



2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Laura N. Pierro
Executive Director
January 15, 2026



A Neutral State Agency
Charged with Investigating Post-Conviction Claims of Innocence

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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

TO THE MEMBERS OF THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY OF THE 2025-2026 SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA:

The North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission herewith submits to you for your consideration its annual report pursuant to N.C.G.S. § 15A-1475.

Respectfully Submitted,



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PREFACE

The North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission (Commission) was established in 2006 by Article 92 of the North Carolina General Statutes. The Commission is an independent Commission that is charged with investigating and evaluating post-conviction claims of factual innocence. The Commission staff carefully reviews new evidence and investigates cases in a neutral and impartial manner. North Carolina General Statute §15A-1475 requires the Commission to provide an annual report to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety by February 1 of each year.

2025 ANNUAL REPORT

This annual report to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety is provided pursuant to G.S. § 15A-1475. This report details the activities of the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission in 2025 and the Commission's plans for 2026. Included are statistics for 2025, as well as cumulative case statistics detailing case data since the Commission began operating in 2007. The Commission remains proud of the accomplishments we continue to achieve in making North Carolina a leader in answering the call of claims of wrongful convictions and serving as a model for the creation of other international commissions.

I. LEADERSHIP AT THE NORTH CAROLINA INNOCENCE INQUIRY COMMISSION

The Honorable Laura N. Pierro (former) continues to be the Executive Director. Director Pierro earned two Bachelor of Arts degrees in Linguistics and Spanish from the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, and a Juris Doctor from Wake Forest University School of Law. She began her legal career as a law clerk to three criminal judges of the Superior Court of New Jersey, Monmouth Vicinage and the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office. Thereafter, she was hired by the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office in Toms River, New Jersey, where she spent the next 20 years serving in various roles from Assistant Prosecutor in the Grand Jury, Juvenile and Trial Sections, to Director of the Special Victims' Unit, Trial Team Leader, Chief of the Trial Section and ultimately the Deputy Executive Prosecutor in charge of all litigation. In 2019, Director Pierro was appointed to the bench as a United States Immigration Judge. After serving in Manhattan, she then transferred to one of the Immigration Courts in New Jersey before electing to leave the bench to become the Executive Director of the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission. Director Pierro has been recognized throughout her career for her achievements as a member of both the bench and Bar and has been the recipient of awards honoring her commitment to victims in the criminal justice system. She is admitted to practice law in North Carolina and New Jersey.

During her time as Executive Director of the Commission, Director Pierro has continued to focus on increasing efficiency, streamlining processes, and updating policies and procedures to ensure the continued success of the Commission, its members and preserve the integrity of the process. Director Pierro has also made concerted efforts to raise awareness about the Commission, elevate its national and international profile and educate criminal justice partners on the success and sustainability of the Commission model. This included education at the local and state levels, invitations to speak nationally and testimony on the international level. On December 17, 2024, the Canadian Senate voted to create their own commission, to be known as the Miscarriage of Justice Commission, in part based on the testimony of the Director and other international commissions. To date their commission has not begun to officially operate.

Catherine Matoian is the Commission's Assistant Director. Ms. Matoian was promoted from her previous role as the Commission's Associate Director for Investigations in May 2024. Prior to that she was the Associate Director of Investigations from 2022-2024 and a Staff Attorney from 2013-2022. As a staff attorney, Ms. Matoian became well versed in post-conviction DNA testing and DNA testing technologies, having worked under the Commission's Post-Conviction DNA Testing Assistance Program grant for 9 years. Ms. Matoian graduated from the University of North Carolina at Asheville in 2008 with a Bachelor of Arts in History. She graduated from the Norman Adrian Wiggins School of Law at Campbell University in 2012. Ms. Matoian is admitted to practice law in North Carolina.

The Commission's Chair is Senior Resident Superior Court Judge Jason Disbrow, whose term began on January 1, 2024. Judge Disbrow became a superior court judge in 2020 and currently serves as the Senior Resident Superior Court Judge for Judicial District 13B (Brunswick County). Judge Disbrow graduated from NC State University in 1994 with a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration. Judge Disbrow went on to graduate from NC Central University School of Law in 1998. Prior to his service as a superior court judge, Judge Disbrow worked in private practice for 17 years and served as a district court judge for four and a half years.

This year, Chief Justice Newby and Chief Judge Dillon appointed new Commissioners to include a new primary and alternate victim advocate; a new primary and alternate Public Member; a new alternate Discretionary Member I; and a new primary and alternate Discretionary Member II.

