

# 2019 IMPACT REPORT

## ABOUT THE COMMISSION

The North Carolina Equal Access to Justice Commission was established in November 2005 by order of the Supreme Court of North Carolina. The mission of the Commission is to expand access to the civil justice system for people of low income and modest means in North Carolina.

## COMMISSION PRIORITIES

Establish the right to counsel in civil matters affecting basic human needs

Increase legislative funding of civil legal services at the state and federal levels

Encourage & support pro bono attorney participation

Help pro se litigants navigate the court system successfully

Educate the public

Increase the role of the business community

Include people with limited English proficiency in the justice system

Increase loan repayment assistance



## LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

As I reflect on the work of the North Carolina Equal Access to Justice Commission during my first year as Chair, I am proud of the impact we have made for North Carolina's most vulnerable populations. Our work has been critical to helping people move on with their lives following the devastation of Hurricane Florence by making sure they had the tools they needed to access disaster recovery resources. We have also worked tremendously hard to give folks a second chance at success by helping to restore driver's licenses and expunge criminal records for tens of thousands of people. Finally, we are working to meet the needs of spouses seeking simple divorces, nearly 70% of whom come to court without a lawyer, by developing an easy to use reference guide to walk them through the process. The Commission is meeting the legal needs of vulnerable North Carolinians who otherwise would have to go it alone.

Unfortunately, the needs are many. According to a 2017 ABA Report, 86% of the civil legal needs of people in poverty went unmet in the prior year, and 71% of all low-income households experienced a civil legal problem. These staggering statistics are compounded by the fact that more than half of North Carolinians who ask for free legal assistance from civil legal aid providers must be turned away due to lack of capacity.

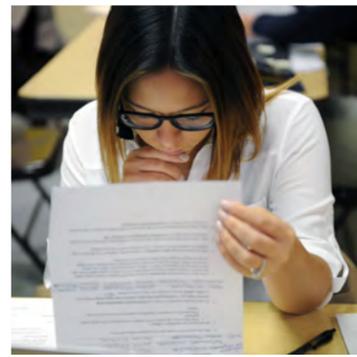
In response to this wide access to justice gap, the Commission continues to innovate in its efforts to support North Carolinians of low income and modest means. I am excited that in 2020, the Commission will launch the North Carolina Faith and Justice Alliance, a coalition designed for legal practitioners to partner with the religious leaders and faith institutions that are so often the first to know of the legal issues facing the members of their community. Additionally, as the North Carolina Judicial Branch works to modernize its systems through expanding its use of technology, the Commission will be a critical partner in advocating for the needs of self-represented litigants.

Please join me in supporting the work of the North Carolina Equal Access to Justice Commission as it works to ensure justice for all in our state, regardless of ability to pay. These efforts are sorely needed by our state's most vulnerable people, and I look forward to seeing our profession continue to rise to the challenge.

In Service,

Cheri Beasley

Chief Justice, Supreme Court of North Carolina



## NC PRO BONO RESOURCE CENTER

The North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center (PBRC) has continued to expand its role in facilitating and encouraging attorney pro bono legal services by working collaboratively with partners across the state.

**LEGAL SERVICE PROVIDERS:** The PBRC has worked with providers like Legal Aid of North Carolina, the North Carolina Justice Center, and the 26th Judicial District SelfServe Center to recruit volunteer attorneys and to create new pro bono opportunities, particularly around Disaster Relief, Driver's License Restoration, and Expunction efforts.

**PRIVATE FIRMS & ORGANIZATIONS:** The PBRC has connected with a number of firms and corporations – such as Alston & Bird, Nelson Mullins, Cisco, and GSK – to provide Ethics CLE, trainings, and pro bono experiences for their attorneys. The PBRC also implemented its annual statewide pro bono reporting process, working with eleven firms to submit batch information in 2019.

**VOLUNTARY BAR ASSOCIATIONS:** The PBRC has served as a sounding board for bar associations interested in involving attorneys in pro bono programs. For example, the PBRC worked with the Wake County Bar Association to launch an Ask A Lawyer initiative in partnership with Wake County Public Libraries. Similarly, the PBRC facilitated a Driver's License Restoration project session for the Triangle Association of Corporate Counsel.

## DISASTER RELIEF & PREPAREDNESS

In the wake of Hurricane Florence, which ravaged Eastern North Carolina in September 2018, low-income residents were suddenly faced with barriers to recovery that required civil legal assistance to overcome. For example, in New Hanover County, residents filed more than 12,000 requests for FEMA assistance that were denied, yet only 95 of those denials were appealed.

In response to this urgent need, the PBRC organized and hosted four FEMA Appeal and Reconsideration Clinics in New Bern, Wilmington, Morehead City, and Trenton. Through these clinics in partnership with Legal Aid of North Carolina and the North Carolina Bar Foundation (NCBF), among many others, 115 volunteers served 196 clients.

As the immediate legal needs from Florence subsided, the PBRC, with the NCBF, convened a Disaster Legal Services (DLS) Summit, where the community of organizations working on legal assistance for people affected by Hurricane Florence could evaluate past efforts and collaborate on a plan for future disaster response.

One of the suggestions from the Summit was to train legal first responders who could quickly respond to future disaster-related legal needs. In November, with support from the NC Commission on Volunteerism and the NC Community Foundation, the PBRC hosted a DLS Bootcamp, providing 72 attendees seven hours of free CLE to support future pro bono volunteer efforts.

