



MLK50

JUSTICE THROUGH JOURNALISM

2024-2025 Annual Impact Report

Reporting Truth for Transformation

MLK50 was founded to answer questions that have lingered in Memphis. What's actually changed since Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came here decades ago? Are we a community still fighting the same battles over labor rights, economic equity, and racial justice?

Nearly 60 years later, the answer is yes, we're still dealing with the same core issues he named in ***Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*** Jobs that don't pay enough to live on. Housing that isn't safe or stable. Schools without what they need. Systems that don't treat every life the same. You don't have to look far to see it in this city, and that's where our work starts.

At MLK50, we report where poverty, policy, and power meet in Memphis and Shelby County. Our stories shine light on the workers who get up before dawn. Families trying to stay afloat. Neighbors stepping in for each other when institutions don't.

These are the stories that usually get left out, and we think that's a problem.

Because if you're trying to understand Memphis, you have to listen to the people living it, not just the people making decisions about it. As Dr. King said, we're tied together in a "single garment of destiny." When one part of the city is hurting, it shows up somewhere else. It all connects.

This impact report is just a snapshot of what happens when those realities are actually documented, when stories that might've been ignored get reported fully. For example, our stories about abysmal living conditions in two apartment complexes owned by the same company led to that company's tax breaks being canceled.

Our reporting amplified the community's response and organizing following the killing of Tyré Nichols by Memphis police officers. We also reported that children were being held in solitary confinement, and nothing was being done. Now, candidates for county mayor are campaigning on the idea that it will never happen again. MLK50 journalists are reporting policies that might look fine on paper but are detrimental in real life.

When our stories are published, transformation happens. Decisions are questioned. Leaders are forced to respond. Policies get looked at again, and people pay attention.

This work isn't easy. Things shift fast, and priorities change. Stories we're tracking one day can be replaced by something more urgent the next. Our editors have to make quick decisions. We also have to mentally process the stories that stick with us longer than we expect.

But we keep going, because Memphis needs community-led journalism that doesn't look away. What keeps us grounded is pretty simple. People deserve the truth. Not softened, delayed, or filtered through distance. Just the truth, with context, so people can actually use it.

At MLK50, we name what's wrong so it can be addressed, and we make room for voices that don't usually get heard.

Ida B. Wells once wrote, "The people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press." That idea still holds up in our newsroom. It's part of a long line of truth-telling in Memphis, and we're just continuing it in our own way.

There's still a lot ahead. MLK50 is going deeper into Memphis communities, examining ground-level issues, and helping provide resources and information so that the people can make material changes in their lives. Our reporters are going to keep reporting with honesty and authenticity, and we're not letting up.

MLK50 MISSION STATEMENT

Our mission is to report on the intersection of poverty, power, and policy, and to bear witness to movement making and lived experiences.



CO-EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR OF MLK50



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DIRECTOR OF MLK50

Coverage Areas



Housing is central to economic justice in Memphis, shaping access to opportunity and stability for families and communities. MLK50's coverage exposes inequities like evictions and displacement while holding landlords and policymakers accountable.



Youth Life and Justice is essential because young people in Memphis are deeply affected by schools, policing, and the courts — systems that shape their futures. MLK50's coverage elevates their voices, exposes inequities, and holds institutions accountable so policies better reflect the realities young people face.



Government Accountability: Public decisions shape everyday life in Memphis, from housing and education to policing and public spending. By scrutinizing those in power, MLK50 exposes wrongdoing, demands transparency, and ensures communities most affected have a voice in how they're governed.



Public safety is vital to MLK50 because it affects how people live, move, and feel in their communities every day. Our coverage goes beyond crime headlines to examine policing, prevention, and root causes. We're holding systems accountable while centering the voices of those most impacted.



The **Enterprise** beat is important to MLK50 because it drives in-depth, original reporting that uncovers systemic issues others might miss. These investigations connect the dots across housing, justice, and policy. It brings deeper accountability and insight to Memphis.



