved forward our decarceration agenda through the 2021 NYC election cycle, primarily through the Manhattan DA race, an open race with reform-minded candidates promising a different path than Cy Vance, who sent more people to Rikers than any other DA. We created the People's Coalition for the Manhattan DA Accountability, which developed a set of demands for the next DA, hosted a candidate forum, and developed and distributed educational materials to inform voters. The coalition continued to meet after the election, holding an accountability meeting with DA-elect Alvin Bragg, and will hold him accountable for the promises he made during his campaign.



Homeless Union

The Homeless Union passed the House Our Neighbors with Dignity Act (HONDA) during the final weeks of the state legislative session. HONDA converts economically distressed hotels into permanent housing for homeless New Yorkers. The HU also passed Intro 146 in NYC, a bill that reforms the cityFHEPS rental assistance program by raising the amount a voucher can pay to a fair market rate.

The voucher increase was set to go into place at the end of December 2021, leaving tens of thousands of people losing housing opportunities in the interim. Leaders immediately began a fight to implement the bill sooner. After numerous meeting requests sent to Steve Banks and the NYC Department of Homeless Services, leaders decided to take over the lobby of the DHS office at 4 World Trade Center. We held a speak out in the lobby for 20 minutes, at which point the NYPD arrested three VOCAL-NY staff members and two leaders without warning. Two weeks later, several VOCAL-NY leaders were able to meet with Erin Drinkwater, DHS Deputy, and the bill was fully implemented less than a month later.



The Homeless Union continued to grow its base, both online and in-person, with joint member meetings with leaders from across the state taking place virtually for the first time. Additional accomplishments included months of organizing around Wards Island, one of the largest and most underserved shelters in NYC, including developing 2 leaders and a dozen new members in just 2 months; led the Hotels 2 Housing campaign to stop the transfer of those placed in hotels from congregate shelters due to the COVID-19 pandemic back to shelters; continued to develop relationships with service providers and re-established our ability to connect people directly with attorneys at monthly member meetings; and built a coalition of allies, partners, and members to demand Wi-Fi access in all NYC shelters, including single adults and adult families, which resulted in the introduction of statewide legislation.





Users Union

2021 was a bittersweet year for the Users Union. We achieved more legislative victories than ever before, but did so in the face of a devastating overdose crisis. UU staff, leaders, and members have felt this pain acutely while fighting for policies that will improve and save the lives of people who use drugs in NY. None of these victories would have been possible without the relentless tenacity the leaders of the UU maintained in 2021. The UU passed marijuana legalization grounded in racial and economic justice; the culmination of VOCAL-NY's 10-year history in moving forward marijuana justice campaigns in NY.

After 10 years of campaigning, we decriminalized syringe possession in NY. Our members relentlessly led this campaign, always centering the voices of people who inject drugs. UU staff and leaders were invited to the in-person bill signing with Governor Hochul, a first in our history. We lost loved ones who were instrumental in starting and sustaining the fight for syringe decriminalization, including UU leaders Elizabeth Owens and Bobby Tolbert. Union leaders printed posters with Elizabeth and Bobby's photos so they too could attend the bill signing that they fought so hard to achieve.