Photographs of Commission staff and new and current Commissioners can be found on the following pages. Biographies for the Commission staff and Commissioners can be found on the Commission's webpage at www.innocencecommission-nc.gov.

Innocence Commission Staff



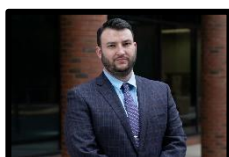
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Michael Sanders
Staff Attorney II



Emma Paul
Victim Services
Program Manager



Clare Kurdys
Grant Staff Attorney I



Siobhan Petracca
Grant Staff Attorney I



Tracey Hamilton
Executive Assistant



Kristie Parker
Paralegal



Jason Fitts
Paralegal

COMMISSIONERS



The Honorable
Jason Disbrow
Commission Chair



The Honorable
Beth Freshwater-Smith
Alternate Commission Chair



Ashley Welch
Prosecuting Attorney



Andrew Gregson
Alternate
Prosecuting Attorney



Catherine Johnson
Victim Advocate



Jane Allen Wilson
Alternate
Victim Advocate



Aleta R. Ballard
Criminal Defense Attorney



Darrin D. Jordan
Alternate
Criminal Defense Attorney



The Honorable Patricia
Evans, Ret.
Public Member



The Honorable Yvonne
Mims Evans
Alternate
Public Member



Van Shaw
Sheriff



Joey Lemons
Alternate
Sheriff



Kieran Shanahan
Discretionary Member I



The Honorable
Marion Boone
Alternate
Discretionary Member I



Mr. Robert J. Higdon, Jr.
Discretionary Member II



Mr. Quentin Williams
Alternate
Discretionary Member II

II. ACTIVITIES OF THE NORTH CAROLINA INNOCENCE INQUIRY COMMISSION

In 2025, the Commission focused on preserving its existence; defining responsibilities for new roles; hiring and training new staff; phasing out of paper filing; adopting new principles; efficiently moving claims through the Commission process; formulating new budget review systems; educating other countries, states, groups, and stakeholders about the Commission model; continuing to overhaul the Commission's antiquated database and exploring a new image.

A. CASE MANAGEMENT

The Commission received a total of 236 new claims in 2025, an increase in claims from 2024 and bringing the Commission's yearly average to 232 claims per year.

Beginning in 2016, through a concentrated effort to increase efficiency and streamline processes at the Commission, the Director and Commission staff worked to reduce the amount of time between when the Commission receives a questionnaire from a claimant and when the Director decides on whether the case meets the statutory case criteria for further review or closes the case. Prior to this effort, this process could take up to a year. In 2024 the Executive Director mandated that this process be completed within two (2) weeks.

Although each case is unique and the length of time to fully review a case is not predictable, the streamlining and increased efficiency of this process has allowed Commission staff to focus on further review and investigation of cases to reduce overall review time. For example, of those 236 cases received, the commission was able to screen, review, investigate and close 184 of them. Going forward, the Commission Director will continue to direct that all phases of claim reviews will be handled swiftly, deftly, and neutrally.

At the end of 2025, there are no longer any active cases that have been with the Commission for more than five years, down from 2024, and only six cases that have been with the Commission between three and four years, down from nine in 2024. All remaining cases with the Commission are two years or less. The Commission is prepared to continue to close at least four of the six oldest cases by the close of 2026.

While true that post-conviction innocence work in a broader sense often takes a decade or more to see resolution, the Commission has instituted processes and procedures that ensure that the Commission is reviewing innocence claims in a timely and efficient manner. For example, the Director has established strict deadlines that local agencies now must comply with initial requests before process is issued mandating compliance. The Director has also engaged in significant outreach with various stakeholders to explain our mission and purpose and provide legal guidance regarding effective compliance. Although each case is different and the circumstances of a case may affect the amount of time a case takes to be fully investigated by Commission staff, the Director is confident that the Commission is able to effectively and efficiently evaluate wrongful conviction claims as the General Assembly intended when it created the Commission in 2006.

B. GRANT FUNDING

DNA GRANTS

In September 2022, the Commission was awarded a three-year grant in the amount of \$550,000 through the Bureau of Justice Assistance FY 22 Postconviction Testing of DNA Evidence Program. This funding was originally slated to begin on October 1, 2022, and run through September 30, 2024; however, the funds were not released for use until December 2022. In 2023, the Commission was invited to apply for a non-competitive, one-year extension to the 2022 Grant with \$246,310 in additional funds. This extension was granted in 2024, meaning the grant will end September 30, 2025, with the option for a no-cost extension if needed. As with our previous DNA grants, for violent felonies where the convicted person is claiming innocence and DNA testing might show innocence, the grant funding covers two full-time staff positions, case reviews, evidence searches, travel, training, supplies, forensic experts, and DNA testing.

