



# E5S6 No Longer Waiting for Top Down Reform

Over the past few years, voters across the U.S. have elected prosecutors who promised to implement much-needed criminal justice reforms, from decriminalizing marijuana to ending cash bail. Journalist Ruxandra Guidi revisits her reporting on the election of a new prosecutor in Houston two years ago, and chronicles how activists, relatives of incarcerated people, and local residents are changing strategies and pushing for reform.

A PODCAST BY

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# The Story

Kim Ogg campaigned on a progressive platform, but critics say many reforms never materialized. Advocates are taking it upon themselves to make change happen.



Attorney Audia Jones stands in front of the 1910 Harris County Courthouse in Houston, Texas. Photo: Christopher Rojas

**“I know what needs to be fixed. I know how it can be fixed. I know how much authority the district attorney has, which is literally, they’re the most powerful actors in our criminal justice system, especially here in Harris County. So that’s why I decided to run.”**

-Audia Jones, candidate for Harris County D.A.

Four years ago, Kim Ogg was elected District Attorney for Harris County, Texas, where the city of Houston is located. But after campaigning on a platform of progressive change, critics say many reforms never materialized. Former supporters Audia Jones and Caravana Cloud ended up running against her. They understood the power of the office to create change from within, and were disappointed when Ogg failed to deliver.

It’s a phenomenon that other grassroots reformers say is familiar: candidates who promise progressive change but don’t get the job done. Grassroots organizers are working to drive movement on issues like ending cash bail, restoring the rights of the formerly incarcerated, and abolishing the death penalty. Of particular note is the movement among formerly incarcerated people and their families to advocate on their own behalf, rejecting the notion that change has to come from the top.

# The Mission

Involve formerly incarcerated people and their families in advocating for critical reforms that affect them and their communities.

**“Now there's this big push for folks who are formerly incarcerated to have a space to talk about their experience and use that experience to pass policies and laws, and also directly impacted individuals. But you know, families' experience is different than somebody who's been incarcerated. So I really think, you know, it's a different experience, but we still need to have a seat at the table.”**

**-Savannah Elridge, Be Frank 4 Justice**

The formerly incarcerated and their families bring knowledge, communication and valuable networking skills to the table that can help advance progressive agendas much more quickly. For example, Houston activist and healthcare worker Savannah Elridge, whose two brothers and step-son are incarcerated, is working to get air conditioning for inmates in the summer, and sanitary pads for inmates who menstruate. Elridge created the organization Be Frank 4 Justice to further her mission.

Devin Branch, who works for the Texas Organizing Project, says this engagement is critical, not only because of the passion and commitment that such volunteers bring to the issues, but because they understand them with a level of complexity and nuance that no one else can. That means when the group meets with candidates for office or works for change on the ground, they understand what to ask for. What's more, they have connections within their communities to involve others who may have been impacted, taking people who may have felt forgotten or been disenfranchised, and joining them to create a powerful political block.

The movement is gaining purchase across the country: Daryl Atkinson, a formerly-incarcerated North Carolina-based activist, is the co-director of Forward Justice and serves on the steering committee of the Formerly Incarcerated Convicted People and Families Movement (FICPFM). Atkinson says that the members of the movement have to write their own story. “Look at history, whenever we wanted to do something bad to a group of people, to debase their humanity, you use images and names to dehumanize them. Then, when you do the bad thing, it's justified because they were subhuman.”



Local activist and healthcare worker Savannah Elridge pictured outside of the John P. McGovern Texas Medical Center in Houston, Texas.  
Photo: Christopher Rojas

# The Strategy

Work from within the communities most impacted to restore rights, and use their perspective to strengthen the work



Days after Houston native George Floyd was killed, tens of thousands of protestors marched through the streets of Houston. Photo: Christopher Rojas

**“Movements have to be led by the people most directly impacted, that’s the only way you win. The family members who have suffered have to be at the moral center. Anything else starts sounding paternalistic, as if someone else has to deliver us to our freedom.”**

**-Daryl Atkinson, Co-Director of Forward Justice**

Activists who are formerly incarcerated and their family members bring unique skills and perspectives to the table. To accomplish a broader goal of progressive reform, organizations like the Texas Organizing Project are using these abilities strategically.

