



Opinion: Cleveland's Art Fund Proves Creative Projects Transform Communities

It is time for Cleveland to consider perpetual support for the arts by including it in its budget. Cities like Philadelphia and Baltimore have done this and are seeing results.
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Cuyahoga County Expands Tax Relief Program for Seniors



SCAN TO LISTEN

Staff Writer

County lowers age threshold to 67 as property taxes continue to rise.

Cuyahoga County is expanding a property-tax relief program for seniors, lowering its eligibility age from 70 to 67 and offering up to \$10,000 in direct assistance to homeowners struggling with delinquent tax bills. The county says the change, announced this month, will help more older residents avoid foreclosure and stay in their homes as tax burdens grow across Northeast Ohio.

County officials said the expansion comes as more seniors on fixed incomes fall behind on payments. According to the announcement from Cuyahoga County, the Treasurer's Office is now accepting inquiries for the

2026 tax year, which covers 2025 tax bills.

The Taxpayer Assistance Program (TAP) launched in 2024 with a goal of preventing foreclosures among older homeowners. It originally served only those age 70 and older. The county said it has already provided “nearly \$1 million” to help 150 senior homeowners catch up on property taxes and create financial stability plans, figures confirmed by WKYC and Spectrum News 1.

Cuyahoga County Executive Chris Ronayne said the program is meant to keep seniors in the homes “they have worked so hard for,” emphasizing that foreclosure avoidance strengthens neighborhoods across the region. Treasurer Brad Cromes said the expansion is aimed at making sure “more taxpayers get a fair chance to get back on track.”

Why Property Taxes Are Hitting Seniors Harder

Across Northeast Ohio, property values have increased dramatically, especially after the 2024–2025 countywide reappraisal.



LaTasha Shields express her concerns to the Hamilton county commissioners. Other homeowners protest property taxes with tombstones

Painter LaTasha Shield expresses concern to the Hamilton County commissioners. Top right: Protester with “RIP” grave marker in their front yards. Credit: Cleveland Observer

Seniors on fixed incomes have struggled with steep tax hikes, and many have been caught off guard by reassessments.

Signal Cleveland found that median residential tax bills rose sharply in some Cleveland neighborhoods in recent years, increasing pressure on older homeowners. Signal Cleveland also noted that before TAP launched, some seniors faced confusing or fragmented relief options, leaving many unsure where to turn for help.

While TAP is broadly popular among housing advocates, some residents and policy watchers have questioned aspects of the program:

Age Limit May Leave Out Struggling Residents Under 67

Signal Cleveland reported last year, that some community groups worry that focusing the aid strictly on seniors ignores other

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Calming Tips for a Stressful Holiday Season



By Jennifer Bailey, LCSW & RDT

Between shopping for the perfect gift, baking for the cookie exchange and finding an ugly sweater for your workplace's holiday party, December can bring more than holiday cheer.

The American Psychological Association (APA) reported that 89% of American adults experience at least one source of stress during the holiday season. For many, this time of year is full of pressure, to say yes to everything, to make everything perfect, and to keep everyone happy.

While the holidays can be overwhelming, they can also be a time for reflection and rest when we approach them intentionally. Slowing down and finding ways to stay grounded can help us experience the season with more peace and presence.

The Reality Behind Holiday Stress

The American Institute of



SCAN TO LISTEN

Stress found that 70% of Americans report stress during the holiday season. In a 2023 APA survey, 41% said their stress increases this time of year, and 49% described their stress as moderate between November and January. The APA reported that 43% said stress affects their ability to feel joy.

These statistics remind us that feeling stretched thin or emotionally drained this time of year isn't a personal failure, it is a common experience. Understanding where that stress comes from can help us address it before it takes over.

Where the Stress Comes From Financial Pressure

The holidays are framed as a season of giving, but they often become a season of overspending. A recent GallupNews.com poll found that about a third of Americans expect to spend up to \$499, 18% between \$500–\$999, and 37% expect to spend \$1,000 or more.

That pressure to give generously, especially in a time of economic uncertainty, can leave people anxious and financially strained.



Credit: YouTube, WLWJ-5 News

Striving for the Perfect Holiday

Whether it's getting the perfect gift, throwing the perfect holiday party, or hosting the perfect holiday dinner, there is a deep need to make the holiday season magical. Unfortunately, the hope of a memorable holiday is usually fueled by perfection. The striving for perfection could also lead to unhealthy comparisons. The APA reported that 36% of Americans feel like the holidays are a competition.

Coping With Grief

Trying to navigate a time of year when traditions and rituals are at their peak can be difficult when loved ones are not available

to engage in them. Nearly 40% of Americans labeled their stressor for the holiday as missing family or loved ones, according to the APA. Grief doesn't pause for the holidays, it simply finds new ways to show up.

Too Much to Do, Too Little Time

Many people look forward to time off from work in December, but that doesn't always mean less to do. Unfortunately, it can often feel like there is more to do. There are office parties, school performances, shopping trips, family photos, and endless to-do lists.

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Calming Tips for a Stressful Holiday

From front page

Lyra Health noted that these competing demands can leave people feeling overwhelmed and stressed about not having enough time, making it hard to truly enjoy the moments meant for rest.

Anticipate Family Conflict

For some, time with family can be more stressful than joyful. Differing opinions, unresolved issues, or personality clashes can turn gatherings into emotional minefields. According to the APA, 22% of Americans say family conflict contributes to their holiday overwhelm. When family time comes with tension, even the most festive settings can feel draining.

