



# 32<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL EMPOWERMENT CONGRESS SUMMIT

PURSuing JUSTICE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY



Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science  
LOS ANGELES

SATURDAY | JANUARY 13, 2024

National Observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend

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## EVENT CO-HOSTS:

- AME Ministerial Alliance of Southern California
- Baptist Ministers Conference of Los Angeles and Southern California
- District Attorneys Accountability Coalition (DAAC)
- NAACP - Los Angeles Chapter
- South Los Angeles Clergy for Public Accountability (SLACPA)
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference - Southern California (SCLC-SC)

## Dear 32nd Annual Summit Participants:

Thank you for joining us at the **Empowerment Congress Annual Summit**, which commemorates our 32nd year of **community education, engagement, and empowerment**. This event is a testament to the **power of people**, which is one of our cornerstone principles. The notion that constituents should have a voice in the decisions that impact their daily lives is as fundamental as it is revolutionary. Since our founding in 1992, community stakeholders have worked alongside elected officials to make a lasting imprint as a premier civic engagement organization that serves as a model for communities nationwide.

As we look around today, we are confronted by challenging circumstances that have led to increasing public safety concerns, rising rates of homelessness across the County, State and nation, and amplified risk to equitable representation in our elected bodies. The troubling ways in which our community priorities have been overlooked in the past several years make it clear that our pursuit of justice is far from over.

This year's theme – "Pursuing Justice through Participatory Democracy" – seeks to put power back into the hands of the electorate by highlighting the ways in which our voices still matter: through our vote; through our advocacy; and through our constant evaluation of and challenge to systems that profess to bring justice to our spaces.

One of the most instinctive and impactful representations of participatory democracy is casting a ballot as an educated voter. The Los Angeles County District Attorney represents the largest prosecutorial office in the United States. Today, seven of the candidates for this powerful role will take to our stage to assert why they are the right choice for the seat. We, as voters, have a responsibility to learn and assess the priorities of those who are seeking this role, to ensure they are in alignment with the office's stated mission to *"advance an effective, ethical and racially equitable system of justice that protects the community, restores victims of crime, and honors the rights of the accused."*

The drive to uphold the spirit and letter of the law comes with the mighty risk of misdirected prosecution – both intentional and unintentional. In those cases, our participatory democracy engages with a system that is often intentionally confusing, hard to navigate, financially devastating, and designed to discourage resistance. Part two of today's program is a teach-in on the U.S.A. vs. Mark Ridley-Thomas case that will provide tangible and constructive ways for participants to challenge obstacles that call the "justice" element of the criminal justice system into question.

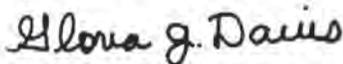
Over the next several weeks, we will continue to enact our core mission to "educate, engage, and empower" with opportunities for you to join our working groups in their advocacy for Los Angeles City charter reform and providing solutions for homelessness. Participatory democracy is an evolving process that does not stop at the polls. It requires ongoing investment in challenging the status quo and holding ourselves and our representatives accountable for shaping the communities we deserve.

We would be remiss if we did not expressly acknowledge the many volunteers that allow us to thrive after more than 30 years of advocacy and engagement. In addition to our core leadership body, we recognize that we have a passionate community of loyal adherents that energize our working groups and other mobilization efforts. We are grateful for your consistent presence, which enables us to make a lasting difference.

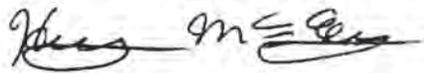
We thank you again for attending the 32nd Annual Empowerment Congress Summit and encourage you to take the next steps to engage in our evolving civic engagement experiment that calls forth neighborhood groups, residents, nonprofit organizations, businesses, religious institutions, and community leaders.