Photojournalism is essential to MLK50 because it brings truth into focus. Documenting real people, conditions, and moments that words alone can't fully capture. It adds urgency, transparency, and human connection, helping audiences see the impact of injustice and the resilience of Memphis communities.



Impact Numbers 2024 – 2025

587,926

Website views
**Between January 2024 – December 2025*

226

Original published stories
**Between January 2024 – December 2025*

4,391

Newsletter subscribers
**as of April 2026*

Social Media

**as of April 2026*

 FACEBOOK
12,090 followers

 INSTAGRAM
6,904 followers

 BLUESKY
4,620 followers

News Partners

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

THE MEMPHIS FLYER/MEMPHIS FLYER RADIO

TENNESSEE LOOKOUT

CHALKBEAT TN

SCALAWAG

PHIL LEWIS' NEWSLETTER "WHAT I'M READING"

THE XYLOM

CHATTANOOGA TIMES FREE PRESS

FOX13 MEMPHIS

DYERSBURG STATE GAZETTE

MISSISSIPPI FREE PRESS

THE HECHINGER REPORT

JACKSON ADVOCATE

BALTIMORE BEAT

THE EMANCIPATOR

CAPITAL B

WYXR 91.7 FM

SOLITARY WATCH

THE IMPRINT

IRE/KNIGHT FOUNDATION NEWSLETTER

ROLAND MARTIN UNFILTERED

WPLN



Awards

**as of January 2024 and December 2025*

- **Mirror Awards recipient** MLK50: Justice Through Journalism received the Lorraine Branham IDEA Award during the 2024 Mirror Awards. The Mirror Awards are among the highest honors recognizing excellence in media industry reporting. Named in honor of the late Lorraine Branham, the IDEA Award recognizes a media organization that has demonstrated a commitment to inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility over the previous year.
- **LION Sustainability Awards Winner:** Operational Resilience Award (Medium/Large Revenue Tier) and Financial Health Award (Medium/Large Revenue Tier).
- Finalist for the **2025 Phillip D. Reed Environmental Writing Award** in journalism, presented by the Southern Environmental Law Center for Freelance journalist Ashli Blow's MLK50 story, "South Memphis residents frustrated even as company leaking toxins says it's leaving."
- During the **2025 Diamond Journalism Awards**, sponsored by the Arkansas Pro Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, MLK50 reporters took home awards in 6 categories. Politics, Features, Enterprise/In-Depth Reporting, Explanatory Reporting, Health, and Public Service.
- MLK50 team members also received national recognition with four **2025 NABJ awards wins** in the (Features, Commentary/Essay, News: Series, and Specialty) categories.



Awards

**as of January 2026 to Present*

- MLK50 youth life & justice reporter, Rebecca Cadenhead, is a finalist for the 2026 Livingston Award in the Local category.
- MLK50 is a finalist in the INN News Best Investigative Journalism Award category in the Medium Division for our "No School, No Fresh Air, and Isolated" reporting.
- Mike Finch II, MLK50 enterprise reporter, was awarded second place in the National Headliner Awards online beat reporting government and political coverage category for his PILOT series.

MOST IMPACTFUL STORY SERIES

“I didn’t think I was ever coming home.”

– **David**, a 17-year-old incarcerated in Shelby County’s Juvenile Detention Center

MLK50 is showing how solitary confinement as a punishment for youth is inhumane and detrimental to the future of Memphis.

i. MLK50's reporting on youth solitary confinement in Shelby County exposed how children were being held in isolation in ways that often conflicted with state protections, bringing urgent public attention to conditions inside juvenile detention. The series fueled community and legal pressure for stronger oversight, influenced policy discussions in Memphis, and strengthened advocacy efforts across Tennessee to enforce better limits on the use of isolation for young people.

ii. Children incarcerated in Shelby County's juvenile detention center are frequently held in solitary confinement, according to more than two dozen sources who spoke with MLK50: Justice Through Journalism.

iii. "The truth is, if you've got a child who's really in crisis, a child who can't control themselves, something really bad is going on around the child. The last thing you want to do is leave the child alone, because they're just going to get more and more depressed, and that's when they start thinking, 'I have no future. I have to end my life.'" – Terry Kupers, a psychiatrist and professor emeritus at the Wright Institute

MOST IMPACTFUL STORY SERIES CONT.

