



# TAKING RISKS

to advance  
social equity

FISCAL YEAR 2016 ANNUAL REPORT





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# VOQAL IS

the collaboration of five  
nonprofits that support  
the use of technology and  
media to advance social equity

## 2016: VOQAL INVESTS BOLDLY

Voqal is a collaboration of Educational Broadband Service (EBS) licensees that work to create an educated and informed public. We have strived to fulfill the mission of EBS, from our beginnings providing free educational video to schools to recent efforts to support change-makers in education. While some Voqal programs serve traditional educational entities like K-12 schools, we embrace a broader view of education and aim to ensure equal access to knowledge to foster a stronger, healthier democracy.

As a collective of EBS licensees, Voqal is committed to using the airwaves to benefit the public. With resources afforded

by spectrum use agreements, Voqal's programs include education ventures, affordable internet service for schools and nonprofits, philanthropic grants, EBS spectrum advocacy, fellowships for social entrepreneurs and more. Voqal's programs and initiatives are all grounded in education and are often aimed at the root causes that bar access to knowledge both in and out of traditional brick and mortar institutions.

Our mission is to advance social equity by creating an educated an informed public.

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

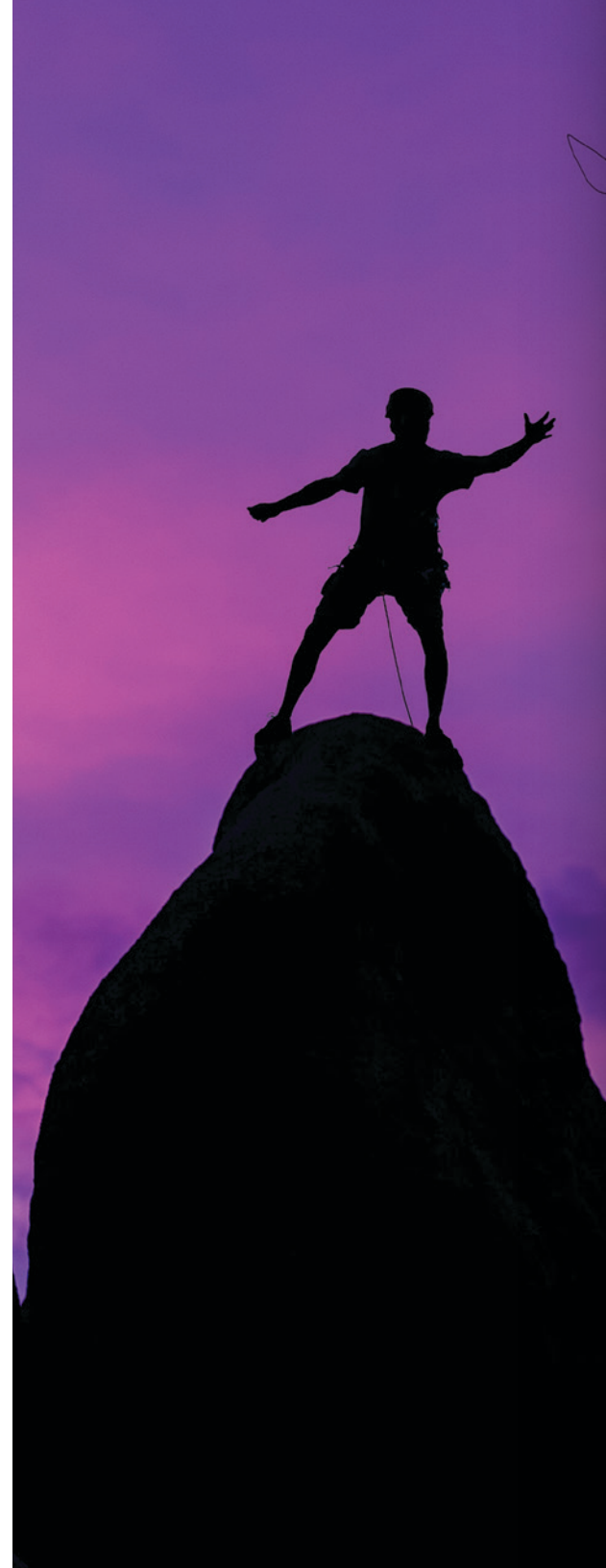
*Dear Friends,*

The annual report is dead. Or so my communications director tells me. That's okay, because at Voqal we are an eclectic bunch and we often buck the status quo. Take the spectrum band known as EBS (Educational Broadband Service). Ever heard of it? Most people haven't. Here at Voqal, however, EBS is our bread and butter.

I believe the FCC showed great foresight about the role technology would play in education when, in 1963, it reserved a spectrum band (now called EBS) to support educational institutions and nonprofit entities whose missions are educational. That's why I founded Voqal -- the collaboration of five different EBS licensees who have banded together to use this public asset to serve the public.

And we've spent the last 30 or so years trying to do just that. With each passing year, however, *"we the people"* seems to move more towards *"we the powerful."* At Voqal we believe the status quo in educational philanthropy is not enough to shift the tide. We believe education is embedded in a society so unequal and so inequitable that broader change is needed if the education system is to work as it needs to. And we believe that broader change is going to come only with calculated risk taking.

So in this annual report, our first, you will read stories about how we invest boldly. Bravely. But not blindly. How in 2016 we tried to make civics cool by connecting it with a wildly popular YouTube series. How we took a chance on a start-up that connects rural school children with professionals in the STEAM industry. How one of our flagship programs, Mobile Citizen, is working to bridge





