


North Carolina  
Justice Center

2009 ANNUAL REPORT



CATALYZING  
PEOPLE TO BE  
THEIR OWN  
ACTORS

- People initiate their own efforts + ask J.C. to support or join.
- Media Begins to site community leaders + organizations as the agents.
- Emerging new non-traditional leaders.





**CONTENTS**

Mission and Overview	2
Letter from the Board of Directors	4
Letter from the Executive Director	5
The State Budget	6
Education	8
Health Care	10
Consumer Protections and Housing	12
Support for Working Families	13
Immigrants' Rights	14
Communications	16
Support for Our Work	18
2009 Defenders of Justice Awards	20

**THE JUSTICE CENTER** is the state's leading research and advocacy organization dedicated to transforming North Carolina's prosperity into opportunity for all.

Our mission is to eliminate poverty in North Carolina by ensuring that every household in the state has access to the resources, services and

fair treatment it needs in order to enjoy economic security.

The Center was founded in 1996 through the merger of two former Legal Services organizations. Today, our staff is nearly 50 people strong and includes community educators, communications specialists,

researchers, attorneys, policy advocates, and other dedicated professionals.

Our unique approach to advocacy has helped the Justice Center to be extraordinarily successful in changing policies in North Carolina to improve the lives of working families. **We use five interconnected strategies in our work:**



**1 Public Policy Advocacy** - Our advocates work with policymakers to secure laws and policies that improve the lives of low- and moderate-income families and to oppose policies that would take the state backward.



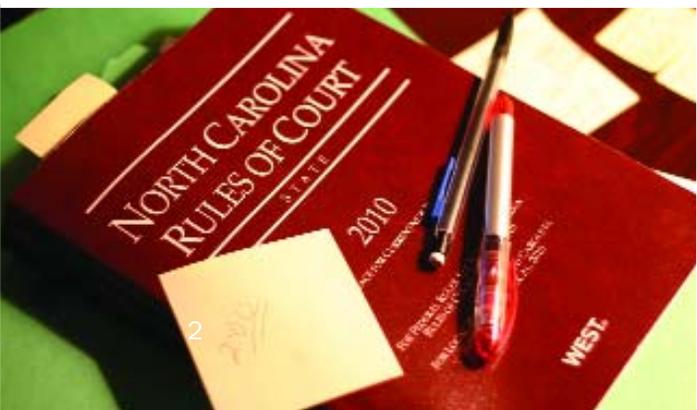
**2 Research** - Our experts analyze policies and challenges that impact low-income North Carolinians, identify strategies for improvement, and publish their findings in an array of well-respected reports and issue briefs.



**3 Community Outreach** - Our educators build relationships with groups and individuals at the community level and pursue a two-way process of education and empowerment.

**4 Litigation** - Our attorneys take on high-impact cases designed to protect and expand the rights of low-income groups and individuals, including immigrants.

**5 Communications** - Our writers and media experts generate commentaries and publications designed to shape public opinion.



To make  
opportunity and  
prosperity for all  
a reality,  
we work toward:



▶ **Public investments** in services and programs that expand and enhance opportunities for economic security



▶ **A fair and stable revenue system** that adequately funds public investments while fairly distributing tax responsibility



▶ **Housing** that is safe and affordable



▶ **Fair treatment** for everyone in North Carolina – regardless of race, ethnicity, or country of origin



▶ **Consumer protections** that shield hard-earned assets from abusive practices



▶ **Public education** that opens a world of opportunity to every child



▶ **Jobs** that are safe, pay a living wage, and provide health coverage and other benefits



▶ **Health care** that is accessible and affordable

North Carolina Justice Center  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

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**There was nothing easy about 2009.** Throughout North Carolina, workers lost their jobs, families lost their homes, and many of us lost some of our sense of security as the nation struggled through the worst recession in a generation.