Alcohol and Substance Use

The challenge of the holidays can show up through increased drinking or substance use. Whether due to social gatherings or attempts to cope with stress, this time of year often sees an uptick in use. Insurance Canopy found that 55% of Americans admitted to drinking more during the holiday season, which can be particularly challenging for those in recovery or those trying to maintain boundaries around substances.

Shift From Stressed to Grounded

Although the holidays can bring stress, there are things that can be implemented this holiday season to help people stay grounded and experience joy.

Set Expectations Ahead of Time

Before the holiday rush begins, take time to define your limits. Set a realistic budget for gifts, decide how many social

events you can comfortably attend, and communicate boundaries early. The LAM Clinic suggests saying “no” when necessary and putting time limits on events to protect your energy.



Credit: Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services (ADAMHS) Board of Cuyahoga County

Make Time for Self-Care

This is often called the “season of giving,” but that generosity should include yourself. Protecting sleep, hydration, movement, and quiet time are not luxuries; they’re essentials for emotional balance.

Clinical psychologist Dr. Diana Hill emphasizes body awareness and distress tolerance skills to regulate the nervous system. Techniques like running your wrists under cold water, stepping outside for a breath of fresh air, or taking a mindful pause

in a quiet room can help you reset when you feel overstimulated.

If family conflict is a concern, choosing reactions ahead of time can be helpful. If you know that one relative will be eager to talk about their political views, choose how you will handle the situation before being in the situation. Know what could trigger you and use self-soothing tools to help manage stressful interactions.

Self-compassion means permitting yourself to slow down, to feel mixed emotions, and to release the expectation that joy must look a certain way. Mindfulness practices like gratitude journaling, mindful breathing, or simply noticing the small, quiet moments of connection can help bring the season back into focus.

Coping With the Holidays Guide

The Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services (ADAMHS) Board of Cuyahoga County has released a “Coping with the Holidays” guide with self-care tips and strategies to support mental health during the holiday season. The guide is available at www.adamhsc.org/resources/coping-with-the-holidays-2025

Need help now? Call or text 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline for immediate, 24/7 mental health support.

Jennifer Bailey is a wife, mother of three, and therapist. She is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and Registered Drama Therapist (RDT).

More Seniors Qualify for Tax Relief

From front page

vulnerable homeowners such as low-income families facing delinquency and foreclosure due to the same rising tax burdens. Source: Signal Cleveland

Questions About Long-term Funding

During budget discussions

in 2024 and 2025, several council members raised concerns about sustainability if demand grows. According to Ideastream Public Media, some officials asked how the county will maintain support if property taxes continue climbing faster than the program’s funding pool.

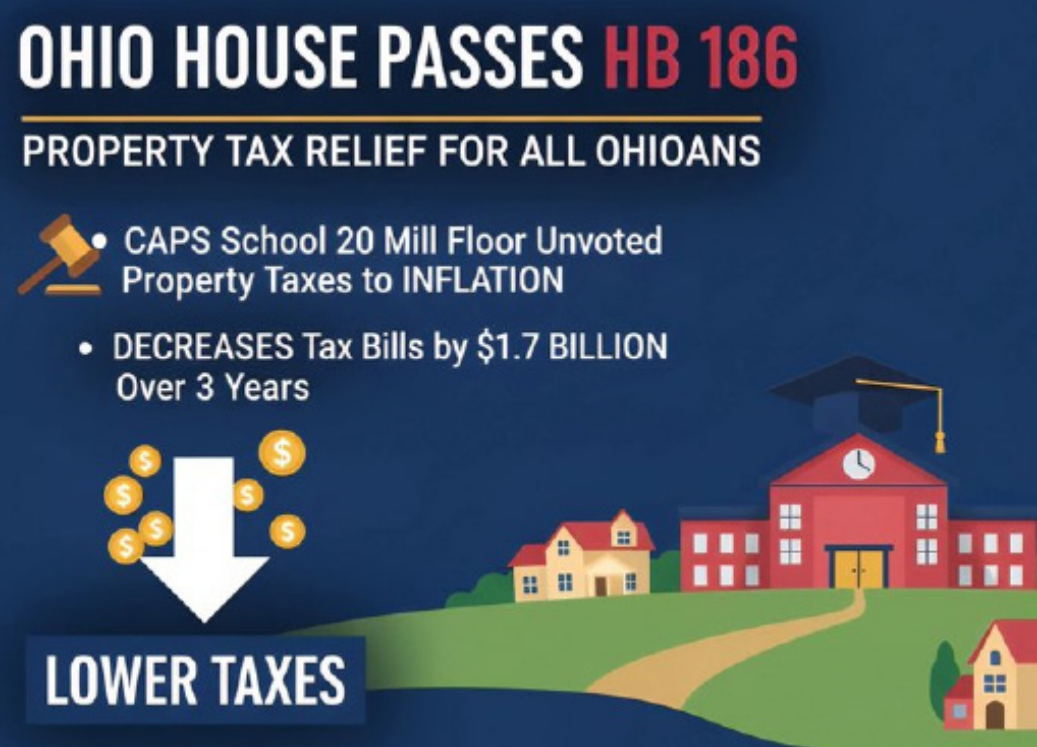
Cuyahoga County’s Response

Treasurer Brad Cromes Cuyahoga County Treasurer said “We know homeowners face real challenges and too often, they don’t know where to turn for help. That’s why we decided to expand the Taxpayer Assistance Program,” Cromes also said, “By broadening eligibility, we can give more taxpayers a fair chance to get back on track and stay rooted in their communities.”