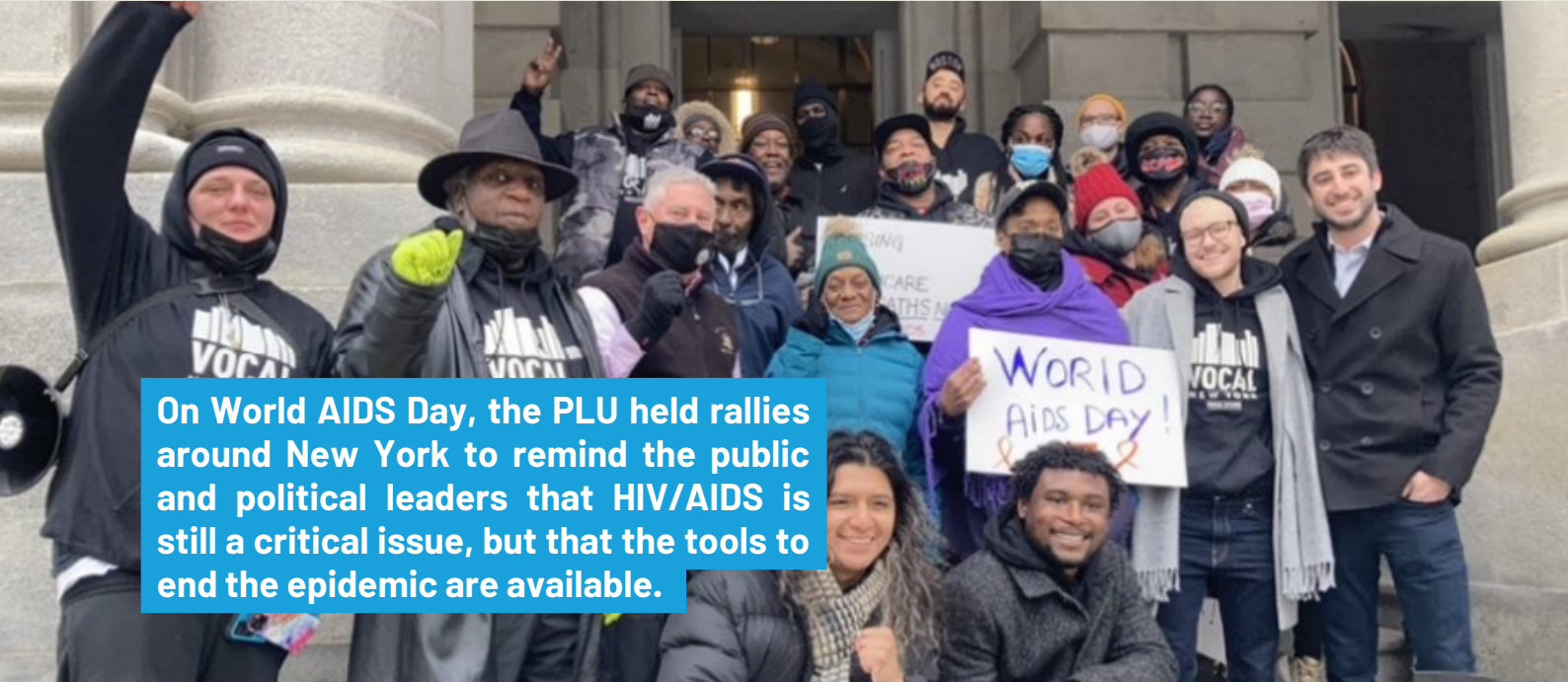
The UU expanded access to life-saving drug treatment medication in all NY prisons and jails. Under the newly-signed legislation, people who are incarcerated will have access to all three forms of medication for opioid use disorder. And in December, Governor Hochul signed the bill to end Cuomo's two-tiered treatment system by removing prior authorization to life-saving medication for low-income New Yorkers.

And OnPoint, an ally harm reduction organization, opened the first sanctioned overdose prevention centers in the country, marking a turning point for evidence-based health services for people who use drugs.

Positive Leaders Union

The Positive Leaders Union experienced a year of rebirth and growth. In the spring of 2021 the Positive Leaders Union relaunched with the hiring of Ruwi Shaikh, who joined as the HIV/AIDS Campaign Coordinator in May. Ruwi has dedicated years of inspiring work towards concrete social change across many different issue areas, including homelessness, defunding the police, healthcare accessibility, and gender-based street harassment.

In November, Kipp Lyle transitioned from the GROW team to the Positive Leaders Union, joining the team as the HIV/AIDS Community Organizer. Kipp was a successful organizer with the GROW team, helping recruit members for VOCAL-NY's unions. Kipp's dedication to our mission is inspiring and they are passionate about the work of the Positive Leaders Union.

