

CANCELING FREE SPEECH  
DOESN'T MAKE US CHINA,  
BUT IT'S A RED FLAG.



FIRE'S NEW ERA:  
AN INAUGURAL IMPACT REPORT



## IMPACT REPORT:

# FIRE's First Year of Expansion

Last year, Kevin Gaughen and Dave Kocur went to a public park in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, to collect signatures to get Dave on the ballot in an upcoming election. Soon after they arrived, the director of Dauphin County's parks and recreation department informed them that all political activity was banned in county parks. Dave and Kevin had no choice but to leave.

In response to this blatant violation of Kevin's and Dave's right to free speech, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression filed a lawsuit on their behalf. This April, a federal court ruled in their favor, ordering Dauphin County to end its unconstitutional ban and vindicating the rights of everyone in the county.

Although this story has a happy ending, what happened to Kevin and Dave is not an anomaly. Whether it's public intellectuals facing cancellation campaigns, college students shouting down speakers with whom they disagree, or government officials clamping down on criticism, free speech is under attack in America.



FIRE PLAINTIFFS KEVIN GAUGHEN AND DAVE KOCUR

That's why FIRE expanded our mission beyond higher education in June 2022, taking up the mantle to defend free speech for all Americans. Over the past year, we have significantly leveled up our organization, working to build FIRE into a game-changing force in the field. That work has been focused on the following goals:



**Secure landmark legal and public advocacy victories** that strengthen the First Amendment and expressive rights.



**Sow the seeds of appreciation for free speech** and renew America's gut-level commitment to free expression as an unshakable core value.



**Create a movement of millions of Americans** willing to stand up for free speech, creating a counterweight against the current incentives to censor.

As this report highlights, FIRE is focused on three program areas to achieve those goals: advocacy, education, and mobilization. Specifically, we seek to:



**Advocate:** Through public advocacy, litigation, and legislative efforts, we are directly defending individuals whose expressive rights have been violated; working to protect and secure First Amendment precedent; and promoting rights-friendly public policy and social outcomes.