How to Apply

The county is now accepting inquiries for the 2026 tax year (covering 2025 payments). Homeowners can:

- Fill out an eligibility form on the Cuyahoga County Treasurer’s Office website
- Or visit the Treasurer’s Office in-person
- For questions, call 216-443-7400 (Option 1) or email TAP@



Ohio lawmakers recently passed a package of property tax reform bills, House Bills 129, 186, 309, and 335, that aim to provide significant taxpayer relief by capping certain tax increases and enhancing homeowner tax credits. Credit x.com

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How to Report a Missing Person in Cleveland: What Families Need to Know



By Christina Easter

When a person goes missing, family members should immediately contact local law enforcement to provide identifying information that can be entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUS). Information provided to law enforcement is used for the Cleveland Division of Police (CDP) Missing Persons and Ohio Attorney General Missing Persons websites which can be searched by anyone.

On June 14, 2023, the Division held a virtual news conference to “address misleading information” in recent national news stories about missing children and human trafficking in Cleveland.

Then-Cleveland Division of Police Chief Wayne Drummond noted an uptick in missing juveniles in Cleveland, while discussing the seriousness with which these cases are handled.

“In the city of Cleveland, we have five detectives in each of the five neighborhood districts who are assigned specifically to missing persons, not just juveniles,” said Drummond. “Our detectives, officers in each of our neighborhood districts and officers in our specialized units take it seriously.”

“We also have a detective who is assigned downtown,” he continued. “Callahan is an expert in locating missing persons.”

No 24-hour Waiting to Report a Person Missing

In 2012, the Division of Police issued a general police order requiring the Division to comply with the Ohio Revised Code on reporting and investigating missing



In 2023, the Black and Missing Foundation posted this billboard in Cleveland as part of a multi-city campaign, to raise awareness of missing persons of color. Credit: Black and Missing Foundation

persons.

The order requires the Division to promptly act to locate persons reported missing and enter the missing person’s information in the Record Management System.

“I want to let people know and get the word out that there is no limit on when a person can file a missing person report,” said Cleveland Division of Police Detective Kevin Callahan during the virtual news conference. Callahan investigates missing persons cases downtown.

“There is an illusion that you have to wait 24 hours to make a missing person report, whether it’s an adult or a juvenile, and this is just not the case here in Cleveland.”

Cleveland Missing Persons Unit

The Cleveland Division of Police, Missing Persons website is updated frequently. In most cases, it shows a photo, case number, race, sex, date of birth, age, date reported missing number of days missing, and district.

Families, neighbors, and other concerned residents should immediately contact a detective for one of Cleveland’s five police districts to report a missing person.

Persons are removed from the website once they are found or return home.

Cuyahoga County Missing

Last year in Ohio, Cuyahoga County had the third-highest number of missing children with 2,717, according to the Ohio

Attorney General’s 2024 Missing Children Clearinghouse report.

The county has a list of community resources on how to help if you have information about a missing person, actions to take to prevent your child from going missing, and a list of organizations and agencies that can assist families of missing children.

Some things the County advises families to do include: contact the Cuyahoga County Sheriff Missing Persons Initiative to add the information on its website; keep notes of the name of the officer who took your report, including their ID, telephone number and police report number. Visit the Department of Justice’s website to find “A Family Survival Guide: When Your Child is Missing.”

Ohio Attorney General

The Ohio Attorney General Missing Persons Unit has a 24-hour toll-free hotline 800-325-5604. The unit fields questions from law enforcement officers, parents, community members, and the news media. The website, which features details and photos of missing children and adults, allows visitors to submit tips and print posters for specific cases.

Cases that meet the following criteria are posted:

- The person has been reported missing to a law enforcement agency, and they have entered the missing person into the National Crime Information Center database; and
- Missing child 17 years of age or younger; or
- Missing adult between the ages of 18-21; or
- Missing person 22 years of age or older who is suspected by law enforcement of being endangered or the victim of criminal activity; and
- Child or adult missing from Ohio; or
- Child or adult missing from another state or country and believed to be in the state of Ohio.

Free Assistance after 30 days

The Ohio Attorney General’s Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI) offers Project LINK (Linking Individuals Not Known), which provides free assistance when searching for a loved one who has

been missing for more than 30 days, or even decades.

BCI analysts gather photos and other identifying information of the missing person from family members. A DNA profile is added to the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) so it can be compared to DNA taken from different sources.

As long as the case is open, the DNA is regularly checked against new DNA entered into the database.

Cleveland Missing

Family members can also contact the nonprofit organization, Cleveland Family Center for Missing Children and Adults (Cleveland Missing), located at 2937 West 25th St., Cleveland, 44113. The organization provides assistance with compiling information needed for the investigative report, such as name, birthdate, place last seen, any vehicles involved, clothing, current photograph, and persons who may be with them.

“We help families do things they are not really sure of how to make happen,” said Sylvia Colon, co-founder and acting director of Cleveland Missing.

“We assist families with preparing a flyer, poster, and search party. We work with families on what we think needs to go on the flyer, posting on social media, and making sure they have copies that they can pass out,” said Colon.

Missing Person Developments

Earlier this summer, OH HB 217 (FIND Act) was introduced before the Ohio Legislature to require that local law enforcement agencies enter missing persons into NamUs within 30 days of a report being filed with the police.

Knowing who to contact and what information is needed to report and search for missing persons can help families learn the whereabouts of loved ones.