# BRIDGE THE DIVIDE

the digital divide by partnering with schools and local community organizations that are doing the hard work in the neighborhoods that most need it, day in and day out.

You will also read about how we support media and tech startups that catalyze progressive change, like Blavity – one of the largest digital communities of diverse millennials in the U.S. How we support not just organizations with big plans, but also individuals with big ideas too. Individuals like Nikki Zeichner whose upbringing, combined with her experience representing prisoners denied parole, sparked an interest in exploring available parole data to improve the parole hearing process. Yes, we focus directly on education by helping ensure teachers in rural Kansas have access to the internet (*that story is in here too*), but we also support bold entrepreneurs committed to using technology and media to promote social equity.

Our work in fiscal year 2016 illustrates that at Voqal we take an independent and assertive approach to our commitment to serve the public. We are willing to take risks and support efforts that demand reforms before they reach the stage of political acceptability. Small, episodic change is fine. We just prefer the harder stuff.

--John Schwartz

## VOQAL EDUCATION

Recognizing that there is a dearth of civics minded programming, Voqal Education decided to lead the charge and fund a civics version of the wildly popular Crash Course series.

Crash Course is an educational YouTube channel featuring 10-minute videos that condense complex topics into quirky, engaging tutorials. Crash Course's YouTube channel has nearly 3 million subscribers, and the videos are shown in classrooms across the country, as well as watched by the public at large. While funding a proven success like Crash Course may not seem like a bold proposition, funding civics programming with the hope of changing attitudes and behaviors around participating in the democratic process is not the safest of bets. Yes, legions of fans love all things Crash Course, but could quirky civics programming actually increase participation in the democratic process?

***"@Voqal : THANK YOU for supporting the work of @johnngreen and @TheCrashCourse! (much love to @wheezywaiter for CC Gov't & Politics!) #kudos"***

Boosted by a partnership with PBS Digital Studios, the Crash Course — U.S. Government and Politics series has 50 episodes covering everything from how a bill becomes a law to gerrymandering. Information is power and the phenomenal viewership numbers bring us hope that our calculated risk has increased participation in the democratic process. At Voqal we believe the root of a healthy democracy is an educated and informed public and are excited to experiment with different ways of increasing access to information.