A financial crisis that puts the global economy on the brink of collapse can easily push North Carolina's low-income families over the edge. In such dire situations, it is the safety net of public programs that protects families from ruin.

But in these tight budget times, many legislators sought to shred that safety net in the name of cutting costs. That is when we all realize how important the work of the North Carolina Justice Center is. Without the Justice Center's advocacy – at the General Assembly, in our communities, at the courthouse and in the media – many North Carolina families would be without the services and programs upon which they depend, and many more workers would be unemployed. We are honored to be affiliated with an organization that, in 2009, worked with dozens of partner groups to prevent budget cuts that would have devastated people with disabilities, helped homeowners avoid foreclosure, ensured children were not denied their right to an adequate education, and rallied thousands of people in support of health-care reform.

Just as it is hard to overstate the importance of the Justice Center's work, it is also impossible to stress too strongly the need for your financial support. Foundation and individual giving are down for virtually every non-profit in the country, and the Justice Center is certainly not immune to this side-effect of the recession. The gifts of individuals concerned with the welfare of their neighbors and their state have never been more necessary.

Please contribute to the North Carolina Justice Center in 2010. Your donations will help the center's staff protect North Carolina's most vulnerable residents and continue the fight for opportunity and prosperity for all.

Sincerely,



*Jean Cary*

Co-Chair, Board of Directors



*Raquel Lynch*

Co-Chair, Board of Directors

**Despite many years of experience with the Justice Center** as a partner and as its executive director, I am still amazed sometimes at the impact this organization has on the lives of families throughout North Carolina.

As you read this 2009 annual report, you will see how our talented and diverse staff worked to protect vulnerable North Carolinians while expanding opportunity for the state's working families. All of these successes were possible only because of the credibility and reputation for integrity that the Justice Center has established over the past 14 years. We built up that clout by getting the research right, knowing the law, and staying committed to our mission to eliminate poverty in North Carolina – year after year after year.

In 2010, we will build upon our efforts and victories of the past. Thanks to our long-standing and aggressive advocacy for the creation of a school funding system that better serves low-income and minority students, the state legislature has made sure to include us in the process of reworking that system. We will also be heavily involved with the effort to reform and modernize the state's revenue system – again, an endeavor for which we have long advocated and which many legislators would not consider undertaking without the input of our experts. Our lobbying efforts in the early part of the decade helped to drive payday lenders out of the state. This coming year, we hope to get a new ruling in our lawsuit to recoup for consumers the illegally high fees charged by payday lenders, a case which has already established new precedents that protect North Carolina consumers.

These long-term efforts are what make the Justice Center so effective. The relationships and expertise our staff have built enable us to secure the changes necessary to improve the lives of low- and moderate-income North Carolinians.

Your financial contribution is also necessary. It is during tough economic times that the need for a powerful voice to champion the rights and interests of working families and vulnerable individuals is greatest. They need us, and we need your support.

With warm regards,



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Melinda Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Melinda Lawrence, Executive Director

## The State Budget

Because of the recession, North Carolina suffered an historic drop in tax revenues, resulting in a \$4.6 billion budget shortfall – a whopping 20% of state spending. Many state leaders declared they would not even consider raising new revenue and instead proposed drastic cuts to schools, health and wellness programs, and services for the elderly and the disabled.

At the Justice Center, we focused the considerable skills of our staff on protecting the vital services many North Carolinians depend on to stay in their homes, provide for their families and maintain a decent quality of life. Our organizers brought together leaders from non-profit advocacy groups and service providers to form the Together NC coalition, which worked aggressively to convince lawmakers to take a balanced approach to the fiscal crisis (See Spotlight). Our researchers with the Budget & Tax Center analyzed revenue proposals, and legislative leaders called on them for explanations of how those proposals would impact the state's most vulnerable citizens. Our communications specialists developed common messages for all Together NC members to use, pushed that message with the media and created newspaper advertisements to influence lawmakers. Our legislative advocates worked with state leaders to craft a proposal that would raise new revenue and protect the state's most vulnerable citizens.

