

‘We are having to fire up on all cylinders’ to challenge the Trump administration, national ACLU executive director tells Utah supporters

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When Anthony Romero first took the helm as the American Civil Liberties Union’s national executive director in 2001, it was a week before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. He thought fighting for civil liberties in the political climate that followed would be his greatest challenge during his tenure with the ACLU. But then, years later, Donald Trump became president.

“That was not a good moment for civil liberties,” Romero said of government policies enacted post-9/11. “But this is worse ... It’s every single one of our top issues is on a front burner at high boil.”

And it’s not just one or two priority issues, he told a small group of Utah supporters during a Wednesday morning breakfast reception in Salt Lake City. There are immigration issues.

Reproduction rights. Voting rights. LGBT issues. Making sure the government is transparent and being held accountable.

“We are having to fire up on all cylinders,” Romero said, “where the challenges in front of us are even more significant than we can even imagine.”

Since Trump took office, the ACLU has filed 135 legal actions against the presidential administration — covering everything from Muslim bans to abortion rights for a teenage immigrant.

And as the civil rights group continues to challenge actions by Trump’s administration, its membership has also grown, Romero said.

Before Trump was elected, the ACLU nationwide had 400,000 donors. That number now has reached 1.75 million.

The ACLU of Utah has also seen an increase in membership locally. Executive Director Brittney Nystrom said Wednesday that before the 2016 election, there were about 1,500 Utah members. Today, the group has more than 7,000.

“We have seen just astronomical growth,” Nystrom said. “This is attributable to a sense of fear, but also a sense of wanting to do something, a sense of engagement and wanting to stand up for the Constitution and civil rights and civil liberties.”

Here are key areas on which Romero said the ACLU is focused nationally — and how the Utah chapter is responding:

Immigration issues

Romero said if he were forced to pick the most important issue for the ACLU today, it would be immigration.

But it’s not just a travel ban for nationals of primarily Muslim countries that is concerning, Romero said. There have been higher rates of arrests for deportation, which has equated to longer detention periods for those being expelled from the country. He noted a “scaling up” of enforcement from the Department of Homeland Security.

“[It’s] already an agency that had run amok and on steroids,” Romero said. “Under this president, it is even more unleashed.”

In Utah, Nystrom noted efforts to bring a lawsuit against immigration officers who broke into a Heber family’s apartment twice on consecutive days last April. A lawsuit filed in February alleges that agents violated the family’s constitutional rights by conducting warrantless, SWAT-style raids on a household with no criminal history.

Voter issues

Romero said the ACLU has challenged an Ohio law that allowed the government to revoke voter registrations if someone did not vote in two consecutive elections. They have also closely watched cases challenging gerrymandering in other states.

Locally, Nystrom said it was a win this past legislative session when lawmakers passed an ACLU-backed bill allowing same-day voter registration in Utah. Another bill also improved voter

registration in Utah, Nystrom said, with the addition of clearer instructions of voter registration on driver license renewal forms.

Reproductive rights

Nationally, the ACLU has focused its efforts on making sure the federal government did not defund Planned Parenthood. But the ACLU is also challenging anti-abortion and anti-reproductive rights laws at the state level, Romero said.

Nystrom said the ACLU of Utah had its own fight this past legislative session when lawmakers contemplated passing a bill to criminalize doctors who perform an abortion in light of a Down syndrome diagnosis. The hotly contested bill cleared the House and a Senate committee, but the measure was never heard on the Senate floor in the closing days.

“We were ready to litigate, if need be,” Nystrom said. “But we’re very thankful that the Legislature did the right thing and did not pass the bill.”