



2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Laura N. Pierro
Executive Director
January 27, 2025



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

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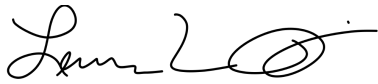
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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

TO THE MEMBERS OF THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY OF THE 2024-2025 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,



Laura N. Pierro
Executive Director
North Carolina Innocence Inquiry
Commission (919) 890-1580
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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.

2024 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 2024 and the Commission's plans for 2025. Included are statistics for 2024 as well as cumulative case statistics detailing case data since the Commission began operating in 2007. The Commission is proud of the accomplishments we continue to achieve in making North Carolina a leader in answering the call of claims of wrongful convictions.

I. LEADERSHIP AT THE NORTH CAROLINA INNOCENCE INQUIRY COMMISSION

The Commission hired a new director on April 1, 2024, Laura N. Pierro. Laura 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, Mrs. 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. Mrs. 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, Mrs. 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. Mrs. 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. In 2024, Mrs. Pierro testified before the Canadian Senate regarding the Commission's model as Canada finalizes the creation of their own innocence commission.

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.

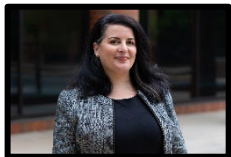
The Commission's Chair is Senior Resident Superior Court Judge Jason Disbrow, whose term began on January 1, 2024. Judge Disbrow became a superior court judge in 2020 and currently serves as the Senior Resident Superior Court Judge for Judicial District 13B (Brunswick County). Judge Disbrow graduated 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.

Photographs of Commission staff and 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.

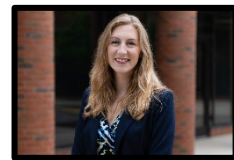
Innocence Commission Staff



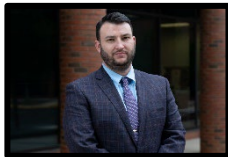
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Corinne Fowler
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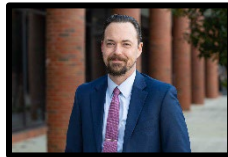
Josh Cox
Staff Attorney II



Andrew Durham
Staff Attorney II



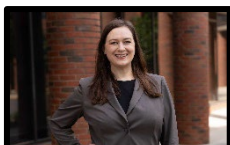
Nicole Hancock
Staff Attorney II



Michael Sanders
Staff Attorney II



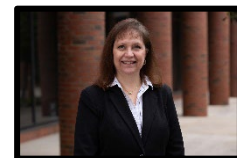
Emma Paul
Victim Services
Program Manager



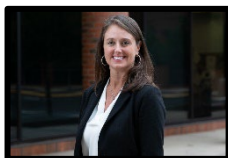
Clare Kurdys
Grant Staff Attorney I



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



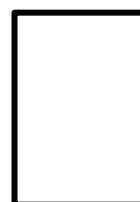
Ashley Welch
Prosecuting Attorney



Andrew Gregson
Alternate
Prosecuting Attorney



TBD
Victim Advocate



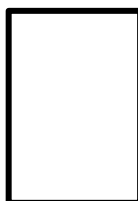
TBD
Alternate
Victim Advocate



Aleta R. Ballard
Criminal Defense Attorney



Darrin D. Jordan
Alternate
Criminal Defense Attorney



TBD
Public Member



TBD
Alternate
Public Member



Van Shaw
Sheriff



Joey Lemons
Alternate
Sheriff



Kieran Shanahan
Discretionary Member I



The Honorable
Beth Tanner
Alternate
Discretionary Member I



Paul "Skip" Stam
Discretionary Member II



Yvonne Mims Evans
Alternate
Discretionary Member II

II. ACTIVITIES OF THE NORTH CAROLINA INNOCENCE INQUIRY COMMISSION

In 2024, the Commission focused on integrating new leadership; 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 231 new claims in 2024, bringing the Commission's yearly average to 231 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 makes a determination on whether the case meets the statutory case criteria for further review or closes the case.¹ Prior to this effort, this process could take up to a year. In 2024 the Executive Director mandated that this process would 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. Going forward, the Commission Director will continue to direct that all phases of claim reviews will be handled swiftly, deftly, and neutrally.

As of the end of 2024, there is one active case that had been with the Commission for more than five years and nine cases that had been with the Commission between three and five years. All remaining cases with the Commission are under two years. The Commission is prepared to close at least half to three-quarters (3/4) of the older cases by the close of 2025.

While true, post-conviction innocence work in the 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. 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.

¹This also includes claims where a questionnaire is not sent because a determination as to eligibility can be made at the time the claim is received.