The Commission's approach to post-conviction DNA testing continues to be used as an example to other grantees. The grant has previously indicated to the Commission that it consistently conducts more DNA testing and has more success in locating evidence than other grantees. In 2025, the Commission was asked to be interviewed by BJA to promote the effectiveness and importance of continuing to fund these grants. The Commission regularly receives requests for assistance and advice from grantees in other states.

In 2025, the Commission applied for the BJA 2025 Postconviction Testing of DNA Evidence grant. Although this grant was slated to begin on October 1, 2025, the funding opportunity was not released until mid-September 2025 and award decisions have been delayed by the federal government shutdown. The Commission hopes to receive the 2025 Grant and be able to continue the essential work of DNA testing in post-conviction cases using the most up to date technologies.

So far under the 2022 Grant, the Commission has investigated 22 cases, conducted 25 evidence searches, and submitted evidence for DNA testing in 14 cases.

The Commission has received funding continuously from NIJ and/or BJA since 2010, receiving seven grants, totaling over \$4 million, for post-conviction DNA related cases. Since that time, twelve individuals have been exonerated or had their convictions vacated through Motions for Appropriate Relief and been granted pardons of innocence based on investigations, evidence searches and/or DNA testing conducted by the Commission under these grants. One individual has now been convicted and sentenced based on an investigation carried out by the Commission using grant funds. Furthermore, the Commission has also had DNA testing conducted in 16 cases that supported the conviction and located files and/or evidence which had previously been declared missing, lost or destroyed in 30 cases.

Through the current and past grants, the Commission has developed strong working

relationships with state and local agencies, as well as private laboratories. The Commission has been able to secure competitive rates for DNA testing at private laboratories, allowing the Commission to conduct DNA testing with the latest technology. The Commission has a strong working relationship with the NC State Crime Laboratory (NCSCL) and uses NCSCL, when possible, for DNA and other forensic testing, as well as to upload DNA profiles to the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS). The Commission will continue to apply for additional grant funding to offset the costs associated with investigating cases, conducting DNA testing, and evidence searches.

VOCA GRANT

In 2025, the Commission continued implementing its Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant from the Governor's Crime Commission. The Commission had a 2022-2024 VOCA grant to fund a partnership with the national nonprofit Healing Justice. Healing Justice is a unique organization that utilizes restorative justice and justice reform to provide healing to individuals and families harmed by wrongful convictions. This grant originally awarded the Commission \$48,855.50 over two years, from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2024. GCC provided the Commission with a one-year extension, with a budget of \$14,659.89, to continue funding this project until September 30, 2025. In the final year of this project, Victim Services Program Manager Emma Paul and Healing Justice partners focused on creating resources for other criminal justice stakeholders who may be considering using restorative justice practices when engaging with crime victims. Those resources include a qualitative report on crime victims' experiences with restorative justice practices. The goal of the report was to gain insight into victims' experiences with restorative practices, identify barriers to engagement, and inform the development of future outreach and programming. The report's contributors - victims who had experienced exonerations - provided deep personal reflections, offering valuable guidance on building trauma-informed, victim-centered restorative justice approaches to engagement and support. The final resource produced by the partnership was a webinar training that addresses criminal justice stakeholders' potential concerns about using restorative justice practices to engage with victims impacted by wrongful convictions. The webinar incorporated lessons learned over the course of the VOCA project.

Victim Services Program Plans for 2026

In 2026, the Commission plans to hire a new Victim Services Program Manager as Emma Paul will be leaving effective January 16, 2026, to pursue a master's degree full time. The Commission's Victim Services Program will continue to work on developing services to assist exonerees in their transition from incarceration. In 2026, the Commission will continue to aim to identify partner organizations and create a process for connecting exonerees with resources and services as they work to rebuild their lives. Finally, the Commission will continue to provide training for criminal justice partners who interact with victims of crime in the post-conviction context with respect to what the Commission has learned through implementation of its Victim Services Program.