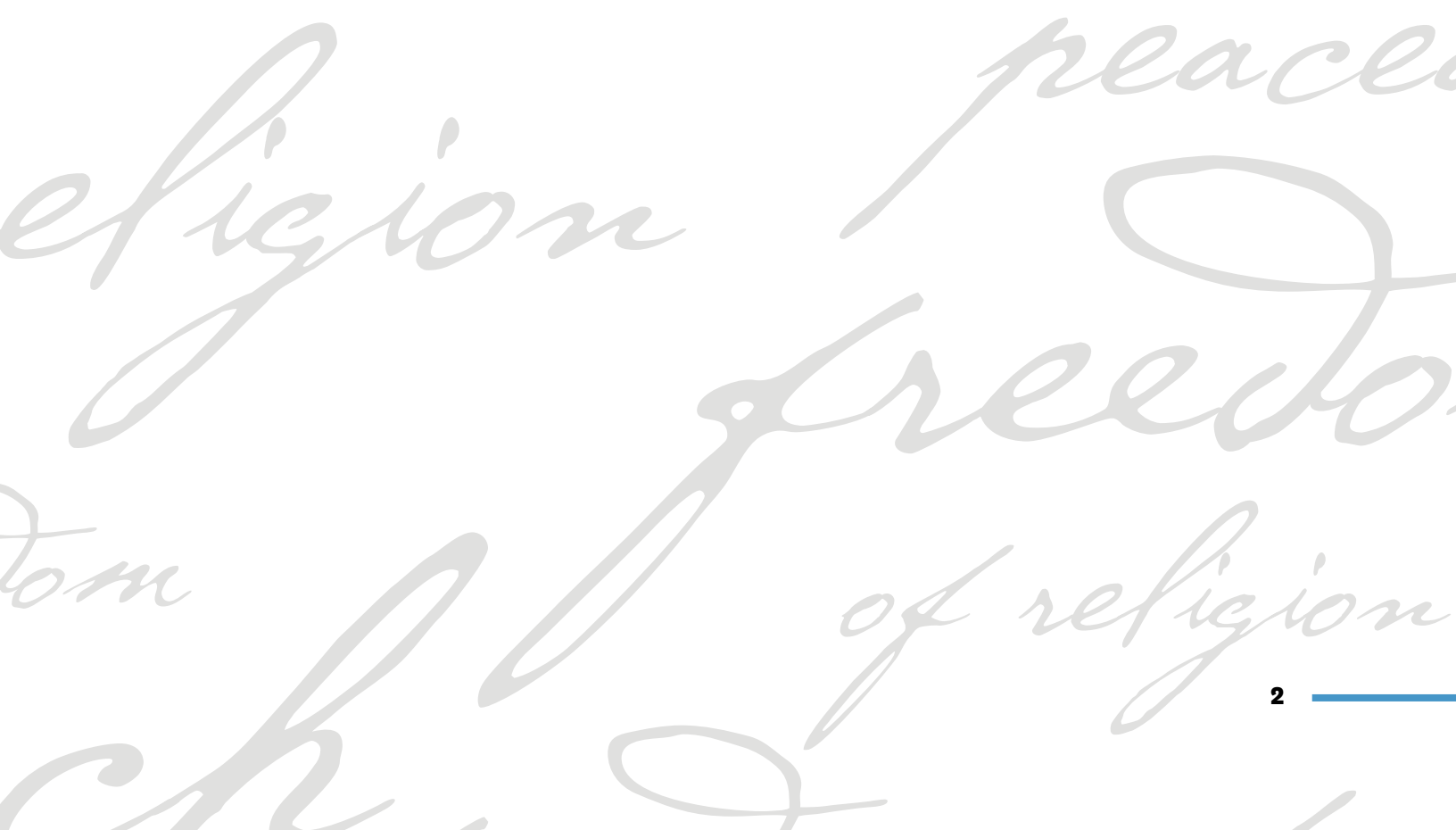


**Educate:** Through creative programs, strong networks and partnerships, and cutting-edge research, we are telling powerful stories about the importance of expressive rights and magnifying FIRE's pro-free speech message to millions of Americans.



**Mobilize:** Through our marketing and outreach programs, we are generating action. We are calling on everyday Americans to join FIRE and become members of the new free speech movement, and giving them the tools and opportunities to begin the campaign to change our culture.

**This report details the success of our inaugural year pursuing this three-part strategy.** None of this success would be possible without the generosity of our donors, and we remain extremely grateful for your support. We hope this report makes you proud to support FIRE.



# Advocate

First and foremost, **FIRE took on eleven litigation cases to defend the First Amendment rights of everyday Americans.**

Highlights include the following lawsuits:

- Against the [City of Eastpointe, Michigan](#), and its mayor, Monique Owens, who repeatedly abused her authority to silence critics during city council meetings.
- Against [two cities in Georgia](#) for stopping, detaining, searching, and arresting Jeff Gray, a U.S. Army veteran, for holding up a sign outside various city halls that read “God Bless the Homeless Vets.”
- Against a [Michigan school district](#), in defense of two K-12 students who were ordered to remove sweatshirts featuring the political slogan, “Let’s Go Brandon.” The incident is part of a pattern of political favoritism by the district, which also ordered a student to stop wearing a Trump flag as a cape, but permitted other students to wear gay pride flags in the same way.



FIRE PLAINTIFF JEFF GRAY

In addition, we sent several demand letters threatening litigation, including on behalf of Adam Martinez, [a resident of Uvalde, Texas](#), whose child was present during last year’s school shooting at Robb Elementary. Adam was banned from public school property for criticizing the Uvalde school district for hiring a police officer deemed ineligible for rehire by the local sheriff’s office.

We also filed 32 *amicus curiae* briefs in strategic First Amendment cases. Our briefs defend the right to [parody](#), [religious associational rights](#), and parents’ rights to [speak up at public school board meetings](#), while addressing many other free speech concerns.

This advocacy has already notched significant victories:

- In response to our [lawsuit](#), a federal judge [ordered](#) Dauphin County and its director of parks and recreation to end an unconstitutional ban on political activity in public parks. We also secured \$91,000 in damages and attorneys’ fees.
- After we [sued](#) the state of New York over a law that unconstitutionally forced website hosts, including our plaintiff Eugene Volokh, to regulate speech on their platforms, a New York judge [halted enforcement](#) of the law while litigation continues.
- While our Eastpointe lawsuit proceeds, the judge signed an order prohibiting Mayor Owens from continuing to suppress criticism.

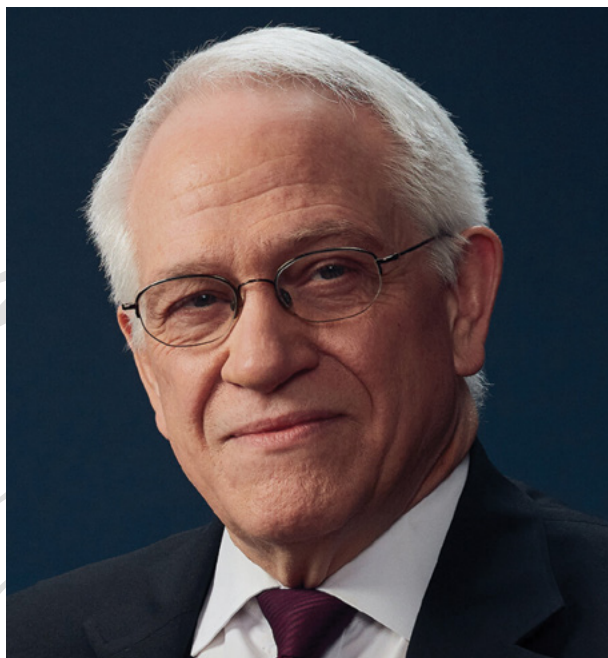
peace  
freedom

FIRE's litigation team has also reviewed more than 800 case submissions and issued more than 440 public records requests to evaluate cases that are ripe for potential legal intervention.