Judge Sugarmon says he didn't know about solitary confinement until June. MLK50 reporting appears to contradict his statement.

Sugarmon attended a meeting where the practice was explicitly discussed months before he said he knew that youth in the juvenile detention center were held in isolation.

From the inside out: Ending solitary confinement for Shelby County children

We need a public, unequivocal commitment to end solitary confinement — and youth must have a seat at the table

No school, no fresh air and isolated

Since 2023, youth as young as 13 have been held in solitary confinement units for weeks or months inside the county's juvenile detention center.

When juvenile detention staff were scarce, youth say they were isolated

Youth incarcerated in Shelby County's juvenile detention center say the sheriff's office held them in isolation for 23 hours a day multiple times a week.

2ND MOST IMPACTFUL STORY SERIES

“I’ve been to countries where there isn’t freedom, but there is military presence, where you can’t protest, and officials stay in power for as long as they want. That’s not America. Sadly, with the occupation of US cities, we are far down this road of losing our democracy.”

– Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris

Memphis Safe Task Force

- i. MLK50's reporting on the Memphis Safe Task Force increased local and national media attention, with stories republished by multiple outlets and cited by organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union, Tennessee, and Vecindarios 901. Wendi C. Thomas also appeared on Roland Martin Unfiltered to discuss the Task Force's impact on Black and brown Memphians. MLK50's reporting improved transparency and accountability. After MLK50 revealed inaccuracies in public arrest data shared by Governor Bill Lee, an elected official updated their messaging to reflect the correct figures.
- ii. The reporting also had a direct impact on the community. Residents said they felt safer when MLK50 journalists were present during traffic-stop observations, and Justin J. Pearson later called for an investigation into state troopers' conduct at ICE protests after reading MLK50's reporting.
- iii. "Is this freedom?" one woman asked the officers. "Is this what you trained for?" The officers — a mixture of state troopers and HSI agents — smirked and laughed as her questions went unanswered.

State troopers and federal agents decide Memphis residents' fates during traffic stops

These officers, who are sometimes from other parts of the state and the country, have discretion to choose if a traffic stop ends with a verbal warning, citation or an arrest

Newly public data shows task force increased traffic and drug charges in Memphis

The dashboard, created by the Shelby County General Sessions Court Clerk's Office, also includes details of citations, but a highway patrol backlog means that data is incomplete

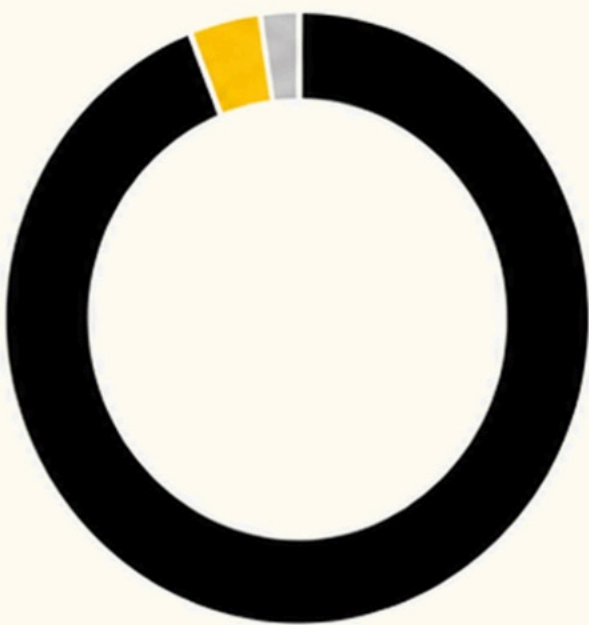
'We are far down this road of losing our democracy,' says Harris as leaders mull sending troops to Memphis

Bill Lee said people arrested by task force are "violent criminals and known gang members." Data show that's not true.