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 slated to begin on October 1, 2022, and run through September 30, 2025; however, the funds were not released for use until December 2022. 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.

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. This will allow the 2022 Grant to run until September 30, 2026. Additionally, the Commission was asked by the Training and Technical Assistance program for the grant to present to other grantees multiple times in 2024 to discuss the Commission's approach to searching for evidence and DNA testing. 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. The Commission regularly receives requests for assistance and advice from grantees in other states.

So far under the 2022 Grant, the Commission has investigated 18 cases, conducted 12 evidence searches, and submitted evidence for DNA testing in seven 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 15 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 (NCSCCL) and uses NCSCCL, 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 2024, the Commission continued implementing its Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant from the Governor's Crime Commission. The Commission currently has 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 a one-year extension, with a budget of \$14,659.89, to continue funding this project to September 30, 2025.

The purpose of the partnership is to offer restorative justice services to crime victims and family members impacted by Commission investigations, as well as exonerees, their family members, and other criminal justice stakeholders who were involved in the wrongful conviction and exoneration.

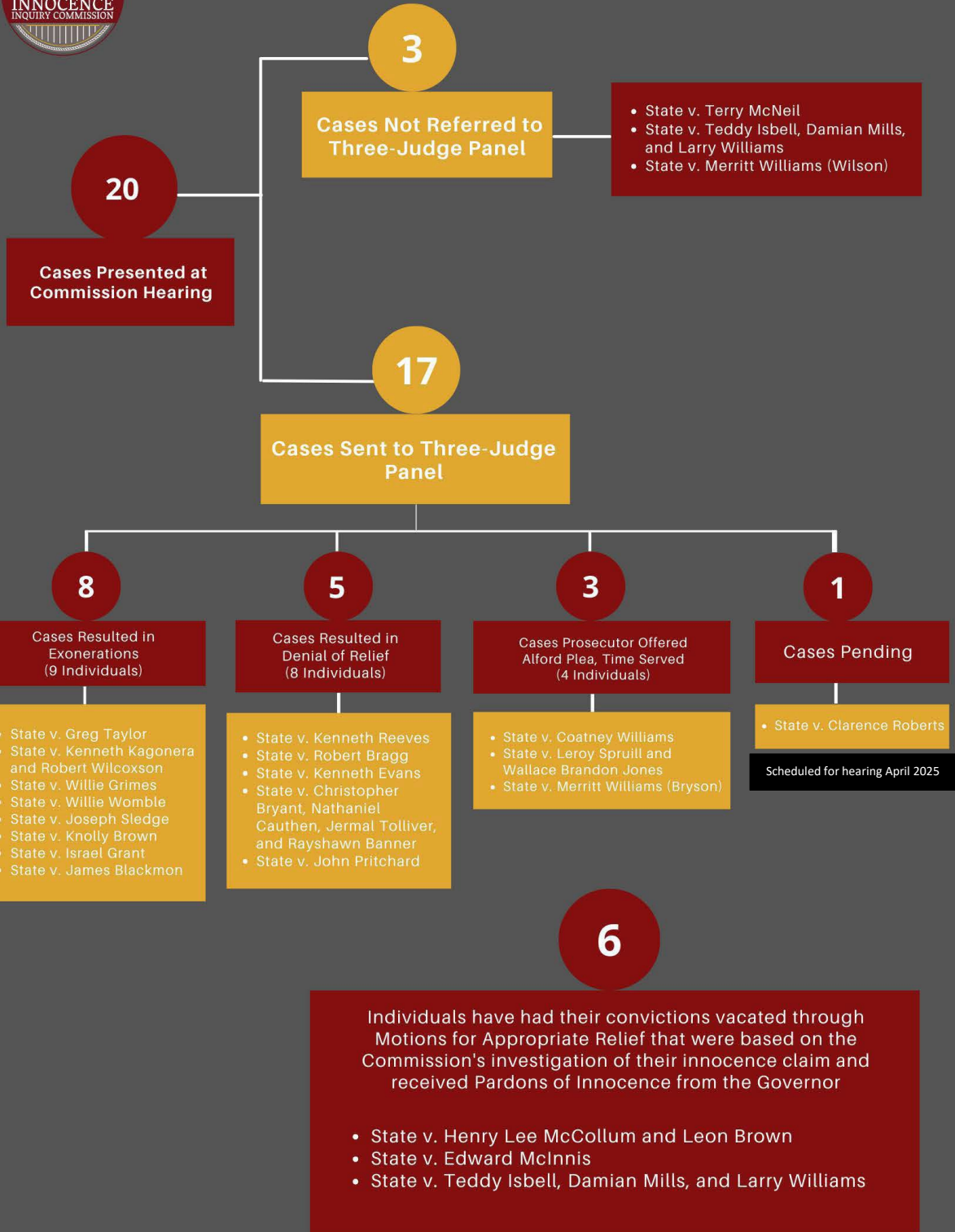
While the Commission's Victim Services Program provides support to crime victims during the process of an investigation, there are few resources to offer after an exoneration to address these victims' feelings of loss, grief, betrayal, fear, and abandonment. This project addresses this gap in NC by creating restorative justice processes through which the Commission, in partnership with Healing Justice, can meet the needs of crime victims in the wake of exonerations.

