



# STORIES FOR JUSTICE



# Development Phase and Year 1

Stories for Justice films are presented by the award-winning documentary series *Independent Lens* which combines the power of documentary storytelling, public television, and community engagement to shine a light on people's lived experience of the criminal justice system. **The goal: to spark conversations and boost the work of people on the front lines of reform.**

This issue brief provides an overview of the Development Phase and Year 1 (Summer 2019–Summer 2021) of the Stories for Justice multi-year initiative, highlight what Americans learned and how they plan to discuss issues of criminal justice and become more civically engaged.

# Producing Films

**Stories for Justice includes: 3 docuseries, 11 feature films, and 22 short films.**

- 5 feature films, 16 short films, and an eight-part docuseries (19 hours of content) were distributed by the end of Year 1.
- Films focus on urban and rural communities across the country and cover a range of complex topics: community crime prevention, policing, pre-trial diversion, life behind bars, reentry programs, and others.
- For a complete list of *Independent Lens* films in Stories for Justice visit: [itvs.org/stories-for-justice/films](https://itvs.org/stories-for-justice/films).

***Independent Lens* has partnered with 48 independent filmmakers to produce these films.**

- 50% of filmmakers identified as female.
- 66% identified as African American, Asian American, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and/or Native American/Native Alaskan.
- Stories for Justice filmmakers have received \$8.1 million in ITVS development and production funding.

“My goal was to look for **intimate and honest conversations** that would help people understand what happened in a different way than what was being presented in short sound bite media coverage, and to **listen to what’s actually being said**. My hope is that the film helps to create a space for new conversations about race, justice and coalition building, and challenges audiences to **question who really benefits** when legacies of solidarity are disrupted.”



**Ursula Liang**

Director, *Down a Dark Stairwell*

# Engaging Audiences

**Films that are a part of Stories for Justice have reached 27.3 million viewers.**

- Viewers watched films on the multiplatform PBS series *Independent Lens* via broadcast or streaming or during events.
- Marketing and publicity campaigns, with \$113.6 million in earned media, raised awareness of broadcast premieres and streaming.
- *Independent Lens* attracts one of the most diverse audiences of any PBS prime time series.

**More than 9,698 event participants attended 190+ film screenings and discussion forums across the country.**

- *Independent Lens* partnered with 21 criminal justice organizations, 24 public media stations, and 29 other community organizations, such as libraries, to host the events.
- Stories for Justice events brought new audiences into the discussion of criminal justice issues: more than 70% of participants did not work for the criminal legal system or toward its reform.

“Our decision to partner with *Independent Lens* and to **choose distribution on public television** upfront, even in the fundraising stages, was important. We really wanted to have the film be **available to people who are currently incarcerated**, and public media provided that opportunity.”



## Angela Tucker

Producer, *Belly of the Beast*

Co-director, *I Am Not Going to Change*  
*400 Years in Four*

# Impacting Viewers

**60% of viewers learned “a lot” or “a great deal” from watching *Stories for Justice* films.**

- Viewers who had not worked within the criminal justice system or toward its reform learned the most.
- The more episodes or films viewers watched, the more they learned.
- Films that exposed shocking realities, such as *Belly of the Beast*'s exposé on forced sterilizations, were most effective at raising viewer awareness.

**45% of viewers were “extremely” likely to discuss the issues raised in the films with members of their community.**

- When viewers connected to and learned from the content, they were more likely to discuss it with their community.
- Viewers planned to discuss criminal justice topics (ex. cash bail, policing, supports for people who are incarcerated) and the root causes of mass incarceration (ex. systemic racism).

**Many viewers planned to be more civically engaged.**

- Viewers planned to learn about local policies, contact elected representatives, and volunteer with or donate to organizations working to improve the system.

## After seeing this film, I will...

“advocate for the **end of cash bail.**”

*Philly D.A.* viewer

(Hispanic/Latino male, age 18–24, Winston-Salem, NC)

“get involved with organizations that will **stand for and support** a movement that involves incarcerated individuals.”

*Belly of the Beast* viewer

(Black female, age 50–64, Baton Rouge, LA)

“**talk with friends** who, like me, care about these issues and will make their voices heard, **advocating for more addiction treatment** and its separation from the criminal justice system.”

*The D.A.'s Dilemma* viewer

(White female, age 65+, Salem, OR)



# *Belly of the Beast*

*Belly of the Beast* exposes forced sterilizations in women's prisons, a human rights travesty largely affecting Black and Latinx people.

*Independent Lens*, the filmmakers, and local community organizations hosted more than 40 screenings and community discussions. The film team and *Independent Lens* also implemented a strategic media campaign.