## **First-hand knowledge of what must change:**

From the need for sanitary pads for inmates, to the lack of COVID testing inside of prisons and jails, these advocates understand the specific needs of incarcerated individuals better than anyone, and can point them out.

## **Networking:**

When working to further a community’s interests, these activists have the ability to bring other stakeholders on board and involve them in creating a larger movement. Their personal experiences resonate in a way that abstract campaigns do not, and when they speak directly to their own communities, they are listened to.

## **Changing the narrative:**

Activists like Daryl Atkinson say that changing the stories we tell about incarcerated people, including the language that’s used to describe them, can be a powerful strategic tool. That means doing away with derogatory language like “ex-convict” or “ex-offender,” and ending the justifications for treating those who have been incarcerated as anything less than human. “With any reform movement, narrative and cultural change have to be a part of it,” Atkinson said.

## **Forcing institutions to pay attention:**

Spending time in an institution like a jail or prison can lead to isolation, but organizations like the Texas Organizing Project say that by joining together, formerly incarcerated people can force candidates for office to recognize them as a powerful voting block, forcing change from inside institutions as well as from outside.

# Resources

Forward Justice, a nonpartisan law, policy and strategy center, helps formerly incarcerated people learn more about whether they have the right to vote. You can find out more information here: <https://forwardjustice.org/stories/2020-voting-resources/>  
You can also participate in one of Forward Justice's Saturday phone banking parties: <https://forwardjustice.org/eventscalendar/>

Formerly Incarcerated Convicted People and Families Movement is a network of organizations across the country using their voices and experiences to drive positive change. Use their national network to connect with an organization close to you: <https://ficpfm.org/network/>  
You can also learn more about their four main priorities here: <https://ficpfm.org/network/#national-policy-priorities>

The Texas Organizing Project, which works to elevate the voices of Black and Latino communities and ensure that they have the power to advance their causes. You can learn more about the issues they advocate for, donate, or sign up to volunteer: <https://organizetexas.org/about-top/>

Organizer for Texas Organizing Project, Terrance Koontz visits his beloved alma mater Willowridge High School in Houston, TX.  
Photo: Christopher Rojas



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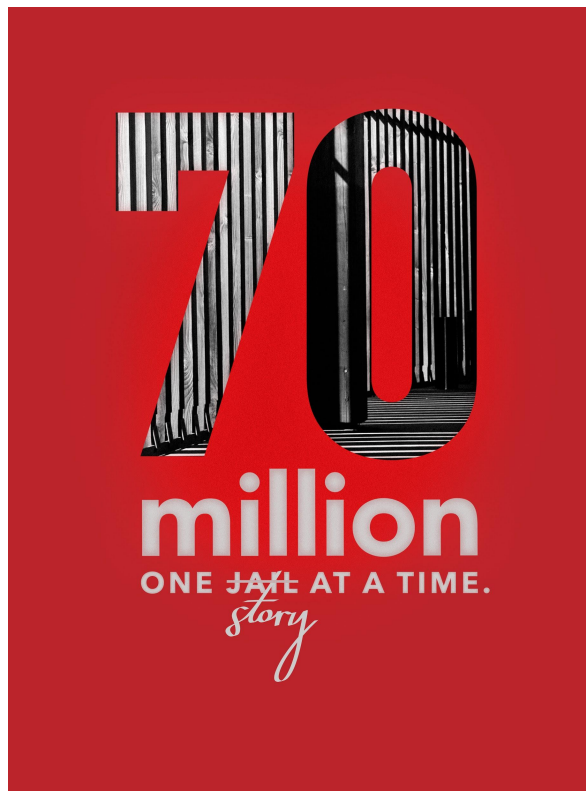
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