



TAKING OUR SEATS: HOW IAAQLI IS POWERING CIVIC LEADERSHIP THROUGH INDIANA BLACK EXPO

In a moment when policy decisions ripple through classrooms, neighborhoods, and dinner tables, Indiana Black Expo (IBE) is turning awareness into action—backed by investment from the Indianapolis African American Quality of Life Initiative (IAAQLI). Their joint push: equip everyday people to “take their seat” in civic life and shape what happens next.



“The intent is to get our community engaged, involved, and informed about what’s happening—politically, in our schools, in government, with our youth,” says Alice Watson, IBE President & CEO. “We want people to see how it works—and how they can dive in and be a part of the solution.”

That solution demands bodies and voices, not just headlines and hashtags. “It takes the entire community,” Watson emphasizes. “Leaders can only do so much. There’s power in numbers and power in words—power in picking up the

phone and understanding how things work at the Statehouse. We need numbers like crazy.”

IAAQLI’s support is catalytic. “They brought the funding,” Watson says plainly. “It’s opened doors, built capacity, and helped with sustainability. The funding and support from IAAQLI is the reason we’re able to do what we’re doing.”

IBE’s Taking Your Seat initiative models what informed engagement looks like. It places issue-makers and officeholders on stage to field tough questions and demystify participation. “It’s about making sure the community is informed about all things civic,” says Jennifer Darby, IBE Chief of Staff. “We bring together the people with their hands on the levers—youth, health, politics—so they can answer the hard questions our community is asking right now.”

Darby is clear: civic action is not a club—it’s a habit. “Everyone needs to be involved,” she says. “If all you do is share information and encourage someone to vote, you’re part of the work.”

IAAQLI’s role, Darby adds, is more than a grant line. “They’ve allowed us to be unapologetically engaged—moving initiatives for the African American community across housing, civic engagement, and education. It’s been good for the community.”

The impact multiplies through a cohort model—20 residents over six weeks, meeting decision-makers like the City-County Council President, then carrying insights back to their blocks, pews, and group chats. “Small victories become large victories,” Darby says. “Ten groups reaching ten people becomes a hundred—then a hundred more.”

Watson’s north star is practical power. “I want people to understand how things work—and that marching alone isn’t the most effective method,” she says. “Organizations care and we’re doing the work. We just need the community’s help to continue the momentum.”

Ready to take your seat? Learn more at IndianaBlackExpo.com.

Leaders can only do so much. There’s power in numbers and power in words—power in picking up the phone and understanding how things work at the Statehouse.

— Alice Watson, IBE President & CEO