MLK50 obtained and analyzed a document detailing some of the activities of the 'Memphis Safe Task Force' Monday

A day and night in Memphis: Trump's task force expands surveillance

Finances and Top Funders



2024 Revenue
Total: \$2,729,172.95

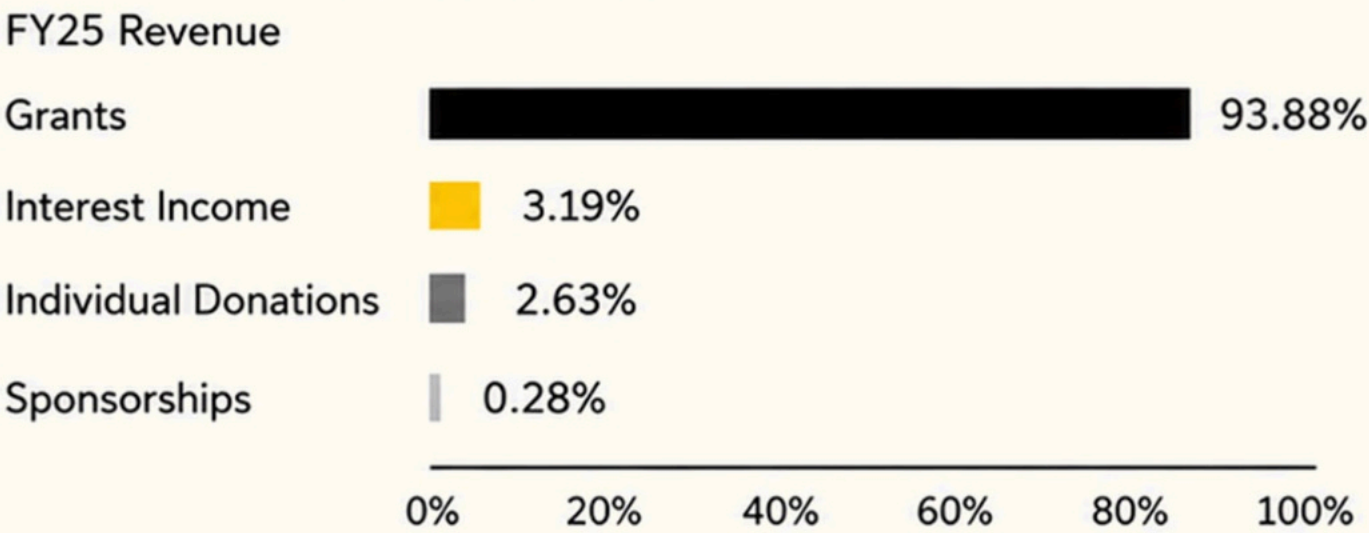
- 94% Grants
- 4% Interest
- 2% Individual Contributions



