

The Initiator and Campaigner Group for HB290—Universal Voucher Bill—Has 16 Employees and a Huge Budget

The group supporting the Universal Voucher Bill plans to achieve the passage of the bill in 2022, according to an article in the November 29 Columbus Dispatch.

The group purchased a building across from the Statehouse for \$1.25 million, has a budget of over \$1.2 million per year, and has 16 employees.

With all that firepower, it appears HB290 will become a front burner item on the legislative agenda in 2022.

Christian policy group expands reach Nonprofit buys Downtown building

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The Center for Christian Virtue, which for nearly 40 years has stood in the center of Ohio's culture war debates, is taking a major leap to cement its power and signal its plans for expansion.

The nonprofit paid \$1.25 million for a downtown Columbus building at 60 E. Broad St. that overlooks the Ohio Statehouse. It is fundraising another \$3.75 million renovation of the 15,000-square-foot building.

"This building, for us, signifies the importance of having a strong Christian voice in not just Ohio politics but in American politics," said Aaron Baer, CCV president since 2016. "This is us saying we're going to be competing for ideas at the highest levels and have a real commitment to excellence in all that we do."

What is the Center for Christian Virtue?

CCV has grown from an organization founded in a Cincinnati church basement to the state's premier lobbying force on Christian conservative issues of abortion and religious freedom.

The organization weighs in on legislation and policy discussions, including critical race theory, private school vouchers and LGBTQ matters.

In his five years at the helm, Baer has built out the staff from two full-time and two part-time employees to 13 full-time and three part-time workers. The annual budget grew from \$400,000 in 2016 to \$1.2 million in 2020.

In recent years, CCV has rebranded from a very narrow range of social issues to a broader agenda that includes education and religious liberty, which is more aligned with the GOP in general, said political scientist Mark Caleb Smith of Cedarville University.

"This is a strategic change that reflects the broader political interests of traditional, conservative Christians," he said.

While CCV has a new name and address, it pushes the "same old oppressive rhetoric," said Alana Jochum, director of Equality Ohio, an LGBTQ rights group often on the opposite side of CCV.

In July, CCV policy director David Mahan gave a guest sermon at a megachurch that raised concerns among Ohio's LGBTQ community for his characterization of transgender issues. CCV made no apologies, and instead, doubled down on the message that gender clinics in Ohio are "pushing cross-sex hormones and puberty-blocking drugs on children."

Jochum said while CCV invests in buildings, Equality Ohio will invest in people and demand civil rights.

"They have tripled their staff and have purchased a 15,000 square-foot, six-story building, more determined than ever to bully Ohio backward, away from the progress we have achieved and will still win," Jochum said.

CCV: Founded in 1983 in a church basement

CCV has come a long way from a small organization founded in 1983 in the basement of College Hill Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati.

Over its 40 year history, CCV has a track record of controversy. Previously called Citizens for Community Values, it made national headlines for protesting the Robert Mapplethorpe photography exhibit in Cincinnati in 1990.

Mapplethorpe's provocative photo exhibit included some nude photos of children and gay sadistic and masochistic culture. While some viewed it as artistic expression, others saw pornography and smut. It spurred obscenity charges against the museum.

From 1991 to 2016, CCV was led by Phil Burress, a recovering porn addict who used the organization to campaign against pornography, promiscuity, obscenity and other morality issues.

Some of that advocacy involved fighting against LGBTQ rights and protections. In 1993, CCV pushed through a Cincinnati city charter ban on laws protecting gay people from discrimination.

In 2004, Burress and CCV led the effort to put a constitutional amendment on the statewide ballot to ban same-sex marriages and civil unions in Ohio. Eleven years later, that amendment was rendered moot when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage is constitutionally protected in Obergefell v. Hodges.

In 2007, CCV advocated for a state law that limits strip club dancers' physical contact with patrons.

Aaron Baer has led the Center for Christian Virtue, previously called Citizens for Community Values, since 2016.

New leadership in 2016

Burress retired in 2016 and handed over the baton to Baer.

Baer shaped CCV into the state's largest Christian public policy group. It has networks with 120 Catholic and evangelical schools and 2,200 churches and is building what Baer calls the "Christian Chamber of Commerce" to support businesses.

In addition to renovating the newly purchased building, Baer and CCV have big plans for 2022, including:

Passing the 'backpack bill' that will allow every K-12 students to get a government voucher to attend private school.

CC3025 Tuesday November 30

Passing a bill to limit the health care transgender children can access regardless of parental consent.

Opposing a bill to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment and public places based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Stopping a citizen-initiated statute and stand-alone bills to legalize recreational marijuana.

The scope of topics underscores how sweeping CCV's lobbying has become. CCV has transformed from a pressure group, which mobilized voters and donors around a specific event, into an educational and advocacy organization with widespread influence, said Smith, the Cedarville professor.

He added, "It is politics through information and relationships instead of mobilization and pressure."

Laura Bischoff is a reporter for the USA TODAY Network Ohio Bureau, which serves the Columbus Dispatch, Cincinnati Enquirer, Akron Beacon Journal and 18 other affiliated news organizations across Ohio.

[Policy group Center for Christian Virtue buys building near Statehouse \(dispatch.com\)](https://www.dispatch.com/content/news/Policy_group_Center_for_Christian_Virtue_buys_building_near_Statehouse_20181129.html)