**KNOWLEDGE  
IS POWER**

***"Longtime Crash Course fan and just wanted to voice my appreciation for your support of the series on US Politics. Thank you!"***



Crash Course consists  
of 50 videos with

4,038,658

views as of  
March 8, 2016



Our efforts  
increase access,  
community  
and knowledge  
for the  
organization  
and people  
we support





## VOQAL EDUCATION VENTURE FUND

*Because inequality in education leads to social and economic inequality, Voqal Education takes a chance on organizations working to even the educational playing field by providing them early stage funding through the Voqal Education Venture Fund.*

The fund provides \$50-100K to technology and media organizations addressing opportunity and achievement gaps within the U.S. educational system.

In its first year, the Education Venture Fund seeded three innovative changemakers already working to address inequality in education: Nepris, Education Modified and Pairin.

Plano, Texas-based Nepris is a technology platform that helps expose students to curriculum, role models and information about STEAM-focused (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) careers. The technology allows teachers to enter their curriculum needs and then pairs them with professionals with matching skill sets who have previously committed to volunteer time.

# \$220,000

Investment  
made in FY16:

By exposing students to the excitement and benefits of STEAM careers early in their education, Nepris is helping to close the opportunity gap faced by many minority, rural and low-income individuals who are often left out because they don't have access to professionals working in diverse industries in their local areas.

Nepris is off to a great start with tremendous momentum among schools and industry alike and has been busy with new product updates, new market opportunities and a new round of funding, including closing the bridge round of \$1 million with the Michael and Susan Dell foundation as lead investor. Nepris is well on its way to meeting its mission of breaking down barriers between industry and education and creating equity of access.

CLOSING  
THE GAP

# \$172,500

Amount invested in  
FY2016 Voqal Fellows:

## VOQAL FELLOWSHIP

The Voqal Fellowship takes risks on unproven entrepreneurs, change-makers and thought leaders who have a “big idea” to remedy a social inequity. Unlike many fellowships, however, part of the design of the Voqal Fellowship revolves around educating early-stage entrepreneurs around the formation, development and implementation of their idea.

People like Nikki Zeichner, a former New York City criminal defense attorney, whose upbringing, combined with her experience representing prisoners denied parole, sparked an interest in documenting, sharing and exploring available parole data to improve the parole hearing process.

“When I was growing up, my mother worked as a forensic social worker,” said Zeichner. *“Through her, I learned about the day to day aspects of our criminal justice system: the bureaucracy, the tragedy, the link between poverty and incarceration, the way people get lost in the system.”*

“In New York over 10,000 parole-eligible prisoners are denied release every year and the process of how these determinations are made is unclear,” said Zeichner.





Recognizing that the first step towards fixing a broken system is understanding it, Zeichner proposed the building of a comprehensive dataset of New York state parole hearing information to get better clarity about how the parole board makes its decisions by examining diverse sources of data.

Despite numerous obstacles, including the inability to access all the data she desired, Zeichner forged ahead in her quest to help people understand the distinction between past and present behavior and to create a more transparent and just parole system in New York state. Zeichner realized she could make a more lasting impact in the short time she had as a Voqal Fellow by developing strong data scraping code and producing a digital space in which people can access open data and work collaboratively.

In the end, Zeichner paved the path for more exploration of parole hearing data in criminal justice research and achieved her goal of bringing more attention to an existing social justice problem. Since being a Voqal Fellow, Zeichner has been contacted by academics and journalists from the U.S. and abroad who have relied on either her or her project to produce new scholarship around how parole boards in New York, and the U.S. more broadly, decide whether an incarcerated individual is fit to return home.

Fellows like Zeichner exemplify the risk taking nature of the Voqal Fellowship program. Supporting early-stage projects that are still in the sometimes messy, but always-important stages of trial and error is a key component of the program. By taking risks on early social change agents like Zeichner, Voqal is able to get one step closer to fulfilling its promise of advancing social equity through the creation of a more educated and empowered society.

