

# Ecumenical Advocacy Days as a first timer

*John Charles McAllister-Ashley, Institute Justice Team*

*John Charles, a member of the Justice Team, attended Ecumenical Advocacy Days (EAD) in Washington, D.C. for the first time in April 2026. This reflection is offered as a window into a first-time advocate's experience for the benefit of other first-timers. This year marked EAD's return to in-person advocacy after COVID-19 took the events online in 2020 after decades of annual events in D.C. The event, co-sponsored by the Mercy Justice Team, adopted a more grassroots-style feel in 2026 and is scheduled to return to D.C. in mid-April 2027.*

This was the first time that I had attended an event with so many like-minded individuals. I learned so much and made amazing connections in a short 48 hours. From meeting people I only see periodically in on-screen, digital boxes (thank you, Zoom!) to making lasting connections with new people, it was an overwhelming experience but also so powerful to see that the work of justice is getting done by people in so many walks of life. I met a number of people who hold our Justice Director, Marianne Comfort, in high regard, and that really sealed the deal that I was in the right place.

I attended two workshops at EAD. Christian Watkins from NETWORK shared about *How to Fight Authoritarianism*, and Alex Parker of the ELCA Advocacy Office presented *Advocacy 101*, a solid foundation of where to start your advocacy as a beginner. I took a lot of what he said into our visits with House and Senate office staff.

Honestly, I was not in my element during our Capitol Hill visits, but I was accompanied by experienced advocates who carried the meetings, showed me the ropes, and made room for me to participate at a comfortable level. Our meetings, especially the first, were very productive. We met with Kweisi Mfume's Legislative Director, Andrew Heineman. He spoke to us with respect and was very supportive of the FEMA Act of 2025 (H.R. 4669) and the Protecting Sensitive Locations Act (S. 455 / H.R. 1061). We also met with Senator Chris Van Hollen's Legislative Correspondents, Myesha Hussein and Leo Confalone. They were both receptive to the FEMA Act and Protecting Sensitive Locations Act, but they were nowhere near as vocally supportive as our previous meeting. Finally, we met with Angela Alsobrooks's National Security Advisor, Jonathan Lord. I was surprised our meeting was with him, as our subject bills were not in his area of expertise, but he seemed very optimistic about the FEMA Act and stated he would

look into the Sensitive Locations Act. I was able to make a memorable connection in Senator Alsobrooks's office, as I have a family member that works on her staff.

Overall, it was a great experience but not uncomplicated. The House and Senate office buildings create some sensory challenges with hard, echo-prone walls and confusing floorplans, and my discomfort was compounded by the feeling that I was underdressed. I enjoyed my time, but I would have felt more ready to express myself and speak up if I had done more homework on our chosen bills. I think with proper preparation, a more formal outfit, and a fresh haircut, I would fit exceptionally well in that environment and hold my own to contribute more meaningfully. Next time will be better, and there definitely will be a next time.