C. CASE STATISTICS

In 2025, the Commission received a total of 236 new innocence claims. Since it began operating in 2007, the Commission has received 4,296 claims of actual innocence. As of December 31, 2025, 3,770 cases had been reviewed and closed. Also in 2025, the Commission reviewed over 82,109 pages of case material, which reflects the complexity of cases currently under investigation, and conducted 20 witness interviews, 2 depositions, 1 search warrant, 16 separate searches for evidence, listened to 419 jail phone calls and consulted with 9 experts. The Commission also uncovered evidence that was not already in the State's control in two cases.

Throughout the Commission process, statistics are maintained for each case. These statistics reflect the types of crime at issue, the basis of the innocence claims submitted, and the reasons for rejection. The statistics show that the types of convictions reviewed by the Commission vary, with murder and sex offenses being the most common. This year, as in years past, more than 60% of cases are rejected by the Commission because the evidence was already heard by the jury at their original trial, was available at the time of plea, amounts merely to procedural complaints, and/or do not suggest reliable evidence that can be used to establish innocence. The Commission can only consider cases in which new evidence of innocence is now available. Included on the following three pages is a compilation of statistical data for the Commission. Further statistical data is available from the Commission's Director upon request.

CASE STATISTICS

The Commission began operation in 2007

4296

TOTAL NUMBER OF CLAIMS RECEIVED SINCE COMMISSION'S CREATION

4254

TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES CLOSED SINCE COMMISSION'S CREATION

236

NUMBER OF CLAIMS RECEIVED IN 2025

20

NUMBER OF HEARINGS CONDUCTED SINCE COMMISSION'S CREATION*+

16

EXONERATIONS**

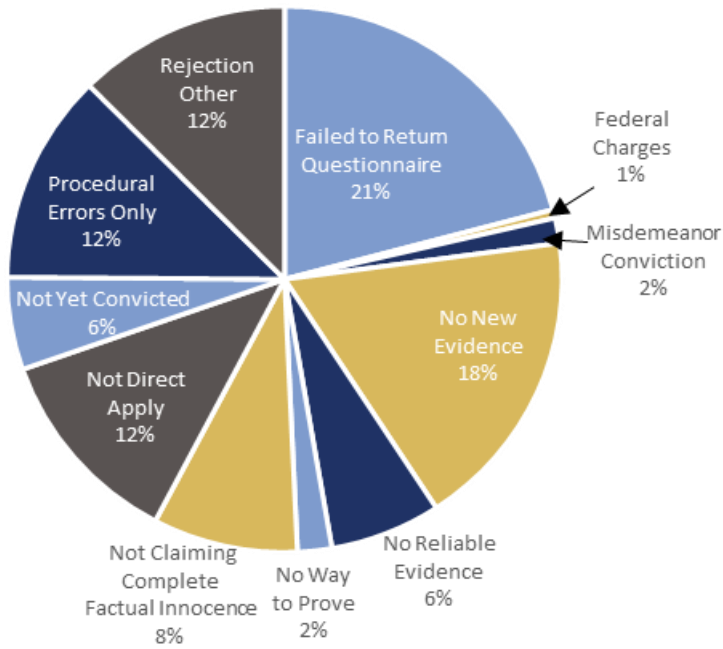
Data compiled January 6, 2026

*One of the hearings involved two separate and unrelated convictions of one claimant; thus 20 cases have been heard.

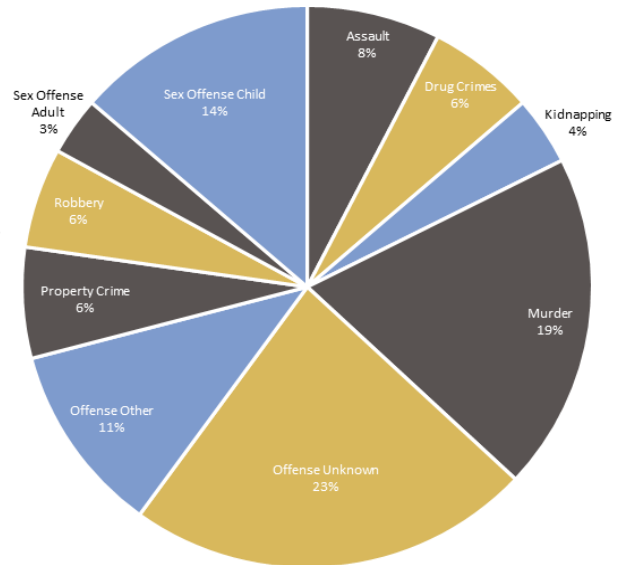
**Includes individuals exonerated because of the Commission's investigations either through a post-conviction three-judge panel or a Motion for Appropriate Relief (MAR) and governor's pardon of innocence.

