

# New Carnegie grant fuels McCain Institute's fight for political prisoners

**Funding will support initiative providing global advocacy to free political prisoners, hostages**

By Staci McDermott, ASU News  
August 11, 2025

The McCain Institute at Arizona State University has received a \$500,000 grant from [Carnegie Corporation of New York](#) to boost its global work on behalf of political prisoners and hostages.

The grant will serve as seed funding for the institute's [John McCain Freedom for Political Prisoners Initiative](#) — a program inspired by the late senator's time as a prisoner of war and his lifelong defense of human rights — enabling it to secure key resources, engage policymakers and boost vital interventions for those held abroad.

[According to the U.S. State Department](#), an estimated 1 million individuals were being wrongfully detained by authoritarian regimes worldwide in 2024, including dozens of American citizens. The Freedom for Political Prisoners Initiative aims to combat this global crisis through persistent, high-level advocacy and international collaboration. Its mission is to spotlight unjust detentions and help secure the release of political prisoners around the world, carrying forth the legacy of McCain as a POW and lifelong advocate for political prisoners.

“Carnegie Corporation of New York is committed to supporting initiatives that strengthen democracy, a core tenet of our founder Andrew Carnegie’s legacy,” said [Jeanne D’Onofrio](#), chief of staff at the philanthropic foundation. “We’re pleased to support the McCain Institute in its efforts to address unjust detention — an issue that undermines functioning democratic societies worldwide.”

In its first year, the initiative has focused on several high-profile cases, including [Mzia Amaghlobeli](#), a Georgian journalist; [Jesús Armas](#), a Venezuelan opposition leader; [Maria Kalesnikava](#), a Belarusian flutist and activist; and Israeli American [Gaza hostages](#).

“The McCain Institute is grateful for this generous grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York, and we are beyond excited for this program’s potential to be fully realized,” said McCain Institute

Executive Director Evelyn Farkas. “With guidance from our advisory council, led by Free Russia Foundation Vice President Vladimir Kara-Murza, we look forward to advocating for the return of pro-democracy activists, human rights defenders, journalists and all who have been wrongfully detained.”

The McCain Institute has already demonstrated impact. Following the 2022 wrongful imprisonment of Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian democracy advocate and U.S. permanent resident, the McCain Institute led advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C., and globally, including holding several events on Capitol Hill, petitioning the White House and United Nations, and raising awareness through strategic communications efforts, eventually helping secure his release in August 2024 as part of a multilateral prisoner exchange. The McCain Institute also awarded Kara-Murza the [McCain Institute Courage and Leadership Award](#) at the Sedona Forum.

Similarly, the McCain Institute played a pivotal role in the release of Georgian journalist and media owner Nika Gvaramia, who was sentenced over three years for his reporting. [Through media outreach](#), political engagement and coordination with legal teams, the McCain Institute helped secure his pardon and release after seven months of advocacy.

Most recently, the McCain Institute celebrated the return of the last two living Israeli Americans held hostage in Gaza, Edan Alexander and Sagui Dekel-Chen, along with the remains of Judy Weinstein-Haggai and Gadi Haggai. Advocacy continues for the release of the remains of Itay Chen and Omer Neutra, as well as the remaining hostages still held in Gaza.

“The progress we’ve been able to make in the last few years has fundamentally improved the lives of many who have been unjustly detained, and their families. This seed funding from Carnegie will take us to a new level of advocacy and will touch the lives of many,” said Pedro Pizano, director of the Freedom for Political Prisoners Initiative and global democracy programs.

---

*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*