As a victim-centered response to crime, restorative justice processes are primed to address the complexity of exoneration cases and the unique harm they cause to crime victims. Restorative circles, conferences, and other activities will be used to provide victims with a safe space to meet others involved in these cases and ask questions, share, and understand different perspectives, and explore opportunities for healing. In 2024, the Commission brought together four North Carolina crime victims whose cases resulted in exoneration to participate in a restorative justice circle. The participants shared their unique needs following the exonerations, discussed the barriers to finding support, the weight of lingering questions, and offered one another peer support.

C. CASE STATISTICS

In 2024, the Commission received a total of 231 new innocence claims. Since it began operating in 2007, the Commission has received 3,826 claims of actual innocence. As of December 31, 2024, 3,770 cases had been reviewed and closed. Also in 2024, the Commission reviewed over 150,000 pages of case material, which reflects the complexity of cases currently under investigation, and conducted 18 witness interviews. The Commission also confirmed guilt through DNA testing in two cases. In previous years, the Commission has had difficulty enforcing court orders for DNA standards from alternate suspects who are now living out of state. In 2024, the Commission successfully worked with the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension to obtain a search warrant for a DNA standard for an alternate suspect living in Minnesota.

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, in excess of 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

3826

TOTAL NUMBER OF CLAIMS RECEIVED SINCE COMMISSION'S CREATION

3770

TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES CLOSED SINCE COMMISSION'S CREATION

231

NUMBER OF CLAIMS RECEIVED IN 2023

20

NUMBER OF HEARINGS CONDUCTED SINCE COMMISSION'S CREATION*+

15

EXONERATIONS**

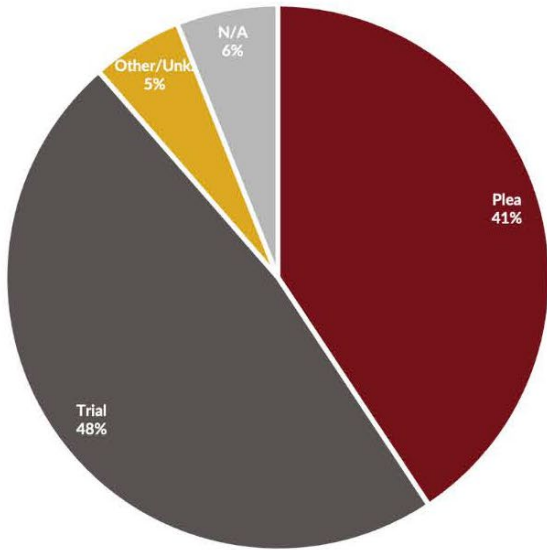
Data compiled January 22, 2025

*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. There is one case pending a hearing before a post Commission three-judge panel.

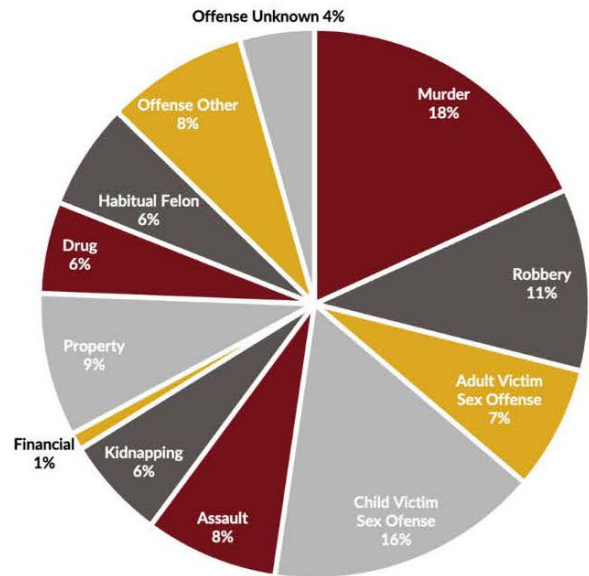
*Of the 20 cases that have been presented at Commission hearings, 17 were sent forward to a three-judge panel and three were not. Of the 17 sent forward to a three-judge panel, eight resulted in the exonerations of nine individuals (one co-defendant case). Five cases sent forward to a three-judge panel 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. There is currently one case pending a three-judge panel. 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.