If someone you know goes missing, immediately contact the local police to initiate an investigation and have the person listed on NamUS, the City of Cleveland, Cuyahoga County, and the state of Ohio websites.

Christina Easter is a freelance journalist in Northeast Ohio.

MISSING

FULL NAME

Date of Birth:

Age:

Sex or gender:

Race:

Eyes:

Hair:

Height:

Weight:

Wearing:

Identifying Characteristics:

CLEAR PHOTO

LAST SEEN: MONTH, DAY, YEAR

IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT (NAME) PLEASE CONTACT:

County Alerts Public to New Jail and Jury Scam Calls



Staff Writer

Cuyahoga County officials are warning residents about a new scam in which criminals impersonate sheriff's deputies and call the families of people recently booked into the county jail demanding payment for ankle monitors in exchange for their loved one's release.

The alert was issued by the Cuyahoga County Scam Squad and the Sheriff's Department, which say scammers are using personal details pulled from public records to make the calls seem more legitimate. Officials emphasize that deputies never call residents to request payments of any kind.

How the Scam Works

According to the county's warning, the scheme begins when a person is arrested and their booking information becomes public. Scammers then contact family members, claiming to be deputies or jail staff.

They insist that the jailed individual can be released immediately if the family pays hundreds or even thousands of dollars for an ankle monitor, a demand the Sheriff's Department says is entirely fabricated.

The Sheriff's Office has published guidance on avoiding impersonation scams and urges

residents to verify any suspicious contact by calling the department directly at 216-443-6000. More resources are available on the county's Scam Squad site.

Jury Duty Scams on the Rise

County officials say this new tactic comes as "jury duty scams" continue to circulate across Ohio. In these cases, scammers email or call residents claiming they missed jury service, then demand "bond payments" to avoid arrest.

The U.S. Marshals Service



and the Ohio Attorney General's Office have both issued statewide alerts in recent years, warning that fake deputies often use spoofed phone numbers and forged documents to intimidate victims.

Why Are These Scams so Effective?

Security experts say impersonation scams thrive because residents often don't know what legitimate law enforcement communication looks like. According to the Federal Trade Commission, caller-ID spoofing and urgent, fear-based scripts are among the most

successful tactics used by phone scammers nationwide.

Transparency Gaps Make Scams Easier

Some criminal justice advocates argue that the county could reduce scam risk by improving public messaging around arrest procedures and release protocols. As reported by Cleveland.com in past incidents involving impersonation scams, inconsistent public awareness about how deputies actually

deputy, agent, or officer says you missed court or are about to be arrested.

- Do not travel anywhere at a caller's instruction, this is a known tactic used to isolate victims.
- Never call back using the number provided in a suspicious voicemail or text. Verify independently by calling the Sheriff's Office at 216-443-6000.
- Do not stay on the phone if a caller insists you remain connected or keep the conversation secret. Law enforcement will never do this.
- Never pay anyone who contacts you unexpectedly claiming you owe money related to court, jail, fines, fees, or missed jury duty.

Scam Squad investigators say scammers often escalate pressure quickly, using legal terminology and threats to stop victims from double-checking the story.

This article was reviewed using The Cleveland Observer's AI-assisted editorial workflow. All AI-generated recommendations were reviewed and approved by a human editor.

contact can create opportunities for criminals to exploit confusion.

Cuyahoga County Response

The Sheriff's Department maintains that it regularly updates the public through its website and Sheriff's app, and urges residents to rely only on official phone numbers and direct communication lines.

Protect Yourself From Scams

The county advises residents to take the following steps:

- Hang up immediately if someone claiming to be a

What Has Cleveland City Council Done Since Declaring Gun Violence a Public Health Crisis?



By Angela Hay



In April, the Cleveland City Council unanimously passed a resolution declaring gun violence a public health crisis in the city.

The resolution, sponsored by Council member Richard A. Starr, said that "it is vital for the residents of this City that public and private institutions develop an evidence-based public health response to address the underlying social, economic, and systemic factors that can lead to gun violence."

At the same session, Starr led the Council to formally recognize May 1-7 as Gun Violence Survivors' Week to "raise awareness about gun violence, recognize the trauma

of gun violence survivors, and honor the lives stolen by gun violence."

Gun violence was not mentioned again in the City Record until early October, when Council resolved to partner with the United Way of Greater Cleveland for "programs, strategies, and activities focused on the reduction of gun violence." The contract was authorized for a one-year term, with a cost not to exceed \$1 million.

Neither Starr nor the United Way of Greater Cleveland responded to phone calls and emails seeking comment for this story.

Gun Violence in Cleveland by the Numbers

Statistics on gun violence in the Cleveland area offer evidence of the problem's severity.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1,768



Cleveland City Council unanimously passed a resolution declaring gun violence a public health crisis in the city. Credit: City of Cleveland

people died by firearm in Ohio in 2023. Nationally, the rate of gun deaths is 13 deaths per 100,000 people, but the rate in Ohio is 14.96. In Cuyahoga County, that rate is 21.5, the highest in the state.

The statistics are even more alarming when distinguished by race, sex, and age. An analysis by the

Bloomberg School of Public Health found that, in Ohio, males are four times more likely to die by gun than females. Black people are 16 times more likely to die by gun than white people. Black women are 11 times more likely to die by gun than white women, and young

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Federal Actions Trigger Scrutiny for Nonprofits, Experts Say



By Staff Writer

A series of recent decisions by the Trump Administration could lead to tougher rules and more government scrutiny for nonprofits across the United States, including those serving communities in Cleveland and Ohio.

