



Faith in Indiana Report to the Rehoboth Project June 2022

Introduction

Over the last year, Faith in Indiana leaders, and especially Black leaders, have worked relentlessly to win reforms that will keep us safe. Funding trained professionals to support us in mental health crises, reducing gun violence, increasing police accountability – these are interlocking pieces of the same complex puzzle. And these policy reforms don't happen by themselves. It takes a groundswell of grassroots leaders, speaking with one voice that whether we are Black, white, or brown, we deserve to be safe. That's what Faith in Indiana did this year. Underpinning every win from the last twelve months is the development of leaders across the state to take the future of Indiana into their own hands. We are grateful for the support of the Rehoboth Project that helped to make it all possible.

Black Organizing and Leadership Development

Faith in Indiana's leaders built community power to win real change in people's lives. Faith in Indiana's grassroots organizing is democracy in action. Every day, one conversation at a time, we build the capacity of Black people, immigrants, women, and other people of faith to drive social change in Indiana. The power of Black-led organizing is particularly important: our organization is a vehicle for Black clergy, Black youth, Black immigrants, and Black faith leaders to build and wield their public agency. This labor is the engine that fuels all our work. It's where we win reforms that improve daily lives for Indiana's communities of color, low-income residents, and religious minorities. And it develops a vocal constituency for progressive policy change that serves not just Faith in Indiana but the whole movement. Here are a few highlights.

We built and strengthened our grassroots constituency. During just the last four months, Faith in Indiana held four large-scale town halls with more than 400 people each to advance our agenda. We also held 36 training and strategy events, trained 507 people, and engaged 1,257 people in public action with us. We launched two new organizing projects, one aimed at Indiana's Muslim residents, another focused on Black Indianapolis youth.

We launched a campaign for environmental justice.

Northwest Indiana is a sacrifice zone – a region where low-income communities of color are regularly exposed to dangerous chemicals and environmental threats, thanks to generations of proximity to polluting industries. Gary, Indiana is poised to build the nation's largest and potentially most toxic solid waste facility. Gary has the highest proportion of Black residents of any city in the US (85%) *and* leads the state in the amount of toxic pollution emitted per square

mile. It's not a coincidence. This threat exemplifies the challenge of environmental racism, which is pervasive in northwest Indiana: historically oppressed communities without political power have become the dumping site for heavy industry and toxic waste. We plan to change that by leveraging the power of Black grassroots organizing.

In May 2022, we hired a full-time organizer to support communities of color in the fight for climate justice in northwest Indiana. Our organizer is currently building the foundation for this campaign through individual conversations with Black clergy in Gary and surrounding communities. These clergy are trusted messengers and leaders in their communities; when equipped with the right tools and research for powerful advocacy, they can become climate champions who will organize their own far-reaching networks.

We're also resourcing local leaders who already have a history of organizing with Faith in Indiana: on May 22nd, 160 community leaders met with Gary Mayor Jerome Prince to share their change agenda.

We are grateful to a new regional funder (Builders Vision) who has committed two years of dedicated funding to support an organizer in northwest Indiana, but the region really needs four to six organizers to deepen leadership among Black residents and the exurban rural whites who could be part of a multi-racial governing coalition. Now that the project has launched, our next move is to invest in building this capacity.

We invested in Black clergy and Black organizing and leadership in Indianapolis.

This has been a busy year in our Black Church Coalition.

- We engaged 400 Black Leaders in listening sessions from June to September 2021 to understand their experiences with the criminal justice system.
- We conducted 35 research meetings with national policy experts and local public officials, including the deputy mayor, city council president, prosecutor, probation officers, chief of police, parole officers, leadership at Eskenazi Health (the local mental health provider), 911 dispatchers, and health providers.
- We organized six large-scale trainings and strategy sessions and engaged 800 people in public action.
- We held nine monthly meetings of the Black Church Coalition leadership team, with approximately 478 people in attendance.

We began organizing Black youth. We launched a new Black Youth Collective in Indianapolis – a vehicle for Black youth to work together to transform their communities. As part of this project, we launched a fellowship program for nine Black youth, aged fifteen to twenty, so they can develop organizing skills that can be used for a lifetime. The eight-week program also offers the historical context to understand and navigate power structures in modern Indianapolis. To help overcome barriers to regular attendance, we're providing these youth with a \$2000 stipend for participation. We'll also give them financial coaching and connect them with free mental health resources.