In the end, state legislators took a responsible approach to the fiscal crisis, closing about half of the budget gap with new funds and federal stimulus money, thus preventing the most devastating cuts that were under consideration. The Justice Center's advocacy efforts also helped protect the planned increase in the state Earned Income Tax Credit, which goes up to 5% of the federal credit this tax season and puts money in the pockets of more than 820,000 North Carolina workers.

**In 2009, the economy fell into deep recession,** unemployment soared, and hundreds of thousands of North Carolina families struggled to keep their homes and feed their children. It is at times like these, when the need is greatest, that the work of the North Carolina Justice Center has the greatest impact.

**Here are some examples of the successes we had in 2009.**





## SPOTLIGHT: Together NC

At the beginning of 2009, the Justice Center, in partnership with the Covenant with North Carolina's Children, organized Together NC, a broad-based coalition that called on state leaders to maintain and build on the public investments that support the fabric of North Carolina's communities. As the year progressed and lawmakers threatened to balance the budget by gutting education, health care, and other core investments, more than 100 organizations joined Together NC, creating a powerful voice that significantly influenced the budget process.

Together NC held simultaneous rallies in Raleigh and Asheville to influence the NC House's budget process that attracted more than 600 people. The coalition also held 10 town-hall meetings around the state featuring staff from the Budget & Tax Center providing updates on the state's fiscal situation. We videotaped attendees telling their stories about how proposed cuts would impact their lives, and legislators received copies of the most compelling stories.

Together NC also got the public involved in the budget debate. Through several phone-banking sessions, volunteers talked to more

than 2,500 North Carolinians about the need for a balanced approach to solving the state's fiscal crisis. A little more than one-third of the people contacted agreed to be patched through to their legislators' offices to make personal appeals.

All of these efforts had a significant impact on the budget process. Listening to their constituents, House leaders backed off their stance against raising new revenues and instead took a balanced approach to creating the budget. To provide support for their decision, Together NC placed advertisements, written and designed by Justice Center staff, in several small and mid-sized newspapers around the state thanking lawmakers.

The final budget, while not perfect, is dramatically better than the proposals some legislative leaders were pushing, and much of their change of heart can be credited to the efforts of Together NC.



## Education

North Carolina law requires schools to assist students at risk of academic failure by creating and implementing Personal Education Plans (PEPs), which outline specific interventions to help these students catch up and to boost their academic performance. However, the parents with whom we work told us that PEPs were not being developed for their children or, when developed, were not being implemented. The Justice Center worked with other education advocates to create and push for a new law that expands and

clarifies the rights of at-risk students. The Justice Center will continue to monitor the use—or lack thereof—of PEPs throughout North Carolina and advocate for students who have been denied this important tool for academic success.

We convinced legislators not to cut special funds that provide money to help educate disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and students in low-wealth communities. In addition, our history of



strong advocacy for public education secured us a role in the creation of new school funding formulas for the state. The legislative committee considering how to revamp the formulas, which currently fail to allocate adequate money to struggling schools, has named the Justice Center as one of the organizations to be consulted during the process. Because changes to the funding formulas may significantly impact struggling schools, the outreach staff of our Education and Law Project spent much of 2009 informing parents and



community groups about the current school funding formulas and the committee's work. We now have hundreds of people we can call on to influence this reform process when the time comes.