These actions, announced between early September and late October, may affect how nonprofits use grant money, report their finances, and manage their daily operations.

On Sept 25, 2025, President Donald Trump issued National Security Presidential Memorandum(NSPM-7), directing federal agencies to investigate political violence and to look into the organizations and donors that may support such activity, according to The White House.

The memo also allows officials to examine nonprofits or U.S. citizens living abroad for potential violations related to foreign influence or financial misconduct.

On Sept 3, the President instructed the Attorney General to review whether federal grant funds are being used improperly for lobbying, as published in the Federal Register.

Legal analysts at Arnold & Porter note that The Wall Street Journal reported the Administration is considering tightening IRS enforcement, potentially making it easier for the agency to pursue criminal tax cases.

Meanwhile, the National Council of Nonprofits says state attorneys general in several states have stepped up checks on charitable registration and filings.

Legal Experts Warn of Broad Impact

In a detailed advisory, the political law team at Covington & Burling LLP warns that these policies could bring new risks for nonprofits, especially those

working in advocacy, civil rights, international partnerships, or politically sensitive areas.

Because the memo is written broadly, even organizations not involved in wrongdoing could face new questions about funding sources or programs.

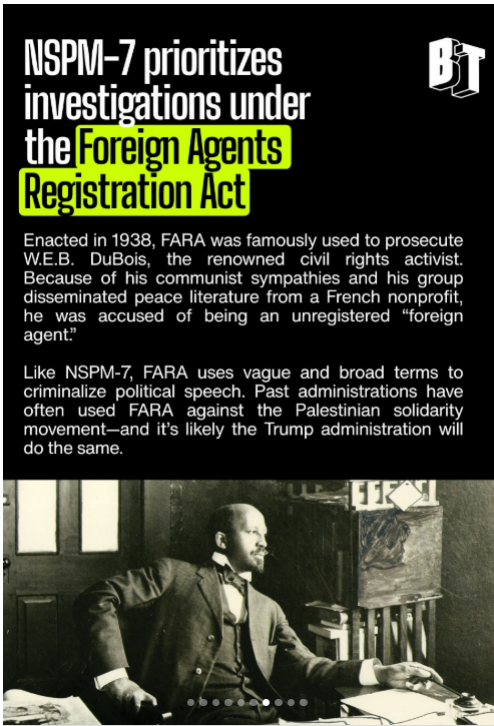
IRS and Grant Oversight Could Shift

Covington’s analysis notes that possible IRS changes might increase scrutiny of nonprofit tax filings and donor reporting practices.

The September 3 memo also reminds federally funded organizations that grant money may not be used for lobbying or political activity. A separate advisory from Covington advises nonprofits to review their internal controls immediately to avoid violations.

State-Level Enforcement Rising

State attorneys general are also increasing oversight in several states. The National Council of Nonprofits reports that even small administrative errors, such as late filing or missed registration, can sometimes escalate



into broader investigations.

Scrutiny Improves Safety

Some organizations say the new policies are necessary to address rising political violence. The Georgia Center for Nonprofits explains that NSPM-7 is intended to identify “networks, entities, and organizations that foment political violence” and argues that stronger oversight may help protect the public.

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What Has Cleveland City Council Done Since Declaring Gun Violence a Public Health Crisis?

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black males ages 15-34 are 35 times more likely to die by gun than young white males.

A mass shooting took place in Slavic Village in September, and a separate mass shooting in October resulted in the closure of Play Bar and Grill in the Flats.

In the first 10 days of November in Cleveland, four people were killed within seven hours: a 74-year-old man shot his daughter and himself, a 19-year-old woman was murdered, and a 13-year-old boy was seriously injured.

State Efforts to Reduce Gun Violence

At the state level, Governor Mike DeWine’s office recently celebrated an initiative aimed at reducing violent crime in Cleveland. This would entails a collaborative effort involving multiple agencies. A recent press release listed 12 different press agencies, including the Cleveland Division of Police, Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and others.

“These are data-driven, focused operations where we know the most violent offenders are committing the most crime in Cleveland,” the governor said at a Nov. 3 press conference.

“The men and women

of our police department can’t do it alone,” Cleveland mayor Justin Bibb added. “Federal law enforcement has played a critical role, state law enforcement has played a great role, as well as the county and the prosecutor.”

In a series of press releases, DeWine’s office announced six firearm recoveries in Cleveland on Oct. 9, 11 on Oct. 15, and eight on Nov. 7.

Since July 2023, Cleveland’s violent-crime reduction initiatives have resulted in more than 1,400 felony arrests for serious offenses, including homicide and felonious assault. Authorities have also seized more than 1,000 illegally possessed firearms during that period, according to city officials.

Community Response

So far, community members have not felt the effects of the declarations and initiatives.

Together We Rise is a coalition of activists and organizations dedicated to ending gun violence and addressing the “crisis of crime” in their communities. In their 2024 strategy, they advocated for declaring gun violence a

public health crisis, but the coalition was excluded from the council’s actions this year.

“We weren’t informed, invited, or included,” said Michelle Bell of M-PAC Cleveland. “The declaration that was meant to reflect our collective struggle got co-opted into political theater. Declarations only matter when they’re followed by real investments, accountability, and action, otherwise, they’re just well-written press releases masking inaction.”

“When coverage focuses on places like the Flats, I can’t help but wonder: is the concern about community safety or about economic impact?” said El Jay-em of Speakezie Go Hard. “Because in our neighborhoods the ones without the waterfront views, the gunfire has been constant, and our pain has rarely made the evening news.”