On behalf of the Empowerment Congress Leadership Council,

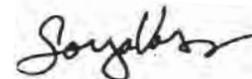
Thank you,



Gloria J. Davis



Harry McElroy



Sonya Vasquez, MSW

EMPOWERMENT CONGRESS CO-CHAIRS

## Pursuing Justice Through Participatory Democracy SUMMIT PROGRAM

**8:15 am** Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (*pre-event entertainment*)

**9:00 am** CALL TO ORDER

**Sonya Vasquez**  
Co-Chair, Empowerment Congress

**WELCOME**

**Dr. David Carlisle**  
President and CEO, Charles R. Drew University of  
Medicine and Science

**Hon. Lindsey Horvath**  
Chair, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors

**Hon. Emma Sharif**  
Mayor, City of Compton

**Hon. Sydney Kamlager-Dove**  
Representative, California District 37  
U.S. House of Representatives

**EMPOWERMENT CONGRESS WELCOME & REMARKS**

**Gloria Davis, Sonya Vasquez, Harry McElroy**  
Co-Chairs, Empowerment Congress

**FOUNDER'S REMARKS**

**Dr. Mark Ridley-Thomas**  
Founder, Empowerment Congress

**DISTRICT ATTORNEY CANDIDATE FORUM**

**MODERATORS:**

**Tavis Smiley**  
Nationally syndicated talk radio host and  
chief visionary officer, KBLA Talk 1580

**Giselle Fernandez**  
Anchor, Spectrum News 1

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**BREAK**

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**11:30 am** TEACH-IN ON THE U.S.A. VS. MARK RIDLEY-THOMAS CASE



PLEASE SCAN THE QR CODE or visit  
[www.empowermentcongress.org/annualsummit/ecsummit32](http://www.empowermentcongress.org/annualsummit/ecsummit32)  
for more information on today's programming, including  
moderator, candidate, and teach-in panelist bios.



## Summit Workshop and Event Series

Schedule subject to change



**January 25**  
Greater Los Angeles  
Annual Homeless Count

**February 6**  
Charter Reform  
Advocacy Forum

**February 8**  
Bridge Street Engagement  
Homeless Outreach  
Strategy Town Hall

**February 17**  
Summit Finale: Voter  
Education, Participation  
and Mobilization Event

### Future Programming

The Annual Summit sets the stage for the Empowerment Congress' programming and advocacy year, providing a blueprint for the organization's work in the months to come.

#### Working group meetings and special events

- Charter Reform
- Civic Engagement
- Financial Empowerment
- Homelessness

#### Signature Events

- Juneteenth Dialogue and Celebration, Saturday, June 15, 2024
- 33rd Annual Empowerment Congress Summit, Saturday, January 18, 2025



Please check our website for an up-to-date schedule and for meeting and event details  
[www.empowermentcongress.org](http://www.empowermentcongress.org)

## LA County District Attorney Candidate Forum

The Los Angeles County District Attorney leads the largest prosecutorial office in the United States. We, as voters, have a responsibility to learn and assess the priorities of those who are seeking this role, to ensure they are in alignment with the office's mission to "advance an effective, ethical and racially equitable system of justice that protects the community, restores victims of crime, and honors the rights of the accused." Today's District Attorney Candidate Forum is part of our effort to fulfill our mission to "educate, engage and empower" and to provide an opportunity to learn what the candidates for this office stand for and against.

*An edited broadcast of the Candidate Forum will air on Spectrum News 1 on Friday, January 19, 2024 at 8pm. Please check the Empowerment Congress website for additional broadcast dates.*

