



A LITTLE BIRD

I spy with my little eye

TOOLKIT · TK-002 · PUBLIC DOMAIN USE

Good Trouble

Justice League · Local Accountability Toolkit

A field manual for civic action when the federal capture is too advanced for federal solutions. Strategic, sourced, sustained pressure at the city, county, and state level. Companion piece to "What They Take When They Take the Fourteenth." The roadmap exists. Someone has to walk it.

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BY A LITTLE BIRD

FOR THE ONES WHO WILL WALK IT

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Frame

JOHN LEWIS · 1940 TO 2020

"Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America."

Good trouble is strategic. Good trouble is intentional. Good trouble is public, sourced, sustained, and disciplined. Good trouble is not vandalism. Good trouble is not chaos. Good trouble is what happens when citizens decide that the system has stopped enforcing its own rules and someone has to show up and witness the breakdown out loud.

This toolkit is the operational companion to "What They Take When They Take the Fourteenth." That piece argues the federal courts are not going to save anyone, Congress is not going to save anyone, and the remaining defense is local, county-level, state-level civic action sustained over years. This toolkit shows you how to actually run that defense.

The methodology is not new. The Civil Rights Movement built it. The Freedom Riders refined it. John Lewis named it. Saul Alinsky wrote it down. Gene Sharp catalogued 198 versions of it. Marshall Ganz taught it through the United Farm Workers. The Movement for Black Lives extended it. The mutual aid networks of 2020 stress-tested it. It is your inheritance. The only question is whether you are willing to use it.

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Why local accountability matters now

Federal capture is advanced. Six of the nine Supreme Court justices were vetted through the Federalist Society pipeline. The administrative state is being purged through Schedule F and parallel mechanisms. Project 2025 is operational. The information layer is consolidated in the hands of a small number of family-owned media networks running on cloud infrastructure owned by the same families. The Voting Rights Act has been gutted. The Fourteenth Amendment is being dismantled by executive reinterpretation.

The remaining defense is local. Every county supervisor session, school board meeting, library board meeting, election commission meeting, planning commission session is a chokepoint where decisions about how power gets distributed in your community are made. Most of them happen with empty seats. Most of them are not covered by any reporter. Most of them are decided by whichever side bothered to show up.

You can change that by showing up. So can four people you trust. Together you are a cell. A cell with discipline becomes a network. A network with a track record becomes a coalition. A coalition with sustained presence becomes the political reality the local power structure has to negotiate with.

THE MATH

Most local boards have 5 to 9 voting members. Most local meetings have fewer than 20 attendees. A 5-person cell that shows up consistently for 12 months produces more cumulative influence than 5,000 people who post about the issue on social media for 12 months. The math is not flattering. It is operational.

The five-person cell model

Civil rights organizing has always run on small disciplined cells, not mass mobilization. You do not need a national organization. You do not need a foundation grant. You need five people who see what you see and are willing to commit time. Pick one target. Document. Walk. Witness. Show up. Scale.

Cell composition

- **Coordinator.** Owns the schedule, contact list, and meeting calendar. The point of contact for other cells.
- **Researcher.** Owns the public records. OpenSecrets, FollowTheMoney, MapLight, FOIA, state filings. Knows who owns the target and why.
- **Documenter.** Owns the witnessing protocols. Video, photos, notes, chain of custody. Trained on legal observer standards.
- **Connector.** Owns the relationships. Other cells, statewide organizations, legal partners, journalists. The handshake function.
- **Frontline.** Owns the public-comment and in-person presence role. The visible face of the cell at meetings.

The roles overlap. Cell members rotate. The structure exists so that no single person carries the entire burden and no single person becomes a single point of failure.

Cell discipline

- Weekly check-in (30 minutes, scheduled, predictable)
- Monthly target review
- Quarterly coalition coordination
- One person speaks at the meeting; others document, support, witness
- No internal drama on public channels
- Disagreements resolved offline
- Decisions made by consensus where possible, by coordinator when consensus stalls

Target selection

You cannot accountability-pressure every local body simultaneously. You pick one. You learn its calendar, its members, its donors, its decision pattern, its choke points. You show up consistently. You become known. Then you scale to a second target with a different cell sharing your methodology.