## DRIVER'S LICENSE RESTORATION

There are 1,225,000 active driver's license suspensions in North Carolina— about 15% of all adult drivers – for failure to pay traffic fines and court costs and failure to appear in court for traffic offenses. These license suspensions have dire consequences for drivers and their families and particularly affect people who are economically vulnerable or who live in rural areas without reliable public transportation.

For example, Marquais lost his driver's license as a teenager when he could not afford to pay court costs and fines. Now 26, he has not had a license since, even though he has a disability requiring frequent doctor visits.

To address this widespread need, the PBRC, alongside the North Carolina Justice Center and other partner organizations, as well as District Attorneys, has formed the Driver's License Restoration Project, a pro bono model that leverages attorney volunteers and technological innovations to efficiently restore driving privileges. Through 2019, 294 volunteers helped eliminate traffic court debt for 9,168 people with license suspensions.

This project is making a difference for clients like Marquais, who after successfully having fees remitted has now acquired limited driving privileges and a full time job. He reports, "You have really changed my life for the best. I have never been this happy before."

## SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANT SUPPORT

Of the many search terms that may bring a visitor to the North Carolina Judicial Branch's website, the top two most frequently used both seek information on how to secure a divorce. While retaining an attorney is, for most people, the preferred way to accomplish the goal of dissolving a marriage, many people are unable to afford that access. Further, information and guidance about family law matters is a particularly critical need that, unfortunately, frequently goes unmet.

To support North Carolinians looking to acquire a simple divorce without claims for equitable distribution or alimony who cannot afford representation, the Commission designed a Self-Help Divorce Packet to provide an overview of the practices and processes of filing for a divorce, as well as access to the legal forms needed throughout.

In September, this Packet was made available on nccourts.gov, and paper copies were sent to Clerk of Court offices across the state. Since being made public, this resource has been viewed online more than 46,400 times.

This effort previews substantial work the Commission will undertake in 2020 as it continues to support self-represented litigants in additional legal areas of need, and as technological solutions from the Judicial Branch expand digital access to the courts.



## BY THE NUMBERS

**522** Members of the 2019 NC Pro Bono Honor Society, each reporting 50 hours of pro bono legal services in 2019.

**465** Volunteers who the PBRC worked with in 2019, from associations, law firms, corporations, law schools, and others.

**9,544** Clients who the PBRC helped in 2019 with the support of pro bono volunteer attorneys.

**25** In-person volunteer events hosted by the PBRC to provide pro bono legal assistance to clients who need it.

**16** CLE hours either hosted or presented by Commission and PBRC staff, with a majority providing Ethics credit.

**14** Prosecutorial Districts across the state to which Commission and PBRC staff have traveled for programs, events, and meetings.

**14,630** Print and electronic copies of the North Carolina Divorce Packet distributed in 2019.

## OTHER COMMISSION ACTIVITIES



In 2019, the Commission continued its work to educate potential supporters about access to the civil justice system, as well as to lead conversations around substantive policy reform, particularly around expunctions and other restorative justice efforts. This work supported the Second Chance Act, signed into law in 2020, which is designed to close the gap on Raise the Age retroactive petitions, and to grant expunctions by operation of law for not guilty verdicts and dismissed cases. The Commission also continued a close partnership with the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts as it explored e-filing and other options to support Self-Represented Litigant access to the justice system.

## FINANCIAL INFORMATION

### SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR SUPPORTERS:

Alston & Bird  
City of Durham  
DLA Piper  
Kilpatrick Townsend  
Lawyers Mutual  
Insurance Company  
NC Community  
Foundation  
NC IOLTA  
Nelson Mullins  
Troutman Pepper  
Winston & Strawn  
Womble Bond Dickinson  
Z. Smith Reynolds  
Foundation

### 2019 Support and Revenue

CLE Fee—NC State Bar	382,346
Grantmaking Support	196,465
Private Support	52,500
NC AOC Support	130,777
<b>Total Revenue</b>	<b>\$762,088</b>

### 2019 Expenses

General Operations—Administrative	59,029
General Operations—Programming	288,202
PBRC—Administrative	31,302
PBRC Programming:	
General	152,829
Disaster Relief	79,642
Driver's License Restoration	184,799
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$795,803</b>

## COMMISSION STAFF



Jennifer M. Lechner, Executive Director  
Sylvia K. Novinsky, Director, NC Pro Bono  
Resource Center  
Katherine Asaro, Senior Staff Attorney & Disaster  
Legal Services Program Director  
Emily Monnett, Social Media Manager  
Jennifer Simmons, Senior Project Manager  
Jared S. Smith, Foundation & Development Manager  
B. Leigh Wicclair, Senior Staff Attorney &  
Restorative Justice Program Director

# COMMISSION MEMBERS

The Honorable Cheri Beasley,  
Chair

James A. Barrett

Senator Danny Britt

Ashley H. Campbell

Darryl Childers

Justin Clayton

Christin Coan

J. Samuel Cone

The Honorable J. Carlton  
"J.C." Cole

Collin Cook

Kim Crouch

Barbara Degen

The Honorable Richard Dietz

William P. Farthing, Jr.

Rick Glazier

Joy Vermillion Heinsohn

Charles Holton

David W. Hood

Gabriel Jiménez

Afi Johnson-Parris

Tracy Kimbrell

Robert C. Kemp, III

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Dean J. Rich Leonard

TeAndra Miller

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Representative David Rogers

Elizabeth D. Scott

The Honorable Linda Stephens

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Julian H. Wright, Jr.

Marion Cowell, Special Advisor

The Honorable Anita S. Earls,  
Special Advisor

George V. Hanna III, Special  
Advisor

George Hausen, Special Advisor

John B. McMillan, Special Advisor

Kenneth Schorr, Special Advisor