Convictions Resulting from Trial or Plea



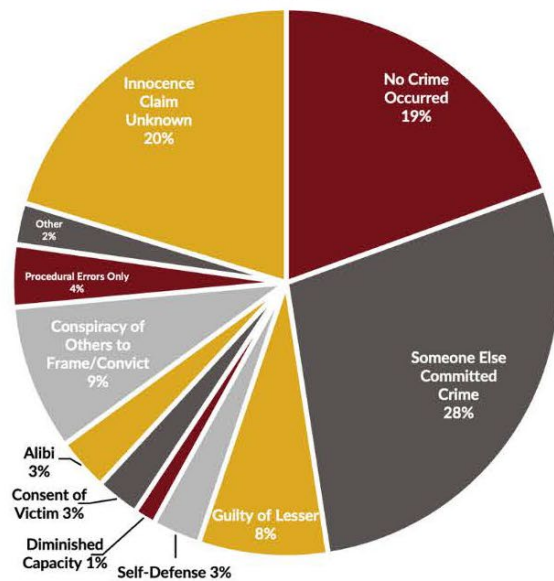
- Alford and no contest pleas are included in plea category.
- N/A is for individuals who apply but have not been convicted.

Applicants' Convictions



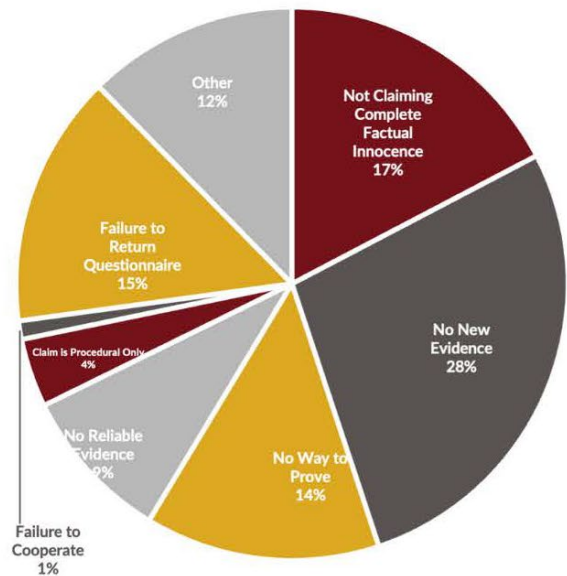
- Some applicants were convicted of multiple offenses.

Applicants' Innocence Claims



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

Reasons for Rejection



- Some cases were rejected for more than one reason.

D. RESULTS OF INVESTIGATIONS

The Commission staff continues to review and investigate cases in a neutral and thorough manner. In 2024, the Commission had approximately 60 cases that were actively being 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 29 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 has now been scheduled for a three-judge panel on April 14, 2025.

In 2019, the Commission heard the case of *State v. Merritt Williams* and voted that there was sufficient evidence of innocence to merit judicial review. Also in 2019, an alternate suspect was arrested and charged in the murder based on a confession and DNA match obtained during the Commission's investigation. In 2022, Merritt Williams accepted an Alford plea by which his murder charge would be dropped, and he would receive time served for Breaking and Entering. In December 2024, Commission Assistant Director Catherine Matoian was called by the State to testify about the Commission's investigation in the alternate suspect's murder trial. The result of the trial was a guilty verdict, and the alternate suspect was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

E. OTHER 2024 ACTIVITIES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

The Commission discontinued its Facebook page as the new Executive Director wanted a more professional social media presence. As a result, the Commission has formed a LinkedIn page that can be viewed at <https://www.linkedin.com/company/north-carolina-innocence-inquiry-commission/posts/?feedView=all>. The Executive Director also overhauled the Commission's website. The goal was to make the site more user friendly for the claimants and victims and their families. Additionally, 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 part of the FY2023-2024 budget, the Commission received funding for one additional state funded position, an administrative secretary. This position was filled in March 2024.

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 2024, the Commission did not receive any private donations, gifts, or devices.

The Commission also experienced turnover in 2024 with one staff attorney leaving for another position and one staff attorney choosing to remain home post the birth of their first child. After promoting from within for the Assistant Director position, a portion of 2024 was spent recruiting, hiring, and training new staff. The Commission currently has no vacancies.