High-leverage local targets

- **City council.** Zoning, policing, housing, public health, contracting. The closest direct decision-making body to most residents' daily lives.
- **School board.** Curriculum, library policy, book bans, district lines, contracting, surveillance technology in schools. The site of the curriculum capture fight.
- **County board of supervisors / commissioners.** Healthcare, elections administration, sheriff's office oversight, contracting, jail conditions, social services.
- **Election commission / county clerk.** Voter rolls, polling place decisions, mail-in ballot processing, certification.
- **Library board.** Library policy, book challenges, programming, funding decisions. Currently a primary battlefield in the curriculum fight.
- **Planning commission.** Land use, zoning variances, development approvals, environmental review.
- **Sheriff's accountability board / police review board.** Where they exist, the direct oversight body for local law enforcement.
- **Public utility commission.** Rate increases, infrastructure decisions, AI datacenter load impacts on residential rates.
- **Hospital board.** Where the local hospital is publicly owned, the board controls service decisions in healthcare deserts.

Choosing your target

Pick the body where (a) the decisions matter, (b) the current attendance is low, (c) your cell has at least one member with personal connection to the issue, and (d) the meeting schedule fits your cell's capacity. A school board meeting at 7pm on a Tuesday is operationally sustainable. A planning commission at 9am on a Wednesday is not, unless your cell has retirees or self-employed members.

Research methodology · the public-source toolkit

Before you confront a local body, you need to know who owns it. Most local officials have political donors. Most have business relationships. Most have ideological affiliations. All of that is on the public record. Most of it is searchable for free.

Political money

OpenSecrets

[opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org)

Federal political contributions, PAC and super PAC data, congressional financial disclosures, lobbying spending.

FollowTheMoney (National Institute on Money in Politics)

[followthemoney.org](https://www.followthemoney.org)

State-level political contributions. The state-equivalent of OpenSecrets. Critical for school board, county supervisor, and state legislative research.

MapLight

[maplight.org](https://www.maplight.org)

Connects donor money to legislative votes. The translation layer from money in to policy out.

FEC.gov

[fec.gov](https://www.fec.gov)

Federal Election Commission filings. Direct primary source for federal political contributions and PAC filings.

Government contracts and spending

USASpending.gov

[usaspending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov)

Federal contracts, grants, loans. Search by recipient, agency, location, dollar amount, or contract type.

SAM.gov

sam.gov

Federal procurement opportunities and registered government contractors. Use to verify federal contractor identity claims.

Nonprofit and dark money tracking

ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer

projects.propublica.org/nonprofits

IRS Form 990 lookups for every registered 501(c)(3), (c)(4), and similar tax-exempt organization. Shows officers, contractors, top recipients, and major donors when disclosed.

Conservative Transparency

conservativetransparency.org

Donor and grant relationships between conservative nonprofits and political organizations. Useful for mapping movement-conservative funding flows.

Investigative methodology

Muckrock

muckrock.com

FOIA and state public records request platform. Free templates, request tracking, and a public record of others' requests on related topics.

Bellingcat

bellingcat.com

Open-source intelligence methodology and training. Geolocation, video verification, network analysis. The benchmark for citizen investigation discipline.

Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press

rcfp.org

Free legal hotline for journalists and citizen investigators. FOIA assistance, libel and defamation guidance, source protection.

Property and court records

County Assessor / Recorder sites

[\[county-specific\]](#)

Property ownership, deed transfers, parcel maps, tax assessments. Every US county has one; search "[county name] assessor" or "recorder."

PACER (Public Access to Court Electronic Records)

pacer.uscourts.gov

Federal court filings. Charges per page but free under 30 USD per quarter. Critical for federal civil and criminal docket research.

CourtListener

courtlister.com

Free access to federal court opinions and many state court records. Run by the nonprofit Free Law Project.

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Public meeting tactics

Before the meeting

- Find the agenda. Most local bodies post 72 hours in advance per state open meetings law.
- Identify the specific agenda item your cell is addressing.
- Sign up for public comment (often required in advance; some bodies allow walk-up).
- Coordinate which cell member will speak. Others document and witness.
- Prepare your three-minute statement. Most bodies enforce a strict three-minute limit. Write it. Time it. Trim it.
- Bring printed copies of any source documents for the board record.

At the meeting

- Arrive 15 minutes early. Take a visible seat.
- Document attendance and quorum.

- Document each board member's behavior during the relevant agenda item.
- Speak when your turn comes. Stay disciplined on the three-minute limit.
- Stay for the vote. Document the roll call.
- Stay for the next agenda item. Visible continued presence matters.