### MODERATORS



**Tavis Smiley**  
Talk Radio Host and  
Chief Visionary Officer,  
KBLA Talk 1580



**Giselle Fernandez**  
Anchor,  
Spectrum News 1

### CONFIRMED CANDIDATES



**George Gascón**  
LA County  
District Attorney



**Debra Archuleta**  
LA County  
Superior Court Judge



**Jeff Chemerinsky**  
Former  
Assistant US Attorney



**John McKinney**  
Deputy District Attorney,  
LA County  
District Attorney's Office



**David Milton**  
Retired LA County  
Superior Court Judge



**Maria Ramirez**  
Head Deputy District  
Attorney, LA County  
District Attorney's Office



**Eric Siddall**  
Deputy District Attorney,  
LA County  
District Attorney's Office

## Teach-in on the U.S.A. v. Mark Ridley-Thomas Case

The Office of the U.S. Attorneys are a division of the United States Department of Justice (USDOJ), whose mission is to uphold the rule of law, to keep our country safe, and to protect civil rights. U.S.A. v. Mark Ridley-Thomas offers a compelling case study on the federal criminal process, from investigation to appeal, and sparks discussion about the USDOJ's execution of its stated mission and its impact on communities. This case has now entered a critical stage of the process, with Ridley-Thomas appealing his conviction and sentence to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

**This teach-in will provide participants with a comprehensive overview of the appeal by:**

- breaking down the key elements of the case — the investigation, the indictment, the trial and the sentence;
- describing the appeal process, issues, and timeline; and
- de-mystifying the judicial branch of government by demonstrating how government prosecutors, public scrutiny, witness and participation in trial proceedings can impact civil rights and the pursuit of justice using U.S.A. v. MRT as a case study.

### MODERATOR



**Areva Martin, Esq.**  
Legal Expert

### PANELISTS



**Alyssa D. Bell, Esq.**  
Cohen-Williams LLP  
appellate counsel for  
Dr. Mark Ridley-Thomas



**Mansfield Collins, Esq.**  
40-year practitioner of  
criminal defense and  
civil law in California



**Vincent Harris**  
retired public servant and  
current Empowerment  
Congress activist



**Mary M. Lee, Esq.**  
consultant, practicing attorney,  
and community advocate in  
Los Angeles and plaintiff in  
SCLC-SC v. City of L.A.



**Dion C. Raymond, Esq.**  
practicing attorney and host  
of the KBLA 1580  
Talk Radio's "Justice Files  
with Dion Raymond"

# YEAR IN REVIEW



The cornerstone of the Empowerment Congress' work is consistent engagement with constituents passionate about making a direct impact on the communities in which they live. Our signature events energize participants by convening larger audiences that allow citizens and stakeholders to discuss timely issues and hear from experts in a wide range of fields, leaving with actionable tools to affect change.

## SIGNATURE EVENTS

### 31st Annual Empowerment Congress A Leadership Summit in Times of Civic Crisis – Hard Truths, Integrity, and Reconciliation

The Empowerment Congress hosted its first in-person Summit since 2020 on the campus of Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science and welcomed more than 400 people. During the plenary session, newly elected Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass inspired participants with keynote remarks on our movement toward addressing homelessness. Four workshops served as a launching point for our working groups that met throughout the year to continue the critical conversations that arose at our flagship event.

- The Crisis of Governance in the City of Los Angeles: Could Charter Reform Improve Representation, Accountability, and Transparency?
- Financial Empowerment in Post-Pandemic Los Angeles
- Homelessness & Intersectionality: New Approaches to Understanding the Issue of Addressing the Humanitarian Crisis of our Generation
- Inclusive Leadership: Empowerment and Respect for Diversity and the Dignity of All People



### State of the Freed 2023 Juneteenth Dialogue & Celebration

The Empowerment Congress joined event partners KBLA Talk 1580, The Gathering Spot LA, The Institute for Nonviolence in LA (INVLA) and Days of Dialogue to host a crowd of more than 100 guests and a live-streamed audience (including several KBLA Talk 1580 listeners who gained special entry through an on-air contest). Participants heard about how local and statewide reparations work, as well as the history of Palm Springs Section 14 razing and fires in the 1950s and 1960s and findings and recommendations of the California Reparations Task Force.





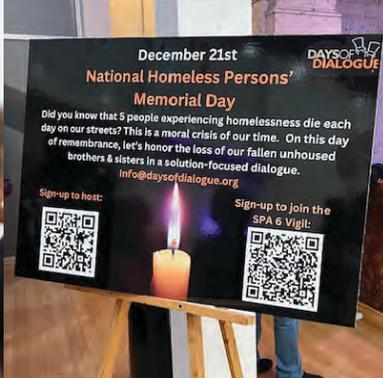
A common thread of the EC's success is identifying synergy across our priorities that align with the work of other like-minded organizations. Our strength and longevity are a direct result of our partnerships that help us to reach the broadest audience possible.