ENTREPRENEURIAL  
SPIRIT

5 Fellows  
in FY: 2019



## MOBILE CITIZEN

Partnering with organizations that face daunting challenges, but forge full steam ahead nonetheless, is yet another way Voqal takes calculated risks. The digital divide runs deep in the United States. Too many schools, low-income people, people of color and older Americans are being left behind. Through its Mobile Citizen initiative, Voqal is honored to partner with organizations around the country that are determined, despite the size of the divide, to provide training, computer equipment and internet to all, regardless of age, education and economic status.

Ashbury Senior Computer Community Center, a nonprofit inter-generational technology learning center in the heart of Cleveland, Ohio, is one such partner. Ashbury helps many types of people including adults with limited income, young adults eager to go to college and senior citizens. More than half of the participants in Ashbury's programs have an annual household income below \$15,000 and with few options available to them to learn technology and get access to the internet on their own, Ashbury's program is critical.

Whether it's families with children in school that have no internet access at home and whose kids fall prey to the homework gap or job searchers who wait patiently in line at the library

for their one hour of computer use to complete job applications, Ashbury serves countless families that need the internet to keep up. Mobile Citizen's partnership and much-needed affordable internet has been a key component of many Ashbury success stories.

For one Ashbury client, Sharon Hunter, a 58-year-old registered nurse raising her grandkids, getting the internet at Ashbury is a family affair. From her parents who signed up for the structured technology classes, to Hunter who signed up for affordable internet for her and her grandkids, all have benefited from Ashbury's services.

Noting that having the internet at home is very convenient, Hunter believes where it has really made a difference is in access to information for her and her grandkids.

"We use it for everything, mostly research for my grandchildren who need it for their reports," Hunter said. "The grandkids need to get online for their school reports — they need

*Estimated value of  
subsidized MC service:*

**\$9.1  
MILLION**

information and pictures — they can't just show up at school with blank poster boards because they can't get online at home."

Another Ashbury client, 31-year old Cleveland native Alexandria Winfield says having affordable internet has made life easier for her and her two kids. ***"We use the internet for most everything -- to keep up with the news, to do the kids' schoolwork and to do research about the things we're interested in."*** And while having access to the internet hasn't necessarily improved her bowling, one of her favorite pastimes, Winfield has used it to further her own education by taking classes online through the local university.

And then there are the folks who are worried about being left behind. People like Ashbury client Ivan Watley, a 54-year-old retired man who has lived in Cleveland his whole life. Living with his wife and his aging mother, whom he takes care of,