After the meeting

- Within 24 hours: post your cell's documentation publicly (cell website, social channel, shared coalition directory).
- Within 72 hours: file public records requests for any documents referenced during the meeting that were not posted.
- Within 7 days: write a short summary for your network distribution.
- Identify the next meeting on the calendar. Repeat.

SHOWING UP BEATS SHOWING OUT

Boards expect outrage. Outrage is dismissable. What boards do not expect is showing up next month. And the month after. And the month after that. Documentation continuity is the lever. Outrage is just noise.

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Public comment best practices

Three minutes. The board has heard everything. They are not waiting to be educated. They are waiting to vote and go home. Your job is to make staying through your three minutes the most informative use of those three minutes the board has had this month.

Structure that works

1. **Identify yourself.** Name, district, constituency you represent (if any).
2. **State the specific item.** Agenda item number and your position.
3. **Source the position.** One piece of public-record evidence the board has not seen.
4. **Name the precedent or consequence.** What happens if they vote one way versus the other.
5. **Close with a specific ask.** Not "do the right thing." Specific. "Vote no on item 7." "Refer item 7 to legal review." "Postpone the vote until the next meeting."

What does not work

- Generalized outrage
- Personal insults of board members
- Reading prepared statements that have already been delivered by previous speakers
- Going over time (the chair will cut you off and the recording will catch it)
- Threats or implied threats (subject to criminal statute in most states)
- Crying without a clear ask

What also works

- Personal disclosure relevant to the issue, briefly
- Reading a single short quote from the board's own prior statements that contradicts the proposed vote
- Naming specific donor relationships (sourced) where they create conflicts of interest
- Stating what your cell will do in response to either outcome

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FOIA and public records requests

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA, 5 USC § 552) covers federal agencies. Every state has its own equivalent public records law. The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press maintains the definitive state-by-state guide at rcfp.org.

What you can request

- Records, documents, emails, memos, drafts, calendars, meeting notes
- Contracts, invoices, grant agreements, MOUs
- Studies, reports, internal analyses
- Text messages on government devices (in most states)
- Body camera footage, surveillance footage from public property
- Statistical and aggregate data

What is typically exempt

- Personnel records (with significant variation by state)
- Active investigation records (FOIA Exemption 7)

- Attorney-client communications
- National security records (Exemption 1)
- Records held by purely private entities (with some hybrid-entity exceptions)

Sample request template

FOIA / PUBLIC RECORDS REQUEST · TEMPLATE

[Your name and contact information]

[Date]

[Agency FOIA Officer or Records Custodian]

[Agency Name]

[Agency Address]

RE: Freedom of Information Act Request / [State] Public Records Act Request

Dear [Records Officer]:

Under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 USC § 552 [or your state equivalent statute], I request the following records:

[Describe records with specificity: date range, topic, type of document, named individuals or entities if applicable.]

I am willing to pay reasonable processing fees up to \$[amount]. If processing costs will exceed this amount, please notify me before proceeding.

I request a fee waiver under [agency-specific public interest provision]. The records sought relate to [public interest purpose, e.g., government accountability, public health, etc.].

Please provide responsive records in electronic format where possible. If portions are withheld, please provide a redaction log with specific exemptions cited.

The applicable response deadline is [20 working days for federal FOIA; state-specific].

Sincerely,

[Your name]

BUILD A REQUEST PORTFOLIO

One request opens one document set. Twenty requests filed concurrently across your cell, the parallel cell in the next county, and the statewide network produce a research base no single body can ignore. File regularly. Track responses. Appeal denials.

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Documentation and witnessing protocols

Your right to record

Federal courts have consistently held that recording public officials performing their public duties in public places is a First Amendment-protected activity. The leading cases are *Glik v. Cunniffe* (1st Cir. 2011), *ACLU v. Alvarez* (7th Cir. 2012), *Fields v. City of Philadelphia* (3rd Cir. 2017), and *Turner v. Driver* (5th Cir. 2017). Eight federal circuits now recognize the right. The remaining circuits have not definitively ruled the other way.

State wiretapping laws complicate audio recording in two-party-consent states. Eleven states require all parties to consent to audio recording: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Washington. The exemption for recording public officials in public has been litigated in most of these states; consult your state's current case law before recording in non-public settings.

Video documentation protocols

- Identify yourself if asked. Recording does not require permission but identification can defuse confrontation.
- Hold the camera steady and at a normal angle. Avoid theatrical framing.
- Capture context: location, time, identifying signage, identifying badges if visible.
- Do not interfere with official activity. Maintain reasonable distance.
- If ordered to stop recording: state, on camera, that you are exercising your First Amendment right. Do not surrender the recording device. Do not delete footage. Do not assault or resist if the device is taken; document the seizure and consult counsel.
- Back up footage to a cloud destination within 24 hours.
- Preserve original metadata (date, time, GPS where applicable).