COLLABORATIONS

**Institute for Nonviolence in Los Angeles**

The Institute for Nonviolence in Los Angeles (INVLA) was founded in 2010 by Avis Ridley-Thomas, founder of the Los Angeles City Attorney's Dispute Resolution Program, and Buzz Wilms, UCLA Professor of Education. The Institute's programming includes a year-round series of undergraduate courses called "Restoring Civility: Understanding, Using, and Resolving Conflict," a Peer Mediation Program for students ages 8-18 at several schools in South Los Angeles, and Days of Dialogue.

**Days of Dialogue** produces community hosted events where people engage in constructive civic conversations around difficult issues. Trained volunteer facilitators and mediators help to build the safe spaces where relationships can begin to be transformed, and new policies are developed. The EC partnered with INVLA in launching two of their 2023 dialogue series, **Facing Racism and Bigotry in Los Angeles and Tackling Homelessness through Collaboration**, and joined with INVLA and KBLA Talk 1580 to broadcast a live version of the Facing Racism dialogue featuring a number of community voices.



# YEAR IN REVIEW



## COLLABORATIONS

### KBLA Talk 1580

Launched on Juneteenth 2021 by nationally syndicated talk radio host and author, Tavis Smiley, KBLA Talk 1580 enlightens, empowers, and encourages listeners through unapologetically progressive programming that provides a non-stop platform for people to express their fears and frustrations, as well as their hopes and aspirations. The station fosters an enlightening, sustainable, and restorative language that challenges listeners to reexamine the assumptions they hold, and expand their inventory of ideas.

The EC frequently joins with KBLA Talk 1580 to promote our common goals of community empowerment. The roster of KBLA Talk 1580 hosts includes a range of expertise that enhances our programming, including station leader, Tavis Smiley, as a program host at our 2023 signature events, and Dominique Di Prima and Areva Martin, Esq. as moderator and panelist (respectively) at our 2023 Juneteenth Dialogue and Celebration - State of the Freed.



### South LA Clergy for Public Accountability

The South Los Angeles Clergy for Public Accountability (SLACPA) is a network of pastors representing 50,000 faithful and some of South L.A.'s largest congregations. As clergy steeped in the tradition of Black Church leadership on matters of justice, SLACPA was established out of concern about the disenfranchisement of L.A. City Council District 10 voters in October 2021, the suspension of its duly elected representative (Mark Ridley-Thomas) and the transparency associated with the appointment of his successor.

The EC has engaged with SLACPA in shared advocacy on LA City Charter Reform, as well as in voter education efforts, such as the 2022 LA City Attorney candidate forum and the 32nd Annual Empowerment Congress Summit LA County District Attorney candidate forum. Members of SLACPA are also an active part of the deployment of the EC Bridge Street Engagement Homeless Outreach Strategy, alongside INVLA.



# WORKING GROUPS

The ongoing engagement of our working groups leads to a range of outcomes, including policy implementation, greater civic education, and community activism. Engagement in the Empowerment Congress provides individuals with a sense of ownership in the decisions being made to serve their community.



## Charter Reform Working Group

*The Charter Reform Working Group articulates and channels the EC's perspective on issues associated with City of Los Angeles Charter reform efforts. Among these is promoting broad public participation in the deliberations pertaining to reform, particularly on those matters that relate to Council District 10's experience with representation, community empowerment, voting rights and public participation in the decision-making process.*

Following the topical workshop at the Annual Summit, *The Crisis of Governance in the City of Los Angeles: Could Charter Reform Improve Representation, Accountability, and Transparency?*, the working group held standing meetings throughout the year to review progress made by the LA City Council Ad Hoc Committee on Governance. In partnership with CD10 Voices for Empowerment, SCLC of Southern California, and South LA Clergy for Public Accountability, the Charter Reform Working Group also developed a survey to understand community priorities related to charter reform to inform the group's advocacy. The working group also hosted special guests, including Councilmember Marqueece Harris-Dawson, President Pro Tempore of the LA City Council, and Dr. Raphael J. Sonenshein, founding Executive Director of the The John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation, to provide constituents a deeper understanding of both the necessity and complexity of reforming the LA City Charter.