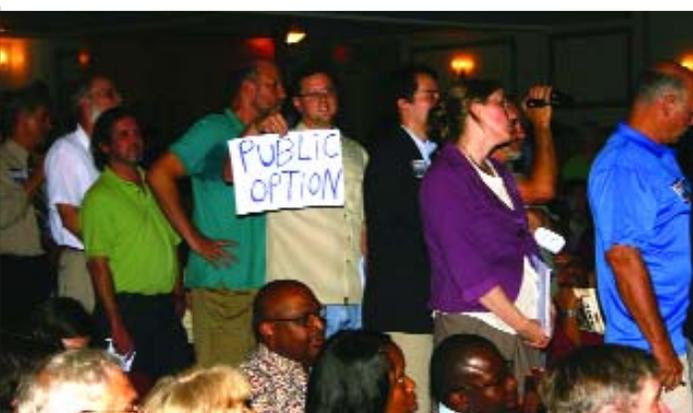
Staff of the Education and Law Project also conducted more than 30 trainings in 2009, hitting 15 counties and reaching more than 300 parents and community members. The trainings covered many education topics, including school funding, dropout prevention,



student discipline, alternative learning programs, and protections for students with disabilities. Most importantly, these efforts empowered participants to be activists in their communities by giving them information about students' education rights and advocacy techniques.

The Justice Center also has joined the effort to prevent the resegregation of Wake County schools. We are a member of the Great Schools in Wake coalition, which opposes the efforts of the newly elected school-board majority to end the county's policies promoting socioeconomic diversity in schools. We provided legal research and communications support to the coalition, and we will continue to fight to protect Wake's diversity policies.

When North Carolina's nationally recognized More At Four Program was in jeopardy, our research team produced a report explaining how this pre-kindergarten education effort, which targets at-risk four-year olds, had improved the academic outcomes of children who participated. The information helped to persuade lawmakers to scrap plans to cut More At Four, and as the state faces another difficult budget year, we will be at the legislature working to protect funding for this important program.



## Health Care

As an important swing state, North Carolina garnered attention from dozens of national organizations on both sides of the health reform debate. Despite the heightened noise level, the voice of the Justice Center's Health Access Coalition (HAC) rose above the din as an established source of reputable analysis on the impact health reform would have on North Carolinians. HAC used its considerable media presence and grassroots contacts to drive news coverage. We set up news conferences, served as commentators on health reform developments, and connected reporters with people who could tell their stories of suffering under the current health care system.

In addition, we organized rallies in Asheville, Raleigh, Charlotte and Greenville. The rally in Raleigh attracted nearly 1,000 attendees and was covered both by local media and larger outlets such as England's *Guardian* newspaper. Staff also organized nine major community meetings across North Carolina on health care reform, several of which drew considerable attendance and were covered in the local media.

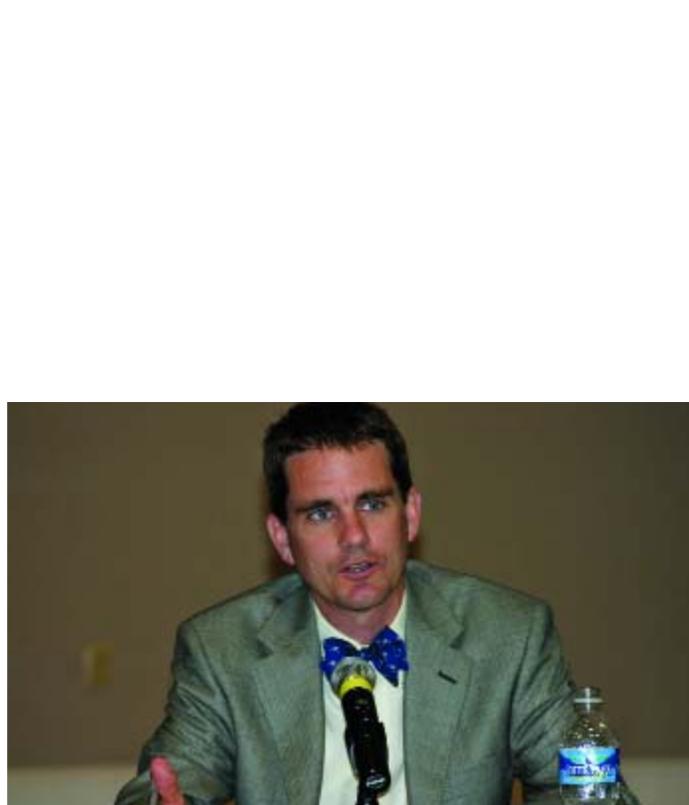
As a respected source of information, HAC staff appeared frequently with members of the state legislature and Congress. We presented with U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield in Rocky Mount and U.S. Rep. Bob Etheridge in Lillington, and we helped to organize a Durham town-hall meeting with U.S. Rep. David Price. In addition, we did presentations with state legislators in Fayetteville, Greensboro, Greenville, Henderson, Warrenton, Ahoskie, Windsor and Raleigh. Partnering with NC Policy Watch, HAC also attracted media attention by hosting two "Crucial Conversation" luncheons – one with U.S. Rep. Brad Miller and another with insurance industry whistleblower Wendell Potter.