Precinct Captain Program

This spring, Faith in Indiana supported hundreds of grassroots leaders to run for elected office. Precinct captains play a crucial role in Indiana, by making party endorsements and choosing appointees for vacant legislative seats. We trained 210 grassroots leaders from across the state to run for these positions, the most accessible rung of the political ladder. Then we helped them use the voter file to identify the households in their precinct, walk door to door, and text the voters in their district. Collectively, they held more than 3,200 face-to-face conversations with voters about their hopes for their communities.

In the primary election of May 2022, an astounding 151 of them were elected as local precinct captains, more than 70% of those who ran. None of them have held elected office before. 75% are people of color. Today, one quarter of the precinct captains in Indianapolis, the nation's 12th largest city, are grassroots leaders with Faith in Indiana. So are 40% of precinct captains in St. Joseph County and more than half in Tippecanoe.

The experience of campaigning has been transformative. Within days of the election, many of them (including some who lost their races by a handful of votes) were already saying, "Hey, if I can do that, why can't I run for city council? Or state legislature?" In the coming months, we'll support our fledgling public officials, expand their leadership capacity, and help them operate at a wider scale.

Decriminalizing Mental Health

In a state where 80% of people in jail have diagnosed mental illness or problems with substance use, Faith in Indiana advocates a behavioral response continuum that supports people in crisis and offers them treatment, not jail time. In the last year, we have organized and held public actions in four counties to build support for a better alternative for those experiencing a mental health crisis. Here are the highlights:

St. Joseph County

In late 2021, following three years of organizing and agitation by our grassroots leaders to advance a vision of "help, not handcuffs," St. Joseph County commissioners [approved \\$3 million to build a crisis response facility](#) and [committed to champion](#) a \$90 million investment in a state crisis response system.

This was a hard-fought win. The Centers for Disease Control had appropriated \$3 million in American Rescue Plan funds for health outreach efforts to communities of color, but the Republican county council rejected the resources, saying they feared the money would force them to accept federal COVID restrictions. Faith in Indiana generated nearly 3,000 emails to the county council and mobilized 100 leaders to attend the final vote and override the Republican veto. Our efforts moved the county council to override the veto and reinstate ARP funding for the county's first low-barrier emergency shelter, home to 120 community members.

Indianapolis

Faith in Indiana's Indianapolis leadership, primarily building power in the city's Black churches, has won a significant set of police accountability measures. Now, we're turning our attention to providing the care of trained professionals for people experiencing mental health or substance use crises.

In a meeting in the spring of 2022, with 300 people present, Indianapolis Mayor Hogsett promised to include funding in his 2023 budget to [pilot clinician-led mobile teams](#) to respond to crises and set a goal of reducing incarceration by 30% by the summer of 2023. Clinician-led teams are an improvement on a program we persuaded the mayor to launch four years ago: mobile crisis assessment teams or MCATS, which pair officers with social workers. While MCATS reduced reliance on jail, the eight-officer team proved too small to handle the thousands of non-weapon-related calls that come into 911 each year, and the city never scaled up the pilot. Research also shows that dispatching a police officer increases the possibility of escalation and lethal use of force.

In addition to the pilot program for clinician-led mobile teams, the mayor has committed funds to establish a new clinic that will include comprehensive mental health services.

Public Safety

Faith in Indiana's work on mental health and crisis response in Indianapolis, described above, has modeled real pathways to reform that communities across the state are starting to replicate. This year in Indianapolis, we won policy reforms to make our communities safer that could lead to similar statewide adoption.

- Thanks to advocacy by our grassroots leaders, Indianapolis [adopted a discipline matrix](#) that helps identify rogue police officers before people get hurt.
- Working with community members on the General Orders Board (which sets policy for law enforcement), we updated the police *use of force* policy, mandated de-escalation training, and ended foot and car chases by the police ([why this matters here](#)).
- The police chief committed to improve [data transparency](#) by the end of the year.
- We persuaded the city to fully implement expert recommendations to strengthen Indianapolis's Group Violence Intervention (GVI) program, which identifies the individuals most likely to be involved in gun violence, surrounds them with support, and offers them an honorable exit from the life of the street. In August 2021, the mayor announced he would invest [\\$115 million of American Rescue Plan Funds in GVI](#) and other reforms Faith in Indiana has advocated for years. The city went on to contract for three years with the national experts we recommended, hire a program manager, and put fifty trained outreach workers on the streets. These outreach workers are formerly incarcerated individuals who are now in career track jobs; it's now the city's largest re-entry program.