# JUMP IN

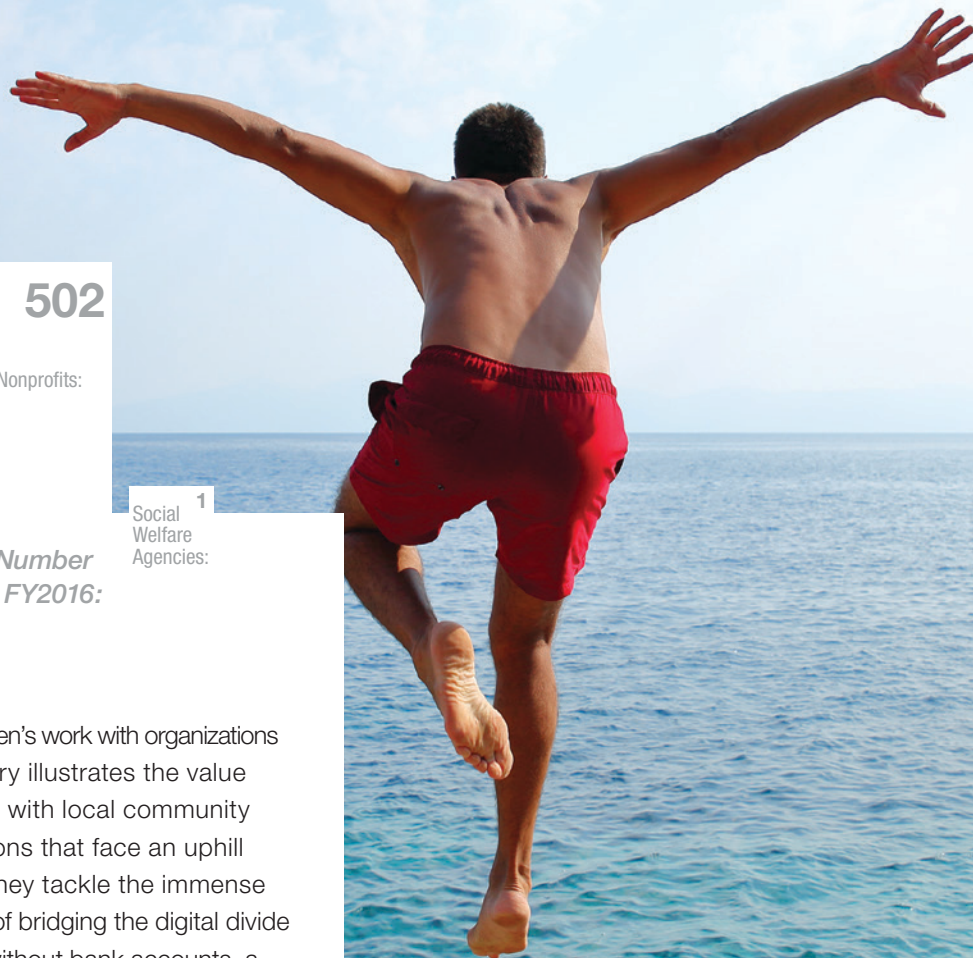
Watley was afraid that the technology world was moving on without him. As a Marine Corps veteran, Ivan qualified for government-sponsored computer classes at Ashbury and that, along with his desire to keep up with the times, brought him to Ashbury the first time.

At the time Watley started the classes he didn't have a computer or internet at home, and also did not know how to use either. Now, after attending computer classes at Ashbury and getting Mobile Citizen's affordable internet service, he not only has a computer at home and is online, but also regularly uses it to stay informed and to communicate with many people in his life, including his kids who live out of town. When asked what his favorite part of the Ashbury Mobile Citizen deal is – Watley said "It's the best price ever. I only have to pay once a year and it's affordable. That, and pictures of the grandkids, of course."




## Type and Number of Orgs in FY2016:

Mobile Citizen's work with organizations like Ashbury illustrates the value of working with local community organizations that face an uphill battle as they tackle the immense challenge of bridging the digital divide for those without bank accounts, a stable address and other things many of us take for granted. As an initiative of Voqal, *Mobile Citizen's work with these organizations exemplifies the Voqal promise of advancing social equity through an educated, empowered and engaged public.*





A person is bungee jumping from a high platform. They are wearing a blue helmet, a black jacket, blue jeans, and teal sneakers. They are suspended in mid-air, with their arms outstretched and legs bent. The background shows a vast landscape with green fields, a small town, and a city skyline in the distance under a clear blue sky. A red and white communication tower is visible on the left side of the frame.

Vogal has  
been working  
to build  
an educated,  
empowered,  
and engaged  
public for  
more than  
30 years

LOOK THEN  
LEAP





## VOQAL FUND

Voqal Fund's early support of New Media Ventures (NMV) is another example of risk taking. NMV is a first of its kind network of angel investors supporting media and tech startups that catalyze progressive change. NMV has been at this since 2010. Voqal provided start-up funding and has supported them all along the way. (Voqal President, John Schwartz is a founding steering committee member.)

Since its inception, NMV and its investor network have invested over \$7 million in 32 media and technology startups. Through one such startup, Blavity, NMV is trying to amplify the voices of underserved communities and create a more equitable society.

Blavity's CEO Morgan DeBaun is a first-time founder who had made the rounds pitching the digital community startup to various venture capitalists only to be turned away. New Media Ventures, with the Voqal Fund's support, was willing to take a risk where others wouldn't.

"NMV was Blavity's first money in and it was incredibly helpful to have them as a thought partner during Blavity's early days," said Morgan.