## Financial Empowerment Working Group

*The Financial Empowerment Working Group addresses public concerns about and promotes policy and systemic change in the volume and quality of financial opportunities in the community. The working group also works to increase public awareness of and develops strategies to address the broader social issues that impact financial empowerment.*

The working group kicked off with their Financial Empowerment in Post-Pandemic Los Angeles Annual Summit workshop, citing the various ways in which citizens can prioritize their financial well-being as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to shift our norms. Throughout the year, the working group engaged a diverse core group of constituents that represented homeowners, landlords, tenants, business owners, and more. The working group's conversations highlighted the myriad challenges facing Los Angeles residents as inflation increases proportionally more than wages, widening the wealth gap and magnifying the nuances of all of our needs.



## WORKING GROUPS

### Civic Engagement Working Group

*The Civic Engagement Working Group promotes efforts to achieve equity, respect for diversity, reconciliation, and the dignity of all people. With an emphasis on the principles of intentional civility, reciprocal accountability, and participatory democracy, this working group identifies strategies to inform, equip, and mobilize diverse stakeholders throughout Los Angeles County to impact change. In consultation and collaboration with a wide range of experts, this working group helps to enhance programming and presentations of the Empowerment Congress through the practice of inclusion across all areas.*

The working group launched with the tremendously popular Annual Summit workshop, Inclusive Leadership: Empowerment and Respect for Diversity and the Dignity of All People, featuring civic leaders, non-profit The Civic Engagement Working Group provided opportunities for program participants to continue to learn more and advocate for new models of inclusive leadership in their community. In April, the working group welcomed a presentation from Carrie Broadus and Cheryl Branch, Executive Director of Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches, on the Los Angeles Reforms for Equity and Public Acknowledgment of Institutional Racism (L.A. REPAIR) Innovation Fund Participatory Budgeting Pilot Program. Later in the year, Dr. Anthony Asadullah Samad and Dr. Donna J. Nicol, co-authors of the State of Black LA County Interactive Report, provided an overview of the report's findings and information on how to access the resource.



Visit [www.empowermentcongress.org](http://www.empowermentcongress.org)  
to learn more about our  
programming and to get involved!

### Homelessness Working Group

*The Homelessness Working Group educates constituents about policies, programs and advocacy opportunities that would further collective action and solutions to address homelessness. The working group is dedicated to understanding the root causes of homelessness, advocating for more resources to the multifaceted response to the homelessness crisis (street strategy, interim housing, permanent housing, and prevention, with supportive services embedded throughout), and providing leadership around mobilizing and educating the community around needed policy changes.*

The Homelessness Working Group's Annual Summit workshop, Homelessness & Intersectionality: New Approaches to Understanding the Issue of Addressing the Humanitarian Crisis of our Generation, served as a preliminary introduction to the EC Bridge Street Homeless Engagement Outreach Strategy. The working group maintained a dedicated focus on refining the strategy for implementation, convening members twice monthly to sustain momentum. After welcoming Maia Ferdman of BRIDGES Intergroup Consulting to discuss the critical importance of bridge building as a cornerstone for the EC Bridge Street Engagement Homeless Outreach Strategy, the working group hosted the first Tackling Homelessness through Collaboration Day of Dialogue with the Institute for Nonviolence in LA and began to survey the community to identify locations to begin outreach efforts in 2024.