+Of the 20 cases that have been presented at Commission hearings, 17 were sent forward to a three-judge panel and three were not. Of the 17 sent forward to a three-judge panel, ten resulted in the exonerations of eleven individuals (one co-defendant case). Five cases sent forward to a three-judge panel resulted in a denial of relief by the three-judge panel (eight individuals). Three cases (four individuals) sent forward to a three-judge panel resulted in the prosecutor offering the claimant an Alford Plea for time served, negating the need for the three-judge panel hearing. Additionally, six individuals have had their convictions vacated through Motions for Appropriate Relief that were based on the Commission's investigation of their innocence claims and have received Pardons of Innocence from the Governor.

Reasons for Rejection

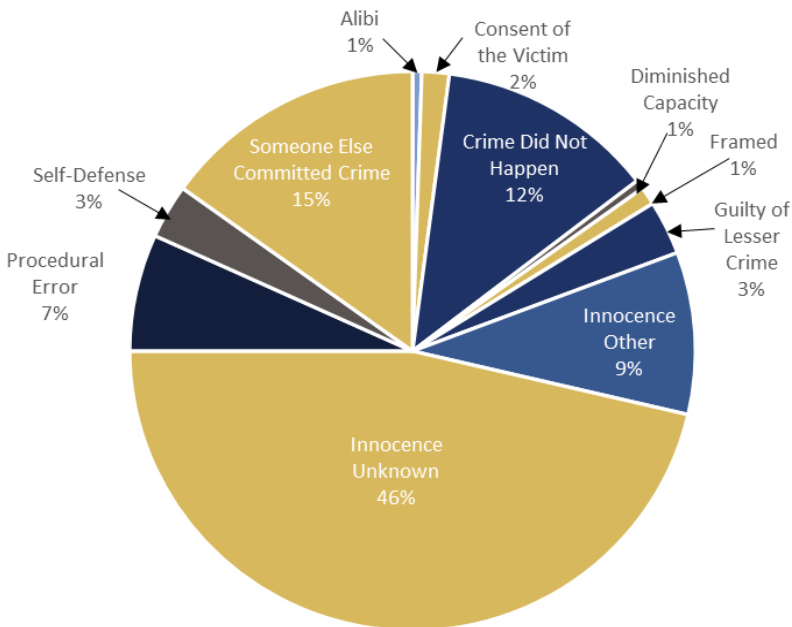


Applicants' Convictions



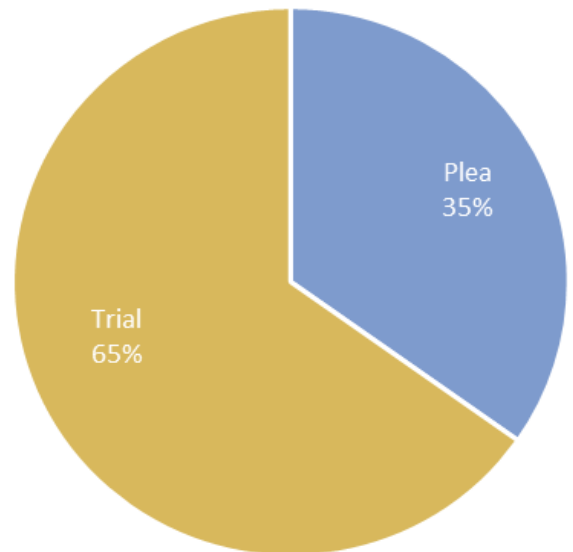
- Some applicants were convicted of multiple offenses.

Applicants' Innocence Claim



- Som applicants made multiple innocence claims.
- Several of these categories do not fit the statutory requirements for actual innocence and result in an automatic rejection.

Convictions Results from Trial or Plea



- Alford and no contest pleas are included in plea category.

D. RESULTS OF INVESTIGATIONS

The Commission staff continues to review and investigate cases in a neutral and thorough manner. In 2025, the Commission had approximately 55 cases that were actively reviewed in the further review, investigation, or formal inquiry phases. These cases included the review of files, documents, trial transcripts, and jail/prison calls; interviews and depositions; subpoenas, motions, and proposed orders; searches for evidence; submission of evidence for DNA and other forensic testing; and consultation with experts, among others.