Our research team produced a report on the levels of treatment patients receive in different North Carolina cities. We found that communities have widely different treatment rates that could only be explained by the preferences and decisions of physicians. The study encouraged lawmakers to study these variations and educate physicians in order to reduce health-care costs.



### SPOTLIGHT: Blue Cross Blue Shield's effort

The Justice Center's NC Health Access Coalition makes powerful use of new media, particularly blogs. In 2009, HAC staff posted 34 short videos on national health reform to NC Policy Watch's popular blog. Some of those videos included personal stories and interviews with small-business owners, and five videos exceeded 500 views, putting them in the top 50 percent of most-watched videos on YouTube.



## Efforts against health reform

HAC also produced more than 220 blog posts on national health reform, several of which became national stories. For example, HAC staff discovered that Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (BCBSNC) planned to launch a series of internet ads to discredit health reform proposals. We publicized the plans, and mainstream media and many national blogs picked up the story, prompting BCBSNC to cancel the ads.

HAC also blogged about BCBSNC's anti-health reform robocalls and mailers. Those mailers to consumers included a postcard they could send to Senator Kay Hagan asking her to oppose "government-run insurance." Staff's posts pointing out that BCBSNC, a non-profit that raises its premiums annually, was using its customers' money to try to stop health reform, caught the attention of people around the country. National progressive blogs picked up the story about the mailers,

and throughout North Carolina BCBSNC customers started fighting back. They altered the pre-paid mailer to urge Senator Hagan to support reform, and some of them sent us pictures of the improved mailers so we could post them online. The effort empowered members of the public and focused attention on BCBSNC's questionable practices.

# Consumer Protections & Housing

This year, Justice Center advocates successfully secured a bill to protect North Carolina consumers from debt buyers who act unethically and often illegally. Such debt buyers pay pennies on the dollar for the right to old debt – in some cases debt that has been paid off or which is no longer valid because the statute of limitations has passed. They often target low-income families who can't afford a lawyer to fight a claim, even if it is bogus. The new law, the Consumer Economic Protection Act of 2009, imposes numerous requirements on debt buyers, such as having valid documentation of the debt, and increases the penalties for the most egregious practices.