## Empowerment Congress Description

After more than three decades, the Empowerment Congress (EC) continues to empower and engage all members of our diverse communities to ensure our collective voice is heard by:

- Encouraging and enlisting full participation from our community to improve our quality of life;
- Educating and informing our community on how government works;
- Developing strategies that shape policy and legislation; and
- Connecting our community with public resources

The EC is a distinctive and deliberate national model of civic engagement built on the core principles of participatory democracy, reciprocal accountability, and intentional civility. Founded in 1992 by Los Angeles City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, the EC is a dynamic partnership among neighborhood groups, residents, nonprofit organizations, businesses, religious institutions, and community leaders within diverse communities. A precursor to the City of Los Angeles' Neighborhood Councils, the EC is an ongoing effort in participatory government, founded on the tenet that elected officials are most effective when the constituents they serve are actively involved in the decision-making process.

The EC provides unique opportunities for the community to be heard and engaged on issues that directly impact their quality of life. Our ongoing programming and partnerships generate dialogue that encourages and lays the foundation for economic, social, and political justice.

## Principles of Civic Engagement and Empowerment

These ten core principles and values of citizenship promote positive community and social change and define the perspective, practice, and methodology of the Empowerment Congress and our approach to representative and participatory democracy.

We employ these principles and values to guide advocacy, impact politics, and promote transformational change. These principles encompass the values and practices that arose from the African American political experience and in the quest to participate in representative self-government. While developed under the auspices of that specific movement, they are common to all communities seeking to perfect the practice of democracy in the United States.

- Civil discourse on matters of debate and contention
- Evidence-based inquiry, discussion, and public policy development
- Inclusive, democratic participation
- Reciprocal accountability
- Non-violent, peaceful resolution of disputes
- Respect for diversity and the dignity of all persons
- Principle-based organizing
- Neighborhood empowerment
- Collective advocacy and direct action in the redress of grievances
- Mass mobilization rooted in the agency of the individual



## EMPOWERMENT CONGRESS CO-CHAIRS

**Gloria Davis**  
Executive Director  
Girls Club of Los Angeles

**Harry McElroy**  
Vice President of Development  
and Research  
Performance Corporation

**Sonya Vasquez, MSW**  
Director, Center for Health Equity  
LA County Department  
of Public Health

## EMPOWERMENT CONGRESS LEADERSHIP

**Dr. Etsemaye Agonafer**  
Assistant Professor, Department of  
Health System Science  
Kaiser Permanente Bernard J. Tyson  
School of Medicine

**Rev. Edward Anderson**  
Pastor  
McCarty Memorial Christian Church

**Dr. Jack Barbour**  
Executive Director  
South Central Health and  
Rehabilitation Programs

**Dr. Shani Byard**  
Curator  
Legacy Refresh

**Kwame Cooper**  
Assistant Fire Chief (retired)  
Los Angeles City Fire Department

**Joan Crear**  
Empowerment Congress

**Arna Fulcher**  
President and CEO  
Alford Consulting Group

**Charles Grimes**  
Chief Executive Officer  
whosgonnatakecareofme

**Sandra Hamilton**  
Director  
Willowbrook Senior Center

**Vincent Harris**  
Project Director  
Empowerment Congress

**Mary Jones**  
Empowerment Congress

**Marie Kellier**  
CEO  
International Eye LA

**Danielle Lafayette**  
President/CEO  
Unite a Nation, Inc.

**Rhea K. Mac**  
Social Equity Consultant  
Rhea K. Mac Consulting

**Danette McBride**  
Director, CYBHI Project  
California Institute for  
Behavioral Health Solutions

**Michael McCaa**  
Chief Financial Officer  
Drew League Foundation

**Pastor Byron L. Smith, Sr.**  
Senior Pastor  
Gethsemane Christian Love  
Missionary Baptist Church

**Father Augustus Taylor, Jr.**  
Retired Clergy  
Roman Catholic Church

**LaVada Theus**  
Commissioner  
Los Angeles County Commission  
for Older Adults (LACCOA)

**Grace Weltman**  
President & CEO  
Communities in Motion



[EmpowermentCongress.org](http://EmpowermentCongress.org)

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