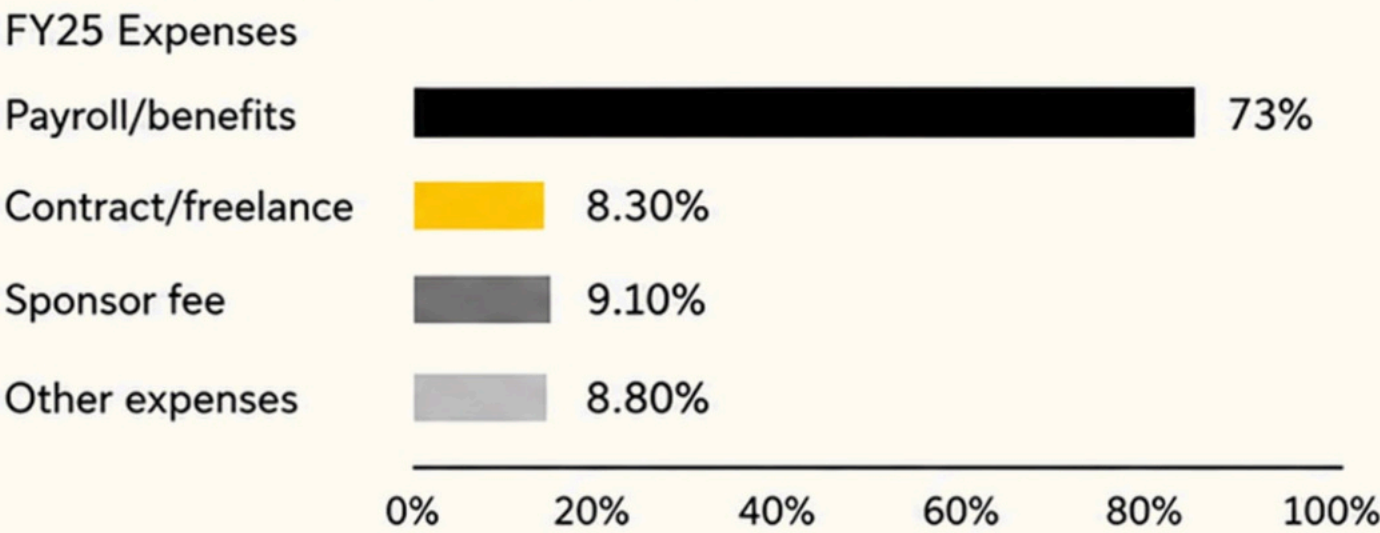
2024 Expenses
Total: \$1,831,564.46

- 65% Staff salaries and benefits
- 18% Office, technology & promotional expenses
- 8% Freelance and contract support
- 6% HR, insurance, other
- 3% Travel

WHAT'S COMING IN...



WHAT'S GOING OUT...



\$500,000 – \$2 MILLION

THE FORD FOUNDATION
THE SKYLINE FOUNDATION
MACARTHUR FOUNDATION
BOREALIS PHILANTHROPY
RACIAL EQUITY IN JOURNALISM FUND
SURDNA FOUNDATION

\$200,000 – \$500,000

KNIGHT FOUNDATION
THE KRESGE FOUNDATION
PUBLIC WELFARE FOUNDATION
JONATHAN LOGAN FAMILY FOUNDATION

\$50,000 – \$100,000

PRO PUBLICA

\$10,000 – \$50,000

REPORT FOR AMERICA
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF GREATER MEMPHIS
CATCHLIGHT LOCAL
NEWSMATCH

MLK50 receives funding from individuals, foundations, and corporations. However, our reporting remains independent, and editorial decisions are never influenced by this support. We are grateful to our generous supporters who help advance our mission.

Truth matters. We need you to help us sustain it.

At MLK50, our reporting is rooted in a responsibility to Memphis to investigate injustice, confront disinformation, and hold power accountable. Every story we publish moves us closer to the beloved community Dr. King envisioned.

There are many ways to stand with us in this work. A one-time gift makes an immediate impact. Monthly donations provide steady support that keeps our newsroom strong and independent. You can also subscribe to the MLK50 newsletter to stay informed, and follow MLK50 on social media to help amplify stories that matter to the 901.

This is Memphis-grown journalism. We're fierce, community-centered, and committed to the truth. However you choose to support it, we're depending on you to help make it possible.

HOW TO SUPPORT



One-time
donation



Monthly
Donation



Mail-in
Donation



Subscribing to
the newsletter



Follow us
on social

Scan the QR code to give today,
or visit givebutter.com/rootedinmemphis





MLK50 VISION

Our vision echoes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream: A nation where all residents – especially workers – have enough resources to thrive, and where public and private policy supports their success.

MLK50: Justice Through Journalism
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CONNECT WITH US

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