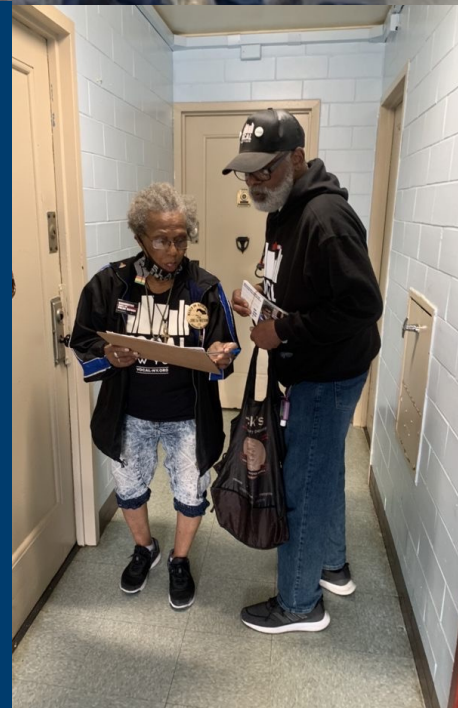


On World AIDS Day, the PLU held rallies around New York to remind the public and political leaders that HIV/AIDS is still a critical issue, but that the tools to end the epidemic are available.

GROW

VOCAL-NY launched the GROW Program in 2021 to recruit, hire, and train a team of part-time organizers to run daily outreach, recruit new members, build the base, and conduct phone banking to mobilize members for campaign meetings, actions, and events. Outreach activities happened on the street outside of homeless shelters, methadone programs, parole offices, food pantries, syringe services programs, and other community hubs where GROW organizers could connect with VOCAL constituents.

Over the course of the year, the GROW team ran 434 outreach activities and made 3,853 contacts with 92% being new people who VOCAL-NY had never met before. In addition, three GROW team members were hired into full-time positions.



Harm Reduction Services

VOCAL-NY runs harm reduction services through our Peer Delivery Syringe Exchange program and our brick-and-mortar syringe services program. The PDSE team conducts outreach and exchange at sites around Brooklyn throughout the week, including Bedford Stuyvesant, Clinton Hill, Coney Island, East New York, Red Hook, and Sunset Park.

Through a partnership with Mount Sinai, VOCAL-NY is able to offer hepatitis C testing and treatment. Our hepatitis C testing and treatment program is one of the most unique and critical components of our harm reduction services. As a result of the outreach testing being expanded through the PDSE, 337 people were able to be tested for hepatitis C. We identified that 9% of those individuals had hepatitis C and moved 23 into care and treatment and 4 were cured. Additionally, the VOCAL/Sinai Cures team began initiating participants into our Buprenorphine medicated assisted treatment services for individuals who wish to manage their opioid use by either tapering down their opioid use or eliminating it altogether at their determination.

Our services teams faced many challenges in 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to limit some on-site services for the safety of our participants and staff. We continued to provide essential services, including syringe exchange, overdose prevention education, Narcan training and distribution, and limited care coordination services.

As fatal and non-fatal opioid overdoses rise rapidly, we continue to educate our participants as well as community members on how to reduce the risk of experiencing an overdose. Two of the best ways are by using fentanyl test strips to check a substance for the presence of fentanyl prior to using and having a Narcan kit available.

PDSE outreach worker Jeff Foster loads the vehicle for mobile syringe exchange.



Through the PDSE and brick-and-mortar syringe services program, VOCAL-NY distributed 387,672 sterile syringes to people who use drugs in Brooklyn in 2021. This is the highest number of syringes that VOCAL-NY has ever distributed in a single year, highlighting the growth of our team, the dedication staff has to this life-saving work, and the trust that the community has in VOCAL-NY staff. Having a sterile syringe for each injection means that people who use drugs in Brooklyn are at significantly reduced risk for infectious disease, including HIV and hepatitis C.

The teams also provided overdose education and response trainings to 640 individuals in 2021 and distributed 1,284 Narcan kits, greatly increasing the possibility that lives will be saved because folks know how to recognize an overdose, how to respond, and have the life-saving medication on hand they need.