Members of the coalition are not optimistic about the city’s partnership with the United Way.

“Although I can see a connection through United Way’s First Call for Help to the crisis of gun violence,” Bell said, “I have not seen their presence in this space as an organization delivering programs and providing services beyond

being a resource connector.”

“I don’t think that anything much will come of the City/United Way intervention,” said Judy Martin, founder of Survivors & Victims of Tragedy, Inc. “I doubt they will help the youth at the street level.”

There is no debate in Cleveland about the importance of decreasing gun violence, only how to address it. The state is attempting to address it with legislation and police action, while the city is approaching it with symbolic resolutions and strategic partnerships. The effectiveness of current interventions is still unknown.

Angela Hay is a professional writing & journalism student at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio.

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Legal Aid May be Able to Help Low-Income Entrepreneurs



By Tanya Sands

Starting a new business can be extremely challenging, especially when there seem to be large barriers to overcome. The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland may be able to help with its Legal Center for Entrepreneurs with Low-Income.

Established in 2019, The Center creates avenues out of poverty for those with low-income. The Center focuses on addressing the issues that make it difficult to achieve entrepreneurship including:

- Providing legal check-ups and legal services to income-eligible business owners
- Partnering with business development incubators to connect entrepreneurs with mentoring and other supports
- Providing education on common legal issues for entrepreneurs and self-employed people

“Legal Aid’s Legal Center for Entrepreneurs with Low-Income is so important because it’s essential to Legal Aid’s mission to work with individuals in low-income communities who are trying to build wealth in those same communities,” said Michael Russell, Senior Attorney in the Community Engagement Practice Group at Legal Aid. “A good way for people to build wealth is to start a healthy business that not only brings in income but employs others in the community.”

The Center helps to remove the barriers that entrepreneurs with low incomes regularly face including access to credit, education and legal counsel.

“Often, entrepreneurs with low incomes lack a credit history that allows them to access financing that otherwise would be available to them from traditional sources. They lack basic business education to know the ins and outs of regulatory compliance to make sure that they’re following all the rules with regards to zoning, licensing and taxes,” Michael said. “Legal counsel is expensive, so we want to fill that gap in services and provide basic legal counsel



to businesses that are either getting started or are established and are looking to build or to overcome a crisis.”

Those who are interested in starting or building their business can apply for help 24/7 at lasclev.org/apply. If the application is accepted, the applicant will be interviewed by Legal Aid staff to learn more about the business and to determine if they are ready to receive legal services.

Legal Aid also has a number of resources for business owners that may need additional help, including referrals to business development partners who will offer mentorship and help them develop a business plan. Legal Aid may also offer discreet legal representation for business owners when complex challenges arise, such as possible lawsuits.

Entrepreneurs can also attend a Legal Aid Brief Advice Clinic to sit with an attorney to obtain legal advice free of charge. To find out if a Brief Advice Clinic will be in your neighborhood, go to lasclev.org/clinics.

For more information on The Legal Center for Entrepreneurs with Low-Income go to lasclev.org/get-help, click “Community Initiatives” then “Legal Center for Low-Income Entrepreneurs”.

Tonya Sams is a development and communications manager at The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

Federal Actions Trigger Scrutiny

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Opponents Warn of Chilling Effects

Others say the memo goes too far. The ACLU warns that its broad language could make “virtually protected expression” vulnerable to investigation.

More than 3,000 nonprofits signed an open letter claiming the directive could “punish nonprofit organizations [the administration] disagrees with,” according to Forbes Los Angeles.

What Nonprofits Should Do Now

Covington recommends that nonprofits:

- Review governance and record-keeping practices
- Double-check any federally funded programs
- Understand risks related to foreign partnerships
- Strengthen donor documentation
- Make sure state registration filings are current

Impact on Cleveland and Ohio

Ohio is home to several nationally and globally recognized nonprofits, including hospitals, universities, community organizations, arts institutions, and social-service networks.

For example, United Way of Greater Cleveland says it works on policy issues “at the local, state, and federal levels,” meaning changes to federal oversight can affect its advocacy efforts.

Large institutions have

also commented on increased scrutiny across the sector. In a public statement reported by Axios, the Cleveland Clinic said: “Cleveland Clinic remains committed to the communities we serve... The methodology used for this report does not fully align with how the IRS Form 990 categorizes community benefits.”

Local nonprofit leaders say that if organizations in Cleveland must shift time, staff, or funding to compliance duties, communities, especially those already under stress, could feel the effects.

Bottom Line

Federal memos, IRS enforcement signals, and new state rules point to a period of increased scrutiny for nonprofits. Covington’s advisory concludes that these actions “increase scrutiny of, and attention on, nonprofit organizations,” making accuracy, transparency, and compliance more important than ever.

This article was developed in partnership with the TCO AI Editorial Assistant using the TCO Editorial Style Guide for accuracy and sourcing. All articles assisted by AI are finalized and approved by The Cleveland Observer’s editorial staff before publication.

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Faith in Action: The Church’s Role in Economic Repair



By Ray’Chel Wilson



The federal government shutdown stalled Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for millions of families nationwide this November, churches and faith coalitions rose to the essential work of economic repair, bridging the gap left by disrupted policy and uncertain funding, according to Pew Research Center & PBS.