"As a first time entrepreneur, I didn't have access to a strong network in Silicon Valley and NMV's guidance was critical to helping me raise our first round of funding and build a smart, defensible business."

NMV's support of Blavity ensured Morgan was able to serve an underserved community, amplify underrepresented views and perspectives into the mainstream and create a more positive narrative around people of color focused on the belief that *"if you can change the way people view the world, you can transform it."*

Not only was NMV support vital to Blavity's early success, but its leadership also led to further investments from The Knight Foundation and several individual NMV investors. The Blavity story represents the NMV model at its best — it put in the initial capital, oversaw the investment of follow-on financing and inspired new funders to consider impact investing as a tool in their toolbox for catalyzing progressive change. And now Blavity is one of the largest digital communities of diverse millennials in the U.S., reaching over 3 million individuals a month.

Through the Voqal Fund we are proud to support disruptors like New Media Ventures and believe their work is vital to making sure we have an educated and informed public.

**\$4 MILLION**  
Over 60 grants  
totaling more than:

## INDEPENDENT SPECTRUM

At Voqal, we believe that Educational Broadband Service (EBS) spectrum set aside by the FCC is a valuable resource that should be preserved and fully developed. For too long, EBS licenses have been underutilized. Not content with the status quo, we created Independent Spectrum as an ally for other EBS spectrum holders.

Through contracts with commercial wireless carrier Sprint, Independent Spectrum passes through to educational entities significant financial and educational benefits. From small, rural communities like Alto, TX to larger, commercially-built markets like Minneapolis, MN, Independent Spectrum assists licensees of all sizes and technological sophistication to maximize benefits from their EBS spectrum.

One place Independent Spectrum has made a difference is in Hutchinson, Kansas. Known as “Hutch” to the locals, Hutchinson is located on the northeast bank of the Arkansas River in south-central Kansas. A home to salt mines since 1887, the city has approximately 42,000 people and more than a dozen schools.

The principal of one such school, Holy Cross Catholic School’s Kevin Hendrick, describes internet access as a tool that not all his teachers can

afford. “In a perfect world, schools would have the ability to pay teachers better than we do. The use of hotspots has helped our teachers, and I’m appreciative of this.”

That’s where Independent Spectrum steps in. By ensuring that EBS spectrum is put to use in the way it was originally intended, supporting education, Independent Spectrum is able to secure resources for the school that it would be hard pressed to secure dealing with commercial operators on its own – opportunities like no-cost access to mobile internet hotspots for staff.

Rebecca Oberly, the school’s new music teacher had difficulty getting consistent wireless internet service in her classroom with the school’s paid internet service. The Independent Spectrum hotspot ensured she would have internet service in the classroom

whenever connectivity was an issue. Music curriculum is available online, and avoiding the interruption of service is highly beneficial to the students in her music classes.

In addition, since Oberly lives on a tight budget at home she was staying late in the evenings to enter grades and plan lessons using the school’s internet. “I do not have internet at home because as a recent college graduate and second year teacher, this is a luxury that I cannot afford at this time.” Now, with the mobile hotspot provided at no cost to Holy Cross, she can do these things from home. According to Oberly, the mobile hotspot “was an answer to (her) prayers.”

Brad Hollinger, the school’s PE teacher, and his wife, Janel Hollinger, a third grade teacher at the school, say the mobile hotspot they share has made a



NEW HEIGHTS





## 32 CALL SIGNS

In FY16 there were 18  
subsidiaries that had  
agreements with  
18 entities

big difference in their lives and their teaching.

The hotspot helps both teachers a great deal when they travel to visit family because now they can access the internet on the road and stay caught up on school responsibilities. Also, instead of staying at school late grading or looking up online resources for lesson planning they can do it from home.

***“We never knew what a hotspot was – it has made our lives easier and our teaching more effective – for that we are very thankful.”***

Through the 23 Independent Spectrum subsidiaries formed to-date, Independent

Spectrum has been able to pass through educational and financial benefits to 37 EBS licenses, and ultimately the students and teachers in need of the resources.