Lastly, the New York State Department of Health released its Hepatitis C Elimination Plan. These recommendations were developed by the Hepatitis C Elimination Task Force in collaboration with community-based organizations, health care providers, harm reduction specialists, social services providers, and public health professionals. The plan addresses barriers and inequitable access to HCV care and treatment due to poverty, homelessness, transportation, stigmatization, and criminalization. VOCAL was instrumental in pushing the state to create a plan, and VOCAL was one of the many co-authors that helped make this plan a reality.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Lukee Forbes Campaign Organizer



"Every single last action is powerful, you cannot forget those moments in which you find power; in those moments you are making history."

Lukee Forbes is a part of the VOCAL-NY family in Albany as a community organizer. Lukee experienced the injustice of the judicial system first-hand when he was incarcerated at 15. Lukee won his appeal after 7 years in prison but faced homelessness after his release, an all too familiar experience of those failed by our judicial system.

However, Lukee found his power in the BLM movement, reclaiming his story as an activist and organizer. This led him to find a home with VOCAL-NY, focusing on the issues that have impacted his life. He now empowers others to share their story and join the fight to end mass incarceration, the AIDS/HIV epidemic, homelessness, and the drug war in New York state.



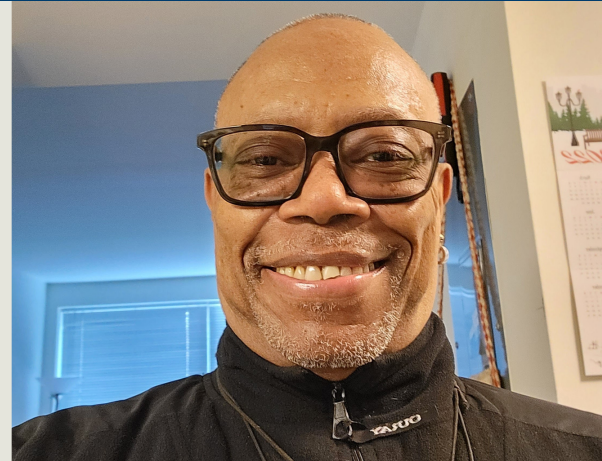
BOARD SPOTLIGHT

Reginald Brown

Vice-Chair
of Board

Reginald Brown has a legacy of power, radical acceptance, and compassion at VOCAL-NY. As a dancer, a teacher, and an activist, Reginald always brings principles of love and kindness to their work. From fighting for gay liberation as a student to Occupy Wall Street Reginald has led a life of activism. Occupy Wall Street brought them to VOCAL-NY, leading them to be a part of the Positive Living Union.

Reginald learned the power of their story as someone living with HIV/AIDS. Reginald helped win the 30% rent cap for HIV/AIDS Services Administration beneficiaries. They credit their mother for always telling them they could be anything they wanted to be. Embracing this, they have become a board member at VOCAL-NY, a member of the PLU, and a representative of VOCAL at People's Action. They have helped many find power in their story, showing them it is their most valuable asset.