The Commission has been granted the authority to request that agencies search for physical evidence, and the Commission staff may request to conduct their own searches when necessary. By working with law enforcement, district attorneys, and clerks' offices throughout the state, the Commission has located evidence in dozens of cases. These conversations and searches have given the Commission, and the agencies the Commission is working with, the opportunity to address the best practices for handling evidence. Moreover, the Commission has successfully located physical evidence and/or files in 30 cases when previous efforts by other agencies had resulted in conclusions that the evidence or files had been destroyed or lost. In some of those cases, the prior searches had been court-ordered with findings of fact made regarding the missing evidence. In fact, 80% of the Commission's exonerations were cases where the evidence was said to have been destroyed or missing.

In 2023, Commissioners determined there was sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review in the case of *State v. Clarence Roberts*, and the case was sent forward for a three-judge panel hearing. This case was scheduled for a three-judge panel on April 14, 2025, and the panel unanimously found that Mr. Roberts provided clear and convincing evidence of his innocence, and he was exonerated.

In March 2020, Commissioners determined there was sufficient evidence of innocence to merit judicial review in the cases of *State v. Christopher Bryant*, *Jermal Tolliver*, *Nathan Cauthen*, and *Rayshawn Banner*. A three-judge panel was held in May 2022, and relief was denied to all claimants. In January 2025, an evidentiary hearing was held for a Motion for Appropriate Relief filed by the defendants based in part on the Commission's investigation and other procedural issues the Commission does not review. Commission staff were asked to testify at that hearing. In September 2025, an Order granting the MAR was issued and charges against all claimants were dismissed with prejudice. The ruling is currently on appeal at the North Carolina Court of Appeals.

E. OTHER 2025 ACTIVITIES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

The Commission continues to maintain its LinkedIn page that can be viewed at <https://www.linkedin.com/company/north-carolina-innocence-inquiry-commission/posts/?feedView=all>. The Executive Director overhauled the Commission's website again in anticipation of the name change and secured a new domain. Last year's goal to make the site more user friendly for the claimants and victims and their families has been realized as people claiming innocence are now able to submit their claims directly through the website which screens the claims up front regarding statutory eligibility. The new website can be toured at [Home - The North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission](#).

BUDGET

As a result of Session Law 2023-74, discussed in detail below, the Commission is now required to include the receipt and expenditure of any private donations, gifts or devices the Commission receives during the year and report those funds annually in this report. In 2025, the Commission received an email indicating that the Commission would be a beneficiary of two retirement accounts: Vanguard and Charles Schwab; however, no amount was designated, and no monies have been received.

The Commission also experienced a change in staffing in 2025 with the staff attorney who previously left to stay home post the birth of their first child, returning to a part-time capacity. The Commission also reduced the hours of its Victim Services Program Manager to part-time in anticipation of hiring a new person to fill that role. The outgoing Victim Services Program Manager will be leaving in 2026 to pursue her master's degree full-time. The Commission will seek to fill that vacancy in 2026.

DATABASE

The Commission received additional funds from the General Assembly in January 2022 that were to be used to begin working to identify a software program and database developer to overhaul and replace the Commission's Access database. The former director used those funds to implement a database that unfortunately did not realize the goals and function of a modern, fully integrated case management software system. In 2025, the Commission sought additional funding for this project but learned that the Senate voted to completely eliminate the Commission instead. As a result, the Commission applied for and was awarded a grant under the Governor's Crime Commission to cover total expenses related to the implementation of a case management software system that will allow the Commission to quickly, efficiently, seamlessly, and judiciously carry out our day-to-day operations, house our evidence, and communicate with outside agencies with whom we are responsible for information and document sharing.

TRAINING

In 2025, Commission staff completed several training courses allowing them to continue to

grow their investigative, legal, and trauma-informed skills. The Commission focused on internal and external training for newly hired staff. New staff completed the National Institute for Trial Advocacy (NITA) Deposition Skills training. Staff also attended Penn Law School's Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice's Spring Symposium, which provided insight into current research on various forensic sciences and investigative practices, and the Bringing Justice to Cold Case Sexual Assault Survivors Symposium held by the North Carolina Sexual Assault Kit Initiative.

Several staff members attended the 24th Annual Bode Forensic DNA Conference, the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyer's Forensics Seminar, and the Techno Security and Digital Forensics conference allowing staff to stay up to date on current changes in DNA and other forensic technology. Our Victim Services Program Manager and other staff attended the National Organization for Victim Advocacy conference for additional trauma-informed training that benefits our investigations. Our Executive Director and Assistant Director hope to liaise with innocence groups at their national convention this Spring.