Churches Respond to SNAP Crisis

According to federal and nonprofit analyses published on Nov. 13 by The New York Times and the Pew Research Center, more than 42 million Americans, about one in eight, rely on SNAP for their monthly groceries.

State officials underscored the scale of the gap in Ohio: before the shutdown, roughly 1.4 million Ohioans received about \$264 million in SNAP benefits each month, the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services said in a November update on restoring food aid.

The need is particularly acute in Ohio’s urban centers. State and local data show approximately 38,000 residents in Toledo rely on SNAP benefits, and about 190,000 in Cuyahoga County, receive food assistance in a typical month, according to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and county estimates shared during recent SNAP briefings.

Local food banks and churches have been bracing for sharp increases in need, especially as the Greater Cleveland Food Bank grappled with the loss of \$1 million in emergency USDA food contracts earlier this year, the organization noted in its public updates.

At an Oct. 31 press conference at the May Dugan Center, Cuyahoga County officials and civic and corporate leaders announced more than \$600,000 in emergency funds to support the Greater Cleveland Food Bank and neighborhood pantries, while Gov. Mike DeWine authorized up to \$25 million in statewide food assistance through an executive order the same week.

“There is no local or state replacement for these massive federal funds,” said Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb said at the press conference, noting that about 170,000 of the county’s 190,000 SNAP recipients live in the city. “The city, the county and the state cannot replace these SNAP benefits,” he said in remarks carried by local media and the county feed.

At Avon Avenue Baptist Church and Bethany Baptist Church, weekly produce and pantry events have provided crucial fresh food for families at risk, Signal Cleveland reported in a Nov. 9 story on local food distribution during the SNAP shutdown. “It’s a good idea to call and make sure food is still available,” a Greater Cleveland Food Bank spokesperson told Signal Cleveland in that report.

In addition, Cleveland’s restaurant community helped fill the gap: Dante’s in Tremont organized curbside meals, while sites like Trinity Cathedral and Fatima Family Center ramped up hot lunch and dinner service, Cleveland.com reported on Oct. 30. United Way’s 211 line and local resources such as Love in Action Ohio and the Hunger Network support ongoing distribution events.



Southern Voices: A National, Interfaith Solidarity

Pastor Orlando Scott of Amplify Church in Snellville, Georgia, said in a Nov. 5 conversation that faith-based responses are moving beyond charity toward long-term mutual aid and advocacy.

“I’m a part of our regional initiative for food assistance for the churches in the region, so it’s good, but we got to do this for the long haul,” Scott said. “We need to encourage people to sacrifice a little, so that we all can, all God’s children can eat.”

He detailed the collaborative work of Metro Atlanta ministers alongside interfaith partners, including imams, Quakers and Jewish Voices for Peace, united in the food justice mission. Their initiative, “So Others Might Eat,” made up of Metro Atlanta ministers and partners, has organized to directly address food insecurity in their community.

Scott also pointed to direct political advocacy for land justice and SNAP restoration. “We’re trying to get a meeting with the governor so he can release some of his billion dollars to SNAP. He’s been boasting a billion-dollar surplus for the state of Georgia, but nothing for the poor and working poor. So, red state dilemma,” he said.

For him, faith is inseparable from practical economics and environmental justice. “We want to give practical solutions to our churches, dealing with, you know, economics, food justice, environmental justice, the whole nine, the political landscape. This is right on time.”

Faith-Based Advocacy and Systemic Limits

Clergy and charity leaders from Ohio to Georgia repeatedly caution that their resources and networks, while vital, cannot fully substitute for robust government safety nets.

“No food bank can make up for a lack of SNAP benefits, for every meal distributed by a food bank, SNAP provides nine,” Greater Cleveland Food Bank President and CEO Kristin Warzocha said in a county statement announcing the emergency fund.

food insecurity, even as national debates over public benefits continue.

Recent national surveys and news coverage show that churches, faith-based nonprofits, and community ministries are playing a central role in keeping families fed during the SNAP disruption, but they also reveal concern that charity alone cannot keep up with the scale of need.

At Metropolitan Baptist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that tension between compassion and structural change was front and center during worship on Nov. 9. In a sermon streamed on the church’s YouTube channel, Rev. Dr. Ray A. Owens told congregants that “the value of the church is to be relational, tapped in with the needs of its community and responsive as a collective”.

Owens grounded his message in Acts 2:42, 44–46, which describes the early church devoting itself to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, breaking bread together, and holding possessions in common so they could share with anyone in need.

For Owens, and for many pastors and lay leaders across the country, that passage is not just a history lesson but a blueprint. It invites today’s congregations to move beyond a “service provider” mentality toward a deeper, interdependent way of life in which members share resources, watch over one another and respond quickly when neighbors are hurting.

In a season when food aid is uncertain and costs are rising, he argued, the call is for churches to be communities where both material needs and spiritual burdens are carried together, in real time, for “such a time as this.”

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In an October interview with Christianity.com, Catherine D’Amato, CEO of the Greater Boston Food Bank, put it bluntly: “There’s no way that our charitable food network or the system in this country can provide that much food overnight or quickly. It’s an impossible task.” The widespread scale of hunger relief, especially during shutdown periods, they say, requires sustained policy action as much as neighborly solidarity.

Practical Information for Families

Cleveland’s food banks, pantries, and faith groups offer weekly and monthly distribution sites, including Avon Avenue Baptist, Bethany Baptist, Greater Heights Church of Christ, and more.