Our work is paying off: while it's not public yet, preliminary data suggests our work has led to a 30% drop in homicides in the city, the first decline in seven years.

Criminal Justice Reform

Report: *Who is in the Marion County Jail?*

Indiana's jail population has risen dramatically because of policy reforms that lengthened sentences and transferred incarcerated people from prisons to jails. And because nearly 40 percent of Indiana's incarcerated people are Black, racial and ethnic disparities in the jail population are stark.

To learn more about the Marion County jail (who was in there, for how long, and why?), we partnered with the Polis Center at Indiana University on a participatory research project. Over the last year, we compiled data on 283,000 bookings over eight years and developed a [powerful report](#). Here's what we learned:

- Diversion projects have not had a substantial effect on the jail population. Despite a variety of informal and formal programs to reduce or eliminate jail time, the total jail population remained relatively unchanged since 2013.
- People of color are disproportionately represented in the jail population. Forty-eight percent of people jailed are Black, compared to 27% of the overall population. Black men have a much longer length of stay in jail than others (ten days longer on average).
- People suffering mental illness or substance-use crises tend to get booked for more severe charges and spend longer in jail. On average, those identified as experiencing a substance-related problem spend three days longer in jail than those who do not. Those with mental health issues stay a week longer and those experiencing suicidal behavior are typically jailed for ten days longer.

Now, we will make sure this data gets into the hands of our leaders. Combining the power of data, technology, and community organizing will drive advances in criminal justice reform locally and across the state.

Community Engagement

Your support allowed us to engage more deeply on criminal justice reform with Black leadership and in Black communities in Indianapolis.

- We trained 243 grassroots leaders who engaged about 800 members of the Black community in individual conversations and listening sessions about their experiences with the justice system.
- We collected 402 community surveys to understand how the Black community in Indianapolis experiences policing and jails. We're currently analyzing data to be able to share with our leaders and elected officials.
- Leaders conducted 38 meetings with experts and public officials, including the prosecutor, probation officers, chief of police, parole officers, leadership at Eskenazi Health (the local mental health provider), 911 dispatchers, and health providers.
- We brought 300 Black leaders to a summit on March 8th, 2022, where we won support from the mayor and police chief to implement the reforms we advocate.

Changing the Narrative

During the grant cycle, 151 unique media stories reached four million people on TV, online, and print. Nowhere was our communications work more important than in the story of Herman Whitfield III.

Herman Whitfield III was a talented pianist. But on April 25, he suffered a psychotic episode, and his parents called 911 for help. [The police arrived and responded by tasing him repeatedly](#) and handcuffing him. By the time medics arrived, Herman was unresponsive. He died in custody. The bereaved community sprang into action. Faith in Indiana worked closely with the family and the mayor's office to expedite demands for clinician-led response teams, so people in crisis would receive appropriate assessment and treatment, not police violence. Our Black Church Coalition held multiple convenings with Black leaders to chart a course of action and draw public attention to this tragic and horrific murder. We were successful in urging the police to make bodycam footage of the incident public.

At a minimum, this needless death reveals, yet again, why it is so important to uncouple law enforcement from mental health treatment. Thanks to our provocation, the city agreed not just to pilot but to fully implement a program that sends psychologists rather than cops to address mental health crises.

Faith in Indiana also played a vital role in shaping the public conversation around the incident. The police department issued a statement saying Herman's death resulted from a taser malfunction, but we knew there was another story to tell and organized a [public response](#). A Black man in crisis needed help and compassion, but because the only available crisis response came from law enforcement, he got violence. We need a caring response system, so people receive support when they are most vulnerable. This tragic incident shone a bright spotlight on an old problem – and fortunately, because of the relationships our leadership had built at the foundations we had already laid, we were able to win meaningful change. It won't bring back Herman, but it might save the next person suffering from mental illness.

Our ability to act in this moment and lift up a counter narrative was not just an activist response; it resulted from years of building relationships and power in Indianapolis' Black community.

Conclusion

Faith in Indiana is proud of what we've been able to accomplish in this last year with support from the Rehoboth Project. We appreciate your vision and your commitment to a better Indiana for us all, across race, income, and geography. We're positioned for significant growth in the next few years, and our work is cut out for us. We look forward to continuing our relationship with Rehoboth in the years to come.