## SAMPLING OF GRANTEES:

Better Schools Better Jobs - [New Venture Fund](#)  
 Black Youth Project - [The University of Chicago](#)  
 Causa Oregon  
 Chicago Filmmakers - [Chicago Digital Media Production Fund](#)  
 Colorado Immigrant Rights Action Fund  
 Colorado Peoples Alliance  
 Every Voice - [Honest Elections in Seattle](#)  
 Free Press Action Fund  
 Free Speech TV  
 Great Education Action Fund  
 Kartemquin Films - [Filmmaker Development Programs](#)  
 New Media Ventures  
 Oregon Voice - [Communication Academy](#)  
 Rockwood Leadership Institute  
 Saint Paul Neighborhood Network  
 TakeAction Minnesota  
 Twin Cities Media Alliance  
 Voices for Racial Justice  
 Young Invincibles

2016

GRANTEES

VOQAL

BOARD

## VOQAL BOARD MEMBERS

### *Name*

### *Location*

Alice Ellis Gaut	Tigard, OR
Garlin Gilchrist II	Detroit, MI
Lilly Gleich	Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia
Neal Gosman	St. Paul, MN
Thom Hartmann	Washington, DC
Dylan Hydes	West Linn, OR
Barbara K. Iverson	Chicago, IL
Charles Marr	Portland, OR
Denise Mayotte	Minneapolis, MN
David McKay	Minneapolis, MN
Daniel X. O'Neil	Chicago, IL
Joe Pezzillo	Boulder, CO
John Schwartz	Boulder, CO
Luchelle Stevens	St. Paul, MN
Chet Tchozewski	Boulder, CO
James Traynor	Memphis, TN
Frances "Pancha" Valdez	Alamosa, CO



# VOQAL STAFF

*Name*

*Title*

Scott Adams	Mobile Citizen Operations Manager
Cassie Allen	EBS Bookkeeper
Chris Artem	Mobile Citizen Account Manager
Linda Arts	Mobile Citizen Bookkeeper
Vinny Badolato	Education Venture Fund Director
Cassie Bair	Mobile Citizen Chief Business Development Executive
Hazel Bolsover	Corporate Controller Voqal Nonprofits
Tricia Castillo	Mobile Citizen Customer Care Representative
Michele Christiansen	Voqal Fund Program Associate
Patricia Dwyer	CFO
Melissa Edmonds	Mobile Citizen Database Administrator
Kathy Engel	Office Manager
Molly Fohn	Mobile Citizen Anchor Institutions Program Manager
John Kennedy	Mobile Citizen Sales Manager
Zoncharne “Zon” Lee	Mobile Citizen Customer Care Representative
Chris Marceca	Executive Assistant to the COO
Adam Miller	COO
Kathy Partridge	Voqal Fund Senior Program Officer
Kristen Perry	Communications Director
Leah Pryor-Lease	Voqal Fund Program Officer
Nancy Platek	Payroll Bookkeeper
Zoe Raymer–Burdeau	Mobile Citizen Customer Care/Shipping Representative
Lisa Reed	Mobile Citizen Controller
Julie Reinders	Human Resources Director
Becky Schott	Director of Business Administration
John Schwartz	President & CEO
Erika Verplanck	Mobile Citizen Customer Care Representative
Mike Walker	EBS Assistant Controller
Jered Weber	Communications Associate

## STAY CONNECTED WITH VOQAL

Voqal: [www.voqal.org](http://www.voqal.org)

Mobile Citizen: [www.mobilecitizen.org](http://www.mobilecitizen.org)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/voqalorg/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/Voqal>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/voqal>

Voqal blog: <http://voqal.org/news/makingairwaves-blog/>

Voqal Fellowship mailing list: <http://voqal.org/initiatives/voqal-fellowship/>



TOGETHER WE

are Voqal:  
The call for change.

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