STATUTE CHANGES

In addition to seeking funding for case management software, the Commission wishes to change its name to the North Carolina Postconviction Review Commission which more appropriately reflects the greater purpose, practice, and neutrality of the organization. The Commission was formed to consider whether claims of innocence may lead to possible exoneration. However, in general practice, the Commission often operates to confirm the initial justice of a conviction. Accordingly, to most properly reflect the reality of our practice, our neutrality, and correctly preserve the integrity of our operations, the Commissioners and Commission staff have voted unanimously to change our name.

OUTREACH

Since becoming Director in 2024, Mrs. Pierro has continued the focus on outreach and education regarding the Commission's unique mission and neutral investigative function. North Carolina is a leader in post-conviction innocence work due to this state-supported Commission. The Commission model has proven successful and sharing both within and outside of North Carolina how well the model works is important to ensure the innocent, as well as the guilty, receive justice. In addition, because the Commission is neutral and unique in its purpose, it is vital to the Commission's success to distinguish itself from non-profit organizations, private attorneys, or other types of innocence groups whose role may not be based in neutrality. The Commission has become a leader in the fields of post-conviction and evidence practices.

In 2025, the Commission virtually attended the inaugural meeting regarding the not yet fully formed Canadian Miscarriage of Justice Commission. Through that meeting the Director was able to connect with leaders of the other international commissions and hopes to form an international network to share information, challenges and experiences between the commissions worldwide.

The Commission's Executive Director also gave presentations to and met with governmental agencies,

criminal justice stakeholders, civic groups, educational institutions and members of the public. Additionally, the Commission's Executive Director, Assistant Director, and Associate Counsel routinely participated in meetings and interviews and answered questions about the Commission process with members of the General Assembly, other state government agencies and officials, media outlets, writers, legal scholars, students, chiefs of police, and various other organizations and agencies throughout the process following the Senate's vote to eliminate the Commission. Specifically, the Director spoke at the District Attorney's Fall Conference to re-introduce the Commission as a contributor to the North Carolina criminal justice system and not an adversary. That presentation yielded positive feedback and two case referrals.

The Commission's Executive Director and staff continue to make information about the Commission publicly available through both the Commission's LinkedIn profile as well as its website.

VICTIM SERVICES PROGRAM

In 2025, the Commission's victim services program continued to serve as a resource on the implementation of trauma-informed practices for the whole of the judicial branch. Victim Services Program Manager Emma Paul provided training on vicarious trauma for the Court Personnel Conference, the Magistrate Conference, and the A&D Clerks Conference. She spoke on trauma-informed court practices for the Human Trafficking Symposium and the Court Reporter Conference. Additionally, Mrs. Paul provided training on trauma-informed interviewing for Indigent Defense Services. She was also invited to speak at the Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice's monthly training and technical assistance webinar. There, she reached a national audience of attorneys conducting innocence investigations and presented "A Trauma-Informed Approach to Innocence Investigations."

The Commission's investment in trauma-informed practices has been to the benefit of North Carolina's judicial branch. The Commission has developed internal subject matter expertise that is now being disseminated widely to other criminal justice stakeholders.

III. AUDIT OF THE NORTH CAROLINA INNOCENCE INQUIRY COMMISSION

In 2015, the General Assembly passed a provision requiring the Administrative Office of the Courts to conduct an annual audit of the Commission. In 2025, the Commission's tenth annual audit was conducted. This was a detailed process that included several meetings and communications between the Commission's Director, Assistant Director, Executive Assistant, Victim Services Program Manager, and AOC auditor.

The audit was completed on October 24, 2025. The Commission was evaluated in several risk categories, including evidence, accounting, and reporting and annual audit requirements. With respect to all the above-mentioned categories, the audit found that internal controls were designed to reduce risk and were appropriate.

The Commission has been given an overall audit rating of "Effective." This is the highest rating of three possible ratings: Effective, Some Improvement Needed, and Major Improvement Needed. The Effective rating was given to 77% of those audited in 2025. The Commission has received an Effective audit rating every year, apart from one, that it has been audited. The Commission will undergo another audit in 2026 and anticipates that the results will be similar. A copy of the Commission's audit report is available upon request.

IV. THE NORTH CAROLINA INNOCENCE INQUIRY COMMISSION IN 2026

A. PLANS FOR 2026

In 2026, the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission plans to continue to focus on reviewing and investigating innocence claims in the most neutral, detailed, and efficient manner possible. In addition to casework, the Commission will also focus on outreach, continuing the database project, training, and continued maintenance of its Victim Services Program.