Note-taking standards

- Date, time, location at the top of every entry
- Names of all officials present (use rosters or name tents)
- Verbatim quotes in quotation marks; paraphrased summaries clearly marked
- Time stamps for major events within the meeting
- Witness names for any incidents requiring follow-up
- Distinguish observations (what you saw) from inferences (what you concluded)

Digital security basics

- Signal for cell-internal communication (signal.org)
- Encrypted cloud storage (Proton Drive, Cryptee, Tresorit)
- Strong, unique passwords with a password manager (Bitwarden, 1Password)
- Two-factor authentication on every account (preferably hardware key, secondarily authenticator app, last resort SMS)
- Full-disk encryption on laptops (FileVault, BitLocker, LUKS)
- No sensitive cell communication on Facebook Messenger, Instagram DMs, SMS, or unencrypted email

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Nonviolent direct action principles

Nonviolent direct action is a discipline, not an aesthetic. The discipline came from the Civil Rights Movement (King, Lewis, Nash, Hamer, Rustin, Lawson) and was systematized by Gene Sharp in 198 specific methods. Modern movements have extended it. The principles below are non-negotiable. Action that violates these principles is not nonviolent direct action. It is something else.

PRINCIPLE 01

Nonviolence is active resistance to evil. It is not passive acceptance.

PRINCIPLE 02

The target is the system, not the person inside the system. You can defeat injustice without dehumanizing the official enforcing it.

PRINCIPLE 03

Suffering is redemptive only when it is willing, public, and disciplined. Random suffering is not strategic. Manufactured drama is not strategic. Visible willingness to accept the cost of moral action is strategic.

PRINCIPLE 04

Internal violence destroys the movement faster than external violence. Discipline, training, jail support, and de-escalation training are not optional.

PRINCIPLE 05

The universe bends toward justice only when someone pushes. Hope is not a strategy. Action is.

The 198 methods

Gene Sharp's *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973) catalogued 198 specific methods of nonviolent action across three categories: protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and direct intervention. The list is in the public domain and available free at the Albert Einstein Institution (aeinstein.org). Read it. Most of the methods are not what you think of when you think "protest." Most are quiet, structural, and replicable by a five-person cell.

Training resources

Beautiful Trouble

beautifultrouble.org

Tactical toolbox of creative nonviolent action methods, principles, and case studies. The modern complement to Gene Sharp.

Highlander Research and Education Center

highlandercenter.org

The training center where Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Septima Clark, and many others trained. Continues movement education today.

Wildfire Project

wildfireproject.org

Year-long organizing training programs for emerging organizers in social movements.

Training for Change

trainingforchange.org

Direct action training, facilitation skills, group dynamics, and movement strategy.

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Know your rights

First Amendment protections

The First Amendment protects speech, press, assembly, petition, and (by inference) recording public officials. The protection is strongest in "traditional public forums" (streets, sidewalks, parks) and weakest on private property. "Time, place, and manner" restrictions are allowed as long as they are content-neutral, narrowly tailored, and leave open alternative channels.

If you are stopped by police

- **You have the right to remain silent.** "I am exercising my right to remain silent. I want to speak with a lawyer." Then stop talking.
- **You do not have to consent to a search.** "I do not consent to any searches." Say it once, clearly, then stop.

- **Ask if you are free to go.** If yes, leave. If no, you are being detained and have the right to know why.
- **Do not physically resist.** Even unlawful arrests should be challenged in court, not in the street.
- **Memorize: badge numbers, names, patrol car numbers, time, location, witness contact information.**

If you are arrested

- Remain silent beyond identifying yourself.
- Request a lawyer immediately. Repeat the request if questioned.
- Do not sign anything until you have spoken with a lawyer.
- You have the right to make a phone call. Use it on jail support, not family (jail support manages family notification with better discipline).
- Your cell's jail support contact should be programmed into your phone and memorized.

Recording public officials

Confirm your state's two-party / one-party consent rules for audio. Video of public officials in public spaces is constitutionally protected in every federal circuit that has ruled on the question. Recording in your own private property is universally allowed.

Key resources

ACLU "Know Your Rights"

aclu.org/know-your-rights

Comprehensive guides on rights at protests, when stopped by police, during searches, at the border, and online.