## *Belly of the Beast*

### KEY OUTCOMES:

- 91% of survey participants indicated the film **raised their awareness about forced sterilizations**.
- Most of these audiences **planned to discuss** what they learned. Many shared plans to get involved in prison reform efforts or to contact their elected officials to bring about change.
- Public awareness and **media coverage** of criminal abuses **increased significantly** after the film broadcast.
- A new reparation bill was introduced and passed. California will now provide **\$7.5M in reparations** to as many as 600 forced-sterilization survivors.

**“For [people who are or have been incarcerated] to watch this film and to see, **these are actual things that are happening**. I myself may have been coercively sterilized or lied to. It has opened up so much.”**

Kelli Dillon, *Belly of the Beast* film participant



**FILM PARTICIPANT AND PREVIOUSLY INCARCERATED ACTIVIST, KELLI DILLON (RIGHT), AND CYNTHIA CHANDLER FROM JUSTICE NOW (LEFT), ALSO A FILM PARTICIPANT, SEATED AT HEARING.**

CREDIT: BELLY OF THE BEAST LLC

# *Philly D.A.*

*Philly D.A.*, over eight episodes, provided an in-depth look at people's lived experience of the criminal justice system: cash bail, police unions, sentencing and drug laws, the juvenile justice system, parole and probation, and more.

*Independent Lens*, the filmmakers, Fair and Just Prosecution, and local news outlets collaborated on a multipronged "Get to Know Your D.A." strategy.

Local prosecutors attended screening events to provide audiences across the country with an opportunity to discuss how their officials are addressing issues.

"The People v." YouTube video series dove deeper into issues raised in the series, such as cash bail, attracting 59,000–74,000 views per video.

Filmmakers and journalists created multimedia storytelling packages, including short films, articles, and radio spots, focusing on politically diverse prosecutors who seek change.

Viewers had access to a directory where they could look up their local prosecutor and their term in office.

## *Philly D.A.*

### KEY OUTCOMES:

- More than half of survey respondents indicated they **learned about the role of prosecutors** and/or **racial inequities** in the legal system.
- 74% learned about **reform efforts** in the criminal legal system.
- 46% of viewers who did not know who their prosecutor was at the time they watched **visited the prosecutor directory** to find out. Viewers who attended an event were more likely to look up their prosecutor than those who did not.

**“[I will] not remain silent. I will contribute to the discussions of local criminal justice matters in my community. The local DA office needs feedback [on] their decisions that affect their community.”**

*Philly D.A. viewer*

(Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander male, age 50–64, Honolulu, HI)



**PHILADELPHIA DISTRICT ATTORNEY LARRY KRASNER  
REVIEWING DOCUMENTS**

CREDIT: RYAN COLLERD

# *Down A Dark Stairwell*

*Down a Dark Stairwell* chronicles the tragic shooting of Akai Gurley, an innocent Black man, and the trial of Chinese American police officer Peter Liang, who pulled the trigger. It casts a powerful light on the experiences of two marginalized communities, thrust together into an uneven criminal justice system.

*Independent Lens* hosted a virtual screening carefully designed to create a safe space to watch the film and have a future-facing conversation about race, equity, and justice reform. The event attracted 292 attendees.

## *Down A Dark Stairwell*

### KEY OUTCOMES:

- 86% of survey participants indicated the film issues were either “**extremely**” or “**very**” **relevant to their community.**
- 63% of participants planned to **discuss racism or racial tensions** with members of their community.
- 72% planned to actively seek **opportunities for partnerships and allyship** among different groups in their community.

“**[I plan to] explore opportunities for truth and reconciliation between ethnic groups who have previously been in conflict.**”

*Down a Dark Stairwell* viewer

(Asian & White male, age 50–64, Oakland, CA)





**FILM PARTICIPANT, KERBIE JOSEPH, SPEAKS IN SUPPORT OF AKAI GURLEY  
NEAR THE EUCLID AVENUE A-TRAIN SUBWAY STOP IN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK.**

CREDIT: URSULA LIANG

# Learn More

Introducing [DocSCALE](#), the participatory feedback platform used by 1,734 viewers who watched *Independent Lens* films in the Stories for Justice initiative during Year 1.

- [Seeking Justice: Belly of the Beast's Impactful Engagement Strategy](#)
- Featured Event: *Women in Blue* [Reimagining Policing and Public Safety](#)
- Docuseries Snapshot: *Philly D.A.* [The Power of the Prosecutor](#)

About [ITVS](#), the presenter of *Independent Lens* and a leading funder of independent documentary film for public television.

This report was produced by Grace Anglin, Carly Nelson Marcoe, and Justine Armen



**INDEPENDENT  
LENS**

*Stories for Justice*