Residents seeking aid can find updated schedules on each organization’s website or by calling United Way’s 211. Notable services include hot meals at Faith Baptist Community Center Wednesdays, weekend produce giveaways at St. Augustine Community Cupboard, and collaborative efforts at University Settlement and Bountiful Basement.

The Faith Imperative: Relational Community and Collective Justice

Across states and denominations, faith organizations have become a lifeline for thousands of people forced into



Opinion: Cleveland's Art Fund Proves Creative Projects Transform Communities



By Vince Robinson

Cleveland's Transformative Art Fund held a culminating event last week to share the success of seven curated projects executed in Cleveland thanks to \$3 million in funding from the American Rescue Plan Act. Representatives of each of the seven teams had twelve minutes to tell their stories to a rapt audience in the Martin Luther King branch of the Cleveland Public Library on Oct 29.

Rhonda K. Brown, Senior Chief Strategist for Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy for the City of Cleveland, was effusive in her praise of the projects she managed. They were chosen by her and a team of artist volunteers including the author of this editorial. The committee reviewed 103 proposals from artist-led teams and whittled them down to the chosen seven.

According to Brown, "The Transformative Arts Fund embodies Cleveland's unwavering belief in the power of art to activate the soul of the city and uplift its people. More than two years in planning and implementation, this initiative reflects a deep commitment to artist autonomy,"

The projects were diverse, ranging from 9413 Sophia Avenue: A Choreographed Deconstruction and Maintenance of the Built Environment led by artist Malena Grigoli, to All Our Babies: Birthing in the Afro Future, a groundbreaking initiative in Cleveland's Fairfax neighborhood challenging high Black maternal and infant mortality rates led by dancer Jameelah Rahman.

Because of the pandemic, the Biden administration devised the American Rescue Plan Act. ARPA dollars were doled out to cities across the country. Cleveland received over \$500 million. The Assembly for the Arts lobbied for \$10 million and ended up with the approval of \$3 million, a 2% appropriation.

The Assembly for the Arts, as stated in its mission declaration, is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with a focus on advocacy, cultural policy, racial equity initiatives, research, marketing that elevates the region, and services for nonprofits, artists, and creative businesses.

It served as the fiscal partner with the City of Cleveland to fund the projects because the city is not permitted to make direct payments for projects of this nature due to

legal constraints.

Jeremy Johnson, president and CEO of the Assembly said, "As fiscal agent, we built the back-end so the front-line could flourish, moving public dollars with care and speed, removing barriers, and ensuring artists and creative businesses were paid on time. TAF shows what Cleveland can do when we trust artists and invest close to home. It's culture, yes, but it's also connection, learning, small-business vitality, and neighborhood pride. Policy doesn't change lives by itself; implementation does."

The Assembly committed its staff to overseeing the process of payments to the artist teams that executed their projects, sacrificing the customary percentage of administrative fees of 9% to 15%, landing at 3%. In return, Cleveland received the gift of seven beautifully inspired projects fueled

transformation, not only of the communities that received the benefit of a project executed in their respective neighborhoods, but within the artists who executed the projects.

In an era in which the notion of diversity is being given a back seat to certain agendas, the TAF proved that its implementation provides positive results and a return on the investment in art and the intellectual capital that lies squarely in the minds of artists in our city.

The impact of the TAF will continue not only because public facing elements such as the murals and other artworks created exist, but because some of the projects have created programs that will extend the lives of their projects. This, again, reflects the transformative impact of what was created with the one-time gift from

It's time for our political leaders to take action and empower artists to bring their voices into the rooms where decisions are being made about the future of this town. Creative input is a necessary element of problem solving. It can accompany legislation as a means of addressing those things that demand change.

The answer to our issues involving crime, poverty, illiteracy, environmental hazards, homelessness and the litany of other ills dominating the headspace of citizens in this city is not hiring more police officers. We can replace pistols with paint brushes, knives with musical instruments, fear with knowledge of self, and awareness of the power of art to combat the causes that underlie public safety concerns.

With this approach, we can



Transformative Art Fund Lead Artists (L to R). Robin Robinson, Malena Grigoli, Jameelah Rahman, Jordan Wong, Kumar Arora, Latecia Delores Wilson Stone, and Ariel Vergez Credit: Vince robinson

by the collective talent, knowledge and skills of an incredibly diverse array of artists, largely young, who brought them into fruition.

City leaders decided on the project-based approach, as opposed to simply passing out direct payments to individuals as had been done when County Executive Armond Budish approved \$1.3 million in Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act in which 425 artists received grants of \$1,600.

Thanks to the Transformative Art Fund a larger number of artists received funding and in many instances, much greater amounts. In addition to merely receiving funds, they experienced personal and professional growth that went beyond receiving a government handout. This was an additional bonus to amplify the value the projects provided the city. It was the embodiment of the idea of

Uncle Sam. But the overarching reality is that this should not be the end of Cleveland's journey with significant funding for the arts and the benefit that has been demonstrated with this single project.

It is time for Cleveland to consider perpetual support for the arts by including it in its budget. Cities like Philadelphia and Baltimore have done this and are seeing results. Other cities are doing the same. At present, a study is being conducted to examine exactly that with the idea that serious consideration can be made here.

truly transform this city and defy the current narrative that defines our place on the map as one of the worst cities in the country and see it for what it really is, a place where the arts thrive and natural resources exist in abundance. With the support of our political leadership, philanthropic partners, nonprofit and for profit entities, we can be the solution and take this transformation to the next level.

Vince Robinson is a member of the Transformative Art Fund selection committee and is a multi-genre artist residing in Cleveland, Ohio.