All of this work is being coordinated by a talented all-star team. Most notably, we welcomed [Bob Corn-Revere](#) as FIRE's chief counsel in April. Corn-Revere is one the nation's premier First Amendment attorneys and has successfully litigated some of the highest-profile free speech cases in recent decades. He will bolster FIRE's expanding litigation efforts, mentor FIRE attorneys, and bring our free speech advocacy to new audiences.

**In addition to these litigation efforts, we launched a new department: Public Advocacy.**

This department is helping FIRE shape our positions on some of the biggest issues facing free speech today, and its first major project was to craft [FIRE's position on free speech and social media](#). The department also takes on non-litigation advocacy cases involving threats to individuals' First Amendment rights and seeks to promote free expression as a cultural value. For example, the Public Advocacy team challenged a Florida city's [ban on "political" gatherings](#) of more than 10 people on public property and is now working with this city to help it revise its code to respect free expression.



BOB CORN-REVERE, FIRE'S NEW CHIEF COUNSEL

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*Since our expansion launch last June, we launched four campus lawsuits, secured one settlement, and received several favorable rulings.*

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**We've paired these efforts with our ongoing campus advocacy, which has continued to grow and has been strengthened by our expanded capabilities.** As a result, we have celebrated a number of achievements on campus since our expansion last June:

- In our campus litigation work, we secured one settlement, and received several favorable rulings. In one ruling with a pending appeal, a judge halted enforcement of the provisions of Florida's Stop WOKE Act that violate the First Amendment rights of college students and faculty.
- Our legislative team filed an [89-page comment](#) on the Biden administration's newly proposed Title IX regulations, which threaten campus due process rights.
- In the past year, we achieved a near-record 97 [victories](#) while exploring new and [creative tactics](#) for defending campus rights.
- Our Policy Reform team helped reform 48 campus speech policies on 24 campuses, improving the climate for expression for more than 320,000 students nationwide.

# Educate

As part of our effort to educate the public, we are building networks of key constituents.

Since our expansion:

- The FIRE Student Network grew to more than 7,500 currently enrolled students.
- The FIRE Faculty Network now boasts more than 3,700 members.
- We helped establish pro-free speech alumni groups at nine schools, growing our Alumni Network from less than 1,500 to more than 4,400 members.

Through these networks, FIRE is providing learning opportunities. These include our Faculty Network Conference and our annual summer Internship Program, which recently welcomed eight talented undergraduate students to our Philadelphia office.

We also continue to conduct in-depth research that helps fuel all of our education efforts. That includes the release of our “[Scholars Under Fire](#)” report in April. In addition, we’re gearing up to release 2023’s “College Free Speech Rankings” report, which will include the voices of approximately 55,000 students at more than 250 schools nationwide.

Meanwhile, in the past year, our staff has taken to the pages and airwaves of the nation’s top media outlets to ensure that new audiences understand why free speech is important and what we do to defend it. Highlights of this work include:

- Our expansion announcement, which we made through an exclusive with [POLITICO](#).
- Op-eds in [Newsweek](#), [The Daily Beast](#), [The Detroit News](#), the [New York Post](#), the Minneapolis [Star Tribune](#), and the [Los Angeles Times](#).
- Appearances by FIRE staff and fellows on [FOX News](#), “[Real Time with Bill Maher](#),” and two separate episodes of “[Dr. Phil](#).”

Simply put, FIRE is attracting a lot of attention: **Since our expansion launch, we’ve received more than 7,000 media mentions in a broad spectrum of publications.** Just this year, we have already recorded more media mentions than in the whole of 2022. Highlights of that coverage include mentions by [The New York Times](#), [The Washington Post](#), and [The Wall Street Journal](#).



FIRE PRESIDENT AND CEO GREG LUKIANOFF SPEAKING ON “DR. PHIL”

# Mobilize

Coinciding with our expansion launch, we executed a high-profile advertising campaign, “[Faces of Free Speech](#).” It featured primetime ads on multiple cable news networks, including an [ad spot](#) during the NFL season opener featuring former NFL player and U.S. Army Green Beret Nate Boyer; and billboards in 16 major cities across the country, including [in New York City’s Times Square](#). We placed back-page ads in Reason Magazine, The New York Times Magazine, and National Review; experimented with targeted billboard campaigns in [South Carolina](#) and [Texas](#); and ran an ad featuring [Ice-T](#) during the season premiere of “Law & Order: SVU.”