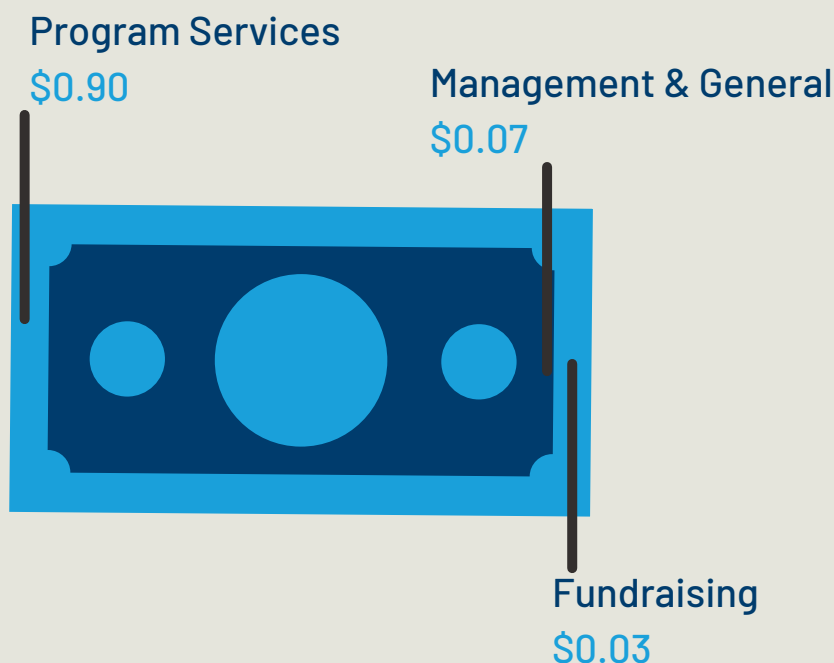
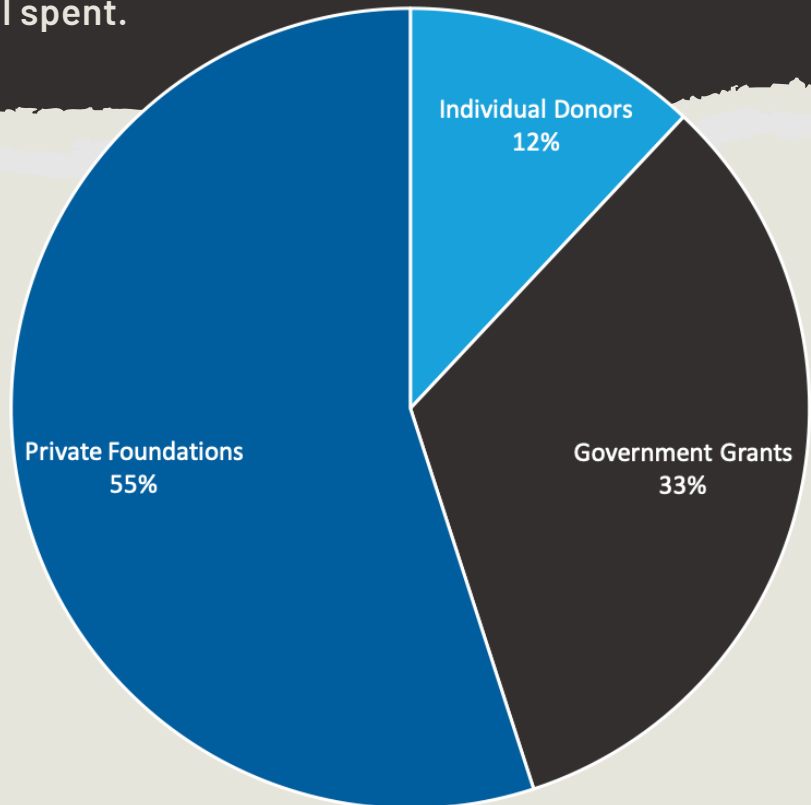
"Realize that someone is waiting to hear your story, even if you think it's mundane, someone needs to hear it to empower their own story."



FINANCIAL STATEMENT

With growing support from donors like you, VOCAL-NY is meeting the needs of low-income New Yorkers impacted by HIV/AIDS, the drug war, mass incarceration, and homelessness. Through private foundation grants, corporate giving, government contracts, and individual donations, In 2021 we had an annual operating budget of \$4.4 Million. Every dollar you give is well spent.

2021 Income
\$4.4 Million



**WHERE
YOUR
MONEY
GOES**

A Special Thank You to Our Solidarity Donors

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Alyssa Aguilera

Ex-Officio

VOCAL-NY



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Luis Bolaños Ordóñez
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Luke Grandis
Lead Upstate Organizer

Lukee Forbes
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Malik Mills
GROW Team Canvasser

Nick Malinowski
Director, Civil Rights Campaigns

Ruwi Shaikh
HIV/AIDS Campaign Coordinator

Stanley Martin
Parole & Re-Entry Coordinator





VOCAL-NY is a statewide grassroots membership organization that builds power among low-income people affected by HIV/AIDS, the drug war, mass incarceration, and homelessness in order to create healthy and just communities.

Donate

To improve the lives of low-income New Yorkers impacted by HIV/AIDS, the drug war, mass incarceration, and homelessness -- and create systemic change that impacts many more.

Give online:

vocal-ny.org/donate

Or by mail:

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For more information:

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Thank you!



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