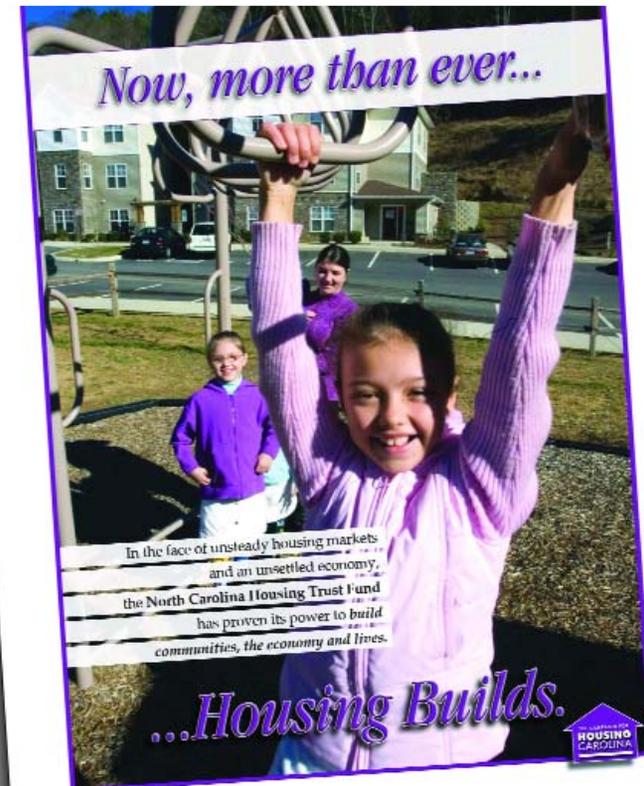
We also supported a bill to help families who lost their homes to foreclosure but were required to continue paying on their mortgages. These “deficiency judgments” can put a crippling financial burden on a family who is already struggling. A new law championed by the Justice Center abolished certain deficiency judgments, freeing families to rebuild their lives and finances.

The Justice Center also secured legislation that creates statewide standards for rental housing, limits and regulates the fees landlords charge for

evictions, increases penalties for improper handling of tenants' security deposits, and requires local governments to first order landlords to make repairs instead of removing tenants when housing code violations are found. Another law clarified and made North Carolina's fair housing laws consistent with federal law in regards to the right to reasonable accommodations and modifications for people with disabilities, and yet a third new law will prohibit local governments from using their land-use and permitting authority to discriminate against housing developments just because they include affordable units for low-income families.

In addition, we stood up for housing rights in the courts. We are challenging foreclosures and working to establish the legal precedent that giving a consumer a loan he clearly cannot afford is a violation of North Carolina's unfair trade practices statute.

Lastly, we succeeded in protecting two important programs from funding cuts: the Housing Trust Fund, which finances the construction and rehabilitation of affordable housing, and the Home Protection Program, which helps laid-off workers keep their homes while they retrain or look for work.





## Support for Working Families

North Carolina is laying the groundwork for more public transportation, and the Justice Center is working to ensure the needs of working families are central to the planning process. A coalition of environmental and social justice groups, organized by the Justice Center, successfully pushed for legislative provisions that ensure there will be affordable housing near transit stops and that low-wealth communities have access to the new trains and buses.

In this year when so many working families were struggling, the Justice Center worked at both the federal and state levels to make unemployment insurance more available. We secured technical

changes to state law that ensure North Carolina receives more than \$200 million from the federal government for modernizing its unemployment insurance system. In addition, we assisted in securing passage of the federal extension of unemployment insurance, which increased the number of weeks laid-off workers were eligible for benefits. Justice Center staff persuaded Governor Perdue to send a letter of support to Congress, and we contacted relevant members of Congress in support of this legislation.

This year, the Justice Center received an increased number of reports of “wage theft”—the failure of employers to pay wages as required by law or

contract. The Justice Center filed a number of lawsuits on behalf of workers who were victims of this practice, such as the case of a moving company that didn’t pay workers for all of their time and made improper deductions from paychecks. These litigation efforts will continue in 2010.

In 2009, the Justice Center launched the NC Second Chance Alliance, a coalition to support policies that reduce barriers facing ex-offenders. Thanks in part to the alliance’s efforts, the legislature created a Study Commission on Prisoner Re-entry, which will look at how the state can “address barriers facing ex-offenders in accessing jobs, housing, education, training and services” and reduce recidivism. We also worked with the attorney general’s staff and the governor’s office to create a task force of faith-based organizations, non-profits, businesses and government agencies to develop a plan to combat recidivism and reintegrate ex-offenders into communities. And we were instrumental in getting state officials to bring to North Carolina the Council of State Government’s Justice Reinvestment Project, which will assist the state in finding ways to reduce corrections spending and recidivism.