In 2026, the Executive Director will continue to manage the day-to-day operations of the Commission, review all claims that come to the Commission and focus on sharing the Commission model through outreach to other states and countries considering the Commission model for post-conviction innocence review. The Executive Director will also focus on outreach to criminal justice stakeholders, as well as the public, to educate them on the Commission's role in the criminal justice community. The Executive Director authored an article to be included in the IDS newsletter; is scheduled to speak at the Superior Court Judges' and Public Defenders' Spring Conferences; and has reached out to the Chiefs of Police, Sheriffs and other Executive law enforcement agencies about presenting.

The Commission's Assistant Director, Catherine Matoian, will focus on ensuring Commission staff investigates claims efficiently and fully and moves any cases that are ready forward to a hearing.

The Commission will also continue to train staff in areas crucial to their day-to-day investigative work. This will include attendance at various conferences on DNA testing, trauma-informed practices and deposition and interviewing techniques. The Commission's evidence custodians will attend training through the North Carolina Association for Property and Evidence to ensure that the Commission is handling and storing evidence in accordance with best practices and statutory requirements.

In 2026, the Commission's Victim Services Program will continue to collaborate with Healing Justice under its 2022 Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant on its restorative justice program. Additionally, the Commission will continue to work on developing services to assist exonerees in their transition from incarceration. In 2026, the Commission will continue to aim to identify partner organizations and create a process for connecting exonerees with resources and services as they work to rebuild their lives. Finally, the Commission will continue to provide training for criminal justice partners who interact with victims of crime in the post-conviction context with respect to what the Commission has learned through implementation of its Victim Services Program.

The Commission serves as a resource for other agencies and elected officials who receive innocence claims but lack the resources to investigate and evaluate them. Over the last few years, the Commission has seen an increase in the number of contacts from superior court

judges related to cases with pending Motions for Appropriate Relief and cases being referred to the Commission by attorneys and law school innocence projects and clinics. In 2026, the Commission will continue to build on the renewed relationship with the Judicial Fellows to accept case referrals for cases that may have otherwise been procedurally barred to ease the burden from the Superior Court dockets. One of the original reasons for the creation of the Commission was to provide relief to the court system related to post-conviction motions. The Commission is fulfilling that role and will work to continue educating the legal community about its mission and ability to relieve the court system in this manner. Our Executive Director's outreach and attempts to liaise with the Conference of District Attorneys has also resulted in the joint referral of two cases from the local district attorney and claimant's counsel. Members of the General Assembly may refer post-conviction innocence claims from their constituents to the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission.

B. FUTURE NEEDS OF THE COMMISSION

Pursuant to N.C.G.S. § 15A-1475, the Commission's Annual Report shall recommend the funding needed by the Commission. The Commission was able to obtain a Governor's Crime Commission Grant to fund the acquisition of new case management software after its efforts to request that money through the legislature failed. The Commission also sought nominal additional funding to support the changeover in branding once the Commission's name change becomes official, but that too, was not included. The Commission will be seeking an increase in its operating budget for standard salary increases to account for the lack of salary increases through the annual budget and healthcare premium increases in the next long session.

CONCLUSION

The members and staff of the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission would like to thank the Joint Legislative Committee on Justice and Public Safety and the entire General Assembly for their creation and support of this groundbreaking part of the criminal justice system. The criminal justice system in North Carolina is strong, and the Commission is proud to serve the important role of uncovering evidence while strengthening the public confidence in the justice system. We take seriously our mandate to ensure that the innocent, as well as the guilty, receive justice. The General Assembly, through its support of the Commission, has positioned North Carolina to continue to be a leader in innovative criminal justice reform.

The Commission receives on average 230 claims per year and continues to investigate cases that ultimately result in the exoneration of innocent individuals, confirm guilt of convicted persons, and lead to arrests and convictions of other individuals who have gone undetected. The steady flow of cases and hearings demonstrate the need for the continued existence and funding of the Commission.

As described above, the Commission maintains a website (innocencecommision-nc.gov) that provides the public with general information about the Commission.

The Commission's Chair and Director are available to meet with any member of the General Assembly to further discuss the work of the Commission. They can be reached at (919) 890-1580 or NCIIC@nccourts.org. The Commissioners and staff are pleased to serve the people of North Carolina and look forward to continuing that service each year.



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