



The Leadership Conference
on Civil and Human Rights

Civil Rights Messaging Toolkit & Memo:







Speaking Out Despite Government Censorship & Threats



Introduction

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, joined by more than 100 civil rights, faith and labor organizations, has released a unified statement titled "**Civil Rights Groups Will Not Be Silenced**" ([read the full statement here](#)) in response to the Trump administration's exploitation of recent violence to threaten civil rights and nonprofit organizations. Our movement is rooted in nonviolence. ***This is an attempt to threaten, criminalize, intimidate, and censor those who advocate for civil rights and government accountability.***

This messaging toolkit provides poll-tested and social science-backed messaging and guidance to help us tell our story on our own terms. It relies on research from the following sources:

-  [Trump's National Guard Deployment: A Guide for Advocates](#) - Navigator Research (September 18, 2025)
 -  MEMO: Responding to Latest Government Weaponization Efforts - [Americans Against Government Censorship](#) (AAGC) & IMPACT Research (September 18, 2025)
 -  [Messaging MAGA Regime Efforts to Silence Those who Serve Our Communities](#) - ASO Communications (2025)
 -  [Guide to Messaging Our Freedoms](#) - ASO Communications (2025)
 -  [The Fierce Urgency of Now: Messages that Advance Diversity and Equal Opportunity](#) - The Leadership Conference (March 2025)
 -  ["Catalyzing Conversations to Promote Opportunity"](#) - Perceptions Institute, et al. (September 2023)
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What the Administration is Trying to Do

Their pattern:

Create a crisis, blame vulnerable communities and their advocates, and aggressively focus on communities of color, immigrants, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ people. The administration is manufacturing fear to justify an unconstitutional and anti-civil rights agenda. Here's how:

- **They exploit violence to attack civil rights and whitewash hate speech and bias**
 - Using isolated incidents to justify broad crackdowns on peaceful advocacy and constitutional rights
- **They spread disinformation claiming crime is out of control**
 - Despite declining violent crime rates in most major cities, to justify militarization
- **They're militarizing our communities**



- Deploying National Guard and federal agents to cities
- **They're escalating, not solving**
 - Americans' biggest concerns are that Trump will "keep escalating and creating chaos" and that "more liberal leaning cities are next" [Navigator Research, September 2025]
- **They are outwardly censoring free speech**
 - Using the power of the federal regulatory system and federal law enforcement to violate First Amendment rights. That includes undermining content moderation on hate while demanding censorship of legitimate speech on hate and bias.



Do's and Don'ts of Responding

DO:

- **Stay disciplined** - We condemn all violence while defending our right to peaceful advocacy
- **Center civil and human rights** - We speak from our principles of a rights-rich, diverse, inclusive, fair and just society that abhors hate and bias and fights for unity.
- **Center constitutional rights** - First Amendment protects speech, assembly, and petition
- **Make it universal, relatable and accessible** - This threatens churches, unions, community groups - everyone [AAGC memo: "veterans' halls could be shuttered, churches and mosques could lose tax status, and food banks could be dragged into court"; ASO Communications: "from those who run animal shelters and soup kitchens, to those who ensure all of our voices are heard and our rights are respected"]
- **Use plain language** - Avoid jargon, speak to regular people's concerns [ASO Communications: Avoid "NGOs," "501c3 organizations" - speak of "people who serve our communities" instead]
- **Address legitimate safety concerns** - Acknowledge that people want safe communities while showing that militarization and crackdowns don't deliver safety [Navigator Research: progressives who acknowledge crime concerns and offer solutions win by 28 points]
- **Frame as "abuse of power"** - Polling shows 86% of voters say abuse of power by government officials is a big concern [AAGC/IMPACT Research, September 2025]
- **Document who faces real violence** - Our communities experience hate crimes at the highest rates, not the other way around

DON'T:

- **Get pulled into debates about particular victims of political violence**- Simply condemn violence and pivot to constitutional issues
- **Act defensively** - Assert rights confidently without apologizing for our work
- **Amplify their framing** - Don't repeat "terrorist" accusations, control our narrative
- **Assume people understand** - Clearly explain why this threatens everyone's rights
- **Lead with problems and disparities** - Research shows messages predicting steep declines in opportunities can discourage applications and reinforce stereotypes [Catalyzing Conversations]



Four-Step Message Framework Examples

The Four-Step Message framework is an adaptation of guidance from ASO Communications Freedom Guide and the Perceptions Institute's Catalyzing Conversations Guide, intended for a civil rights audience. This is further explained in "The Fierce Urgency of Now," a messaging guide published by The Leadership Conference in 2025.

Step 1: Lead with Shared Civil Rights Values

- **Why? Ground conversations in what unites us before addressing what divides us.**
 - Cross-racial solidarity messaging that explicitly names multiple groups consistently outperforms generic "everyone" language [Freedoms Guide]. This approach builds on research from the Perceptions Institute, which shows that "goal framing" significantly outperforms "outcome framing" across all demographics. Specifically, 60% of young respondents expressed hope about college acceptance compared to only 37% with outcome-based messaging [Catalyzing Conversations].
 - **Sample messages:**
 1. The [coalition statement](#) starts with: "Whether we're Black, White, Brown, Latino, Asian, Arab, or Indigenous, Native or newcomer, LGBTQ+ or not, disabled or not, we believe in the freedom to speak out against injustice, organize for change, and fight hate and discrimination through peaceful means."
 2. "No matter our politics, we share a belief in the protections of our Constitution - that the government should not be permitted to silence and censor organizations just because they disagree with them."
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Step 2: Name the Opposition's Actions

- **Why? People need to understand the threat and who's behind it.**
 - Be specific. Use real numbers and stories. Research shows 86% of voters are concerned about government abuse of power [AAGC/IMPACT Research]. The [coalition statement](#) identifies how "this administration has made clear its intent to protect discrimination over civil rights."
- **Sample messages:**
 1. "They want to revoke non-profit status and launch criminal investigations into organizations that ensure people have a lawyer to help them in court, teaching people their legal rights, supporting rallies and protests, and other ways of exercising First Amendment rights."



2. "This is about shutting down any organization that holds government accountable or fights discrimination."
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Step 3: Connect to the Bigger Picture

- **Why? Help people understand this fits a broader pattern of overreach and what's really at stake for democracy.**
 - The [coalition statement](#) notes how the administration "attacks philanthropic institutions, unions, teachers, and universities" and has "intensified the dangers of hate crimes and violence."
 - **Sample messages:**
 1. "When the government can silence critics who care about civil rights laws and their enforcement by calling them 'terrorists,' then it means the government can silence any critics. That's not a democracy."
 2. "We've seen this playbook before - manufacture a crisis, blame marginalized communities, then use fear to dismantle the very organizations that protect people's rights."
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Step 4: Call to Action

- **Why? People need concrete ways to act.**
 - The [coalition statement](#) provides a clear model with specific calls to Congress, allies, and all Americans.
- **Sample messages:**
 1. "Call your members of Congress today. Tell them to publicly defend organizations exercising constitutional rights."
 2. "You must unite across differences - when we stand together, we're stronger than those who would silence us."
 3. Raise your voice and be counted - attend protests and events in your neighborhood (e.g., upcoming protests, marches, town halls, and public hearings).