We also ran a massive “[surround sound](#)” campaign [in Philadelphia](#), featuring [fun](#), [informative](#), and [inspiring](#) ads across television, radio, social media, and billboards all over town.

Notably, this campaign gave us strategic insight into which marketing efforts are the most effective. While our ads ran in Philadelphia, we coordinated a digital-only campaign in Dallas. We conducted surveys before and after our campaigns in Philadelphia, Dallas, and a control city, Chicago, to test individuals’ knowledge of free speech issues and of FIRE itself. Initial results show that the surround sound approach **increased our brand awareness by nearly 250%** — from approximately 7% to 23% — in Philadelphia, compared with a 90% increase in Dallas and no significant increase in Chicago. Among Philadelphia audiences, we also saw a 1,100% increase in email sign-ups and a 76% increase in favorable views toward FIRE.

With that success in mind, we are taking the show on the road and setting up summer campaigns in Chicago and Nashville, two cities that we think have audiences who will be very receptive to our message.



FIRE BILLBOARDS IN TIMES SQUARE

FIRE has also coordinated creative efforts on platforms like TikTok, partnered with outlets such as SPIN magazine to reach “non-traditional” audiences with messages about artistic expression, organized influencer campaigns, invested in video production efforts to grow our footprint on YouTube, and conducted significant digital acquisition work — all of which is geared toward raising awareness of our work in order build a larger subscriber base.

And we are proud to report that we’re well on our way to meeting our goal of reaching one million subscribers and followers by 2025:

- **Since June 2022, we gained more than 190,000 email subscribers, reaching a total of more than 320,000**, putting us on track to meet our goal of reaching 400,000 by 2024.
- **Our social media following nearly doubled across all platforms — with more than 120,000 new followers.** Our TikTok following more than quintupled. More than 3.7 million people visited our website.
- Our videos on YouTube and TikTok amassed more than 15 million views; our [video](#) promoting our lawsuit in Eastpointe, Michigan, racked up more than 1.9 million views on TikTok alone.

And we’re not stopping there. We are working to transform these followers into active supporters. To accomplish this, **we launched our Engagement & Mobilization department** last year. The E&M team coordinates “take-action” campaigns and other opportunities to respond to threats and shift cultural incentives.

Highlights of this department’s work include:

- Coordinating a campaign at Minnesota’s Hamline University to defend an adjunct professor whose contract was not renewed after students complained about her showing a medieval painting of Islam’s prophet Muhammad in her art history course. Our campaign resulted in supporters writing more than 2,100 letters to Hamline’s president and more than 400 faculty members worldwide signing an [open letter](#) to Hamline advocating for reinstating the professor.
- Rallying nearly 1,700 people to email [Puffin Books](#) to dissuade it from scrubbing Roald Dahl’s classic children’s books of language that today’s readers might find offensive. We were proud to be part of the chorus of voices that pressured Puffin to preserve the original edition alongside a “sensitized” version.
- Celebrating E&M-supported alumni groups’ successful efforts to persuade [MIT](#) and [Davidson College](#) to officially adopt statements of commitment to free expression.
- Rallying hundreds of supporters to write to the mayor of Franklin, Tennessee, challenging Franklin’s proposed “community decency” policy, which threatened freedom of expression. The Franklin Board of Mayor and Alderman chose, unanimously, to withdraw the policy.





# Celebrating FIRE's New Era

By any measure, FIRE's inaugural year of this new era has been an overwhelming success. So, we decided to celebrate with a gala on April 18 in New York City. More than 500 allies, friends, and free speech luminaries joined us to look back on all that we've accomplished since 1999, celebrate free speech, and honor those who've stood with us to fight for this fundamental right.

One of those individuals was Mary Hall-Rayford, a plaintiff in our lawsuit in Eastpointe, Michigan. At the gala, Mary shared these words:

Change doesn't happen when people just sit idly by. And this is why I'm grateful for FIRE contacting me, and making sure that not just those of us involved in the lawsuit have our rights protected, but people in every community across the nation. [B]ecause of [FIRE], we have a chance just like everyone else, to freely exercise our freedom of speech.

Mary reminds us that behind each FIRE case are real people whose lives and aspirations are upended by censorship and cancellation campaigns. FIRE's work ensures that people like Mary can stand up for their rights and reclaim their lives — all while pushing back against the culture of illiberalism that threatens our liberty and democracy.

Of course, we couldn't do any of this without the incredible support of our donors. We hope this report makes you proud of all we've accomplished in this exciting first year of carrying out our expanded mission.

And we're just getting started. Together with our donors and allies, we'll continue giving our all to defend First Amendment rights and build a movement to restore free speech as a core American value.



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