DATABASE

The Commission received additional funds from the General Assembly in January 2022 that was 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. Accordingly, in 2025, the Commission will be seeking additional funding, and has applied for technology grants, to finalize the necessary project of implementing a case management software system that allows 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 2024, Commission staff completed several trainings 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. The Commission also brought in experts to hold internal trainings for staff, including science-based best practices for conducting interviews and

cognitive interviewing, trauma-informed interviewing, an overview of crime scene investigations, DNA, and gangs. 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 23rd 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 also attended the 2024 Government Relations and Policy Conference in Washington, D.C.

STATUTE CHANGES

The North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission is the only one of its kind in the United States. We are a neutral, state agency, created by statute, responsible for the review and investigation of claims of individuals who contend they are factually innocent. The Commission does not represent the claimants as clients. In contrast, innocence projects are privately or grant funded and supply direct representation to the claimants. Notwithstanding our distinction, because of our name, we are most often improperly aligned with and mistaken for a partisan innocence project. Over the almost two decades that the Commission has existed, it has operated under a misnomer regarding its purpose and neutrality on account of its name which has likewise hampered others' cooperation. Therefore, it is important to distance the Commission from such entities.

We are also distinct from Conviction Integrity Units or Conviction Review Units which are operated by and run exclusively through a prosecutor/district attorney/attorney general's office. Those offices may review claims of ineffective assistance of counsel, excessive sentencing, postconviction motions and claims of innocence. Those investigations are vetted, accepted, investigated, and rejected at the discretion of the prosecutor/district attorney/attorney general's offices. NCIIC adheres to requirements for cases where it can accept only cases involving claims of actual factual innocence.

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 ensuring 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 2024, the Commission continued to work with Canada as they move forward in their efforts to create the Canadian Criminal Case Review Commission. The Commission's Executive Director was invited to testify before the Senate to provide in depth information on the Commission's model, alongside the United Kingdom and Scotland, the only other like Commissions in the world. A full recording of the meeting can be found here: <https://senparlvu.parl.gc.ca/Harmony/en/PowerBrowser/PowerBrowserV2?fk=653664&globalStreamId=3>. The Commission is very grateful for this opportunity and looks forward to continuing to work with a newly formed Canadian Commission.

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.

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

VICTIM SERVICES PROGRAM

In 2024, the Commission's Victim Services Program Manager Emma Paul provided presentations on trauma-informed practices and post-conviction victim services to other criminal justice stakeholders across the state, including prosecutors, public defenders, and victim advocates. Most notably, this year Ms. Paul was invited to present at the Chief Justice's Special Seminar on Trauma-Informed Courts. The Special Seminar welcomed the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to share lessons in implementing trauma-informed practices in North Carolina's courts. In 2025, Ms. Paul will present to the Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice, to law students of UNC Chapel Hill, and at the Human Trafficking Symposium.

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 2024, the Commission's ninth annual audit was conducted. This was a detailed process that included several meetings and communications between the Commission's Director, Assistant Director, Victim Services Program Manager and AOC auditor.

The audit was completed on October 30, 2024. 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 was given an overall audit rating of "Some Improvement Needed" based on the review of the financial reports. Summarily, there was a complete overhaul of the AOC Finance Department personnel as well as their software system in Fall 2023. That combined with the former Executive Director's departure led to a few months in which the financial reports were not being reviewed for accuracy in a timely manner because the reports were not being provided. They have now been reviewed, and the Executive Director has put a new system in place to address the deficiency. There is now a primary staff member and backup staff member in place who are responsible for conducting a monthly review of the finance reports regarding the State budget, DNA grant and VOCA grant. The Commission will undergo another audit in 2025 and anticipates that the results will be "Effective" as it was in previous years. A copy of the Commission's audit report is available upon request.

IV. THE NORTH CAROLINA INNOCENCE INQUIRY COMMISSION IN 2025

A. PLANS FOR 2025

In 2025, 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 2025, 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, in an effort to educate them on the Commission's role in the criminal justice community.

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 to various conferences on DNA testing, trauma-informed practices and deposition and interviewing techniques. The Commission's evidence custodians will attend trainings 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 2025, 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 2025, 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 2025, the Commission will continue to field calls from judges and accept case referrals in an effort to

make the criminal justice system more effective. 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. 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. In evaluating our fiscal needs over the last year, the Commission had determined that its most pressing need for additional funding remains with the acquisition of case management software. The Commission will also be seeking nominal additional funding to support the changeover in branding should the Commission succeed in changing its name and logo.

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 201 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 (innocencecommission-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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