National Lawyers Guild

nlg.org

Legal observer training, mass defense, and the National Lawyers Guild hotline numbers for arrest support.

Safe protest practices

Before

- Buddy system: every cell member has a designated partner
- Check-in time established in advance; if a member misses check-in, jail support is contacted
- Emergency contacts written on your arm in permanent marker if there is any risk of phone loss
- Identify hospital, jail, and legal observer pre-positioned locations
- Identify de-escalators within your group
- Identify the action's clear end point and dispersal plan

Bring

- Water (sealed, in a clear container)
- Snacks (sealed, individually packaged)
- Cash (small bills)
- Government-issued ID (if your status is secure and you have weighed the trade-off)
- A fully charged phone with Signal installed and jail support number programmed
- Comfortable closed shoes
- Layers (weather-appropriate)
- A simple first-aid kit if you are trained in first aid

Do not bring

- Drugs, alcohol, or anything illegal
- Anything that could be construed as a weapon (including some umbrellas with sharp tips, certain camping tools)
- Contact lenses if there is any chance of chemical agent deployment (use glasses)
- Hair products with oil base (concentrate chemical irritants)
- Personal effects you cannot afford to lose
- Anyone you cannot vouch for

If chemical agents are deployed

- Walk, do not run. Running increases respiration and exposure.
- Move upwind and to higher ground if possible.
- Do not touch your face or eyes.
- Flush eyes with water or saline. Do not use milk or baking soda solutions (debated in medical literature; sterile saline is the consensus).
- Remove contaminated clothing when safe. Wash skin with cool water and unscented soap.
- Seek medical attention if symptoms persist beyond an hour or if breathing becomes labored.

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Coalition building · cell to network to movement

Cell

Five people. One target. Sustained engagement.

Network

Three to five cells, each working on parallel targets. Regular coordination (monthly). Shared documentation pipeline. Shared research infrastructure. Shared legal partners.

Coalition

Five or more networks across a region or state. Coordinated public messaging on shared targets. Joint statewide campaigns where strategic. Cross-issue solidarity (housing, healthcare, climate, immigration, education).

Movement

Multiple coalitions across multiple states acting in coordination on a shared set of demands. The Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War movement, the Movement for Black Lives. Movements are not built quickly. They are built by coalitions that survive the inevitable internal conflicts long enough to consolidate.

Avoiding capture and co-option

- Be wary of foundation funding that comes with strings (most does)

- Be wary of party-aligned organizations that want to absorb your cell into their candidate operation
- Be wary of "professional" organizers parachuted in from outside who do not understand your local terrain
- Keep your cell's decision-making structure intact even when you accept outside resources
- Rotate leadership regularly. Concentration of authority is a vulnerability.

Securing leadership turnover

The Civil Rights Movement lost momentum after assassinations and burnout took out its most visible leaders. Modern movements have learned: distribute leadership. Rotate spokespeople. Document institutional knowledge. Train successors. The movement does not depend on any single person staying in the work.

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Mutual aid as resistance architecture

Mutual aid is not charity. Mutual aid is what communities do when the systems that were supposed to take care of them stop functioning. In the capture transition, mutual aid is resistance architecture: a parallel economy of care that reduces the population's dependence on systems that are being weaponized against them.

Forms of mutual aid

- **Food.** Community fridges, food sharing networks, mutual aid grocery runs, garden cooperatives.
- **Transportation.** Rideshare for medical appointments, court dates, voting, asylum hearings.
- **Childcare.** Pod-based childcare, court-appearance childcare, school-pickup mutual aid.
- **Legal support.** Jail support, bail funds, attorney coordination, legal observer networks.
- **Mental health.** Peer support networks, trained mental health first aid, community-based crisis response alternatives to police.
- **Medical.** Street medic networks, harm reduction supplies, medication-sharing where legal.
- **Housing.** Sanctuary housing networks for asylum seekers and others at risk of detention.
- **Documentation.** Notary networks, citizenship-documentation drives, vital-records replacement support.

Connecting to existing mutual aid networks

Mutual Aid Hub

mutualaidhub.org

Searchable directory of mutual aid networks across the United States. Search by city or zip code.

Big Door Brigade

bigdoorbrigade.com

Mutual aid resource hub built by Dean Spade. Reading list, toolkits, network directory.

Community Bail Funds

communityjusticeexchange.org/national-bail-fund-network

National Bail Fund Network. Find your local bail fund. Donate. Volunteer.

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