## Immigrants' Rights

Protecting the rights of immigrants is the mission of the Justice Center's Immigrants Legal Assistance Project and Eastern Carolina Immigrants' Rights Project. In 2009, we prevented more than 20 deportations and obtained legal status for more than 240 people. We also educated nearly 1400 immigrant farmworkers about their legal rights during outreach visits to their camps.

Because society marginalizes many immigrants, they are often targets of abuse and scams. We filed numerous lawsuits in response to such abuse, including a class action case with potentially 400 plaintiffs against two notaries who practiced immigration law without licenses. We also helped immigrants who were improperly turned away from public programs and services, and we worked with the state Department of Health and Human Services to secure policy

changes to ensure that qualified immigrants – children and pregnant women – have access to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (better known as WIC).

We continue to address the needs of many immigrants across North Carolina who report being harassed and detained under the 287(g) program, which allows local law enforcement



agencies to enforce immigration law. This year, we participated in and planned various events around the state to call attention to the reality of racial profiling, discriminatory traffic checkpoints and diminished community safety that have resulted from 287(g).

## Communications



Thanks to our communications team, the Justice Center and its staff appeared in some 200 distinct media outlets all over North Carolina and a few outside the state in 2009. We placed about 380 stories in the media – and that doesn't include regularly scheduled media appearances such as Chris Fitzsimon's daily commentary and weekly show on WRAL radio, Elaine Mejia's weekly commentary on State Government Radio, or Chris's and Elaine's appearances on WRAL-TV's NC Spin. During the height of the state budget debate, the Justice Center averaged nearly five stories in the media every day.

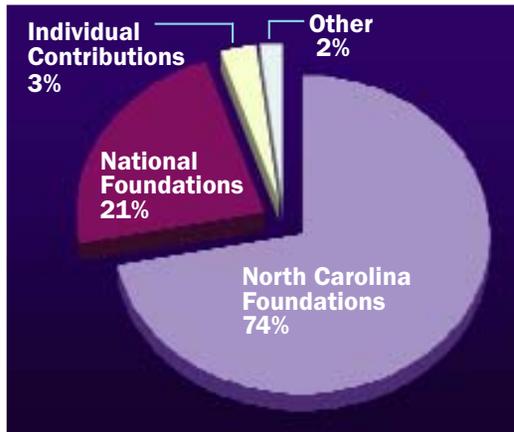
The Justice Center and NC Policy Watch, an independent project of the Justice Center, have taken the lead in the effort to educate the people of North Carolina about the need for public investments – and policymakers, reporters and the state's political networks have taken notice. Policy Watch's blog, *Progressive Pulse*, gets up to 13,000 hits in a month. Traffic to Policy Watch's website was up dramatically in 2009, with more than 78,000 unique users and 1,300,000 page views. The site features daily pieces on policy issues and weekly analysis countering the rhetoric of the right, as well as columns from our progressive partner organizations.

We launched two new printed publications targeted at lawmakers in 2009 – the *Legislative Bulletin*, produced by Justice Center staff, and the *Weekly Briefing*, produced by Policy Watch. Both publications educate members of the state legislature about important policy issues currently before them.

Regular email publications from the Justice Center included *NC Justice News*, an e-newsletter on the latest developments in all of the many issues we work on; *The Week Ahead*, which promotes upcoming newsworthy events from numerous progressive policy groups; and *From the Ground Up*, our e-newsletter on education policy. In addition, each quarter we printed 45,000 copies of *Community News*, which highlighted the Justice Center's policy work and the activities of community activists from other organizations working on behalf of low-income North Carolinians. *The News & Observer* of Raleigh inserted 42,000 copies of *Community News* right into its papers distributed in parts of Durham, Raleigh, Smithfield, Selma, Kenly, Chapel Hill and Carrboro. The rest of the copies went to local libraries, cafes, and legal aid offices throughout the state, or with staff members who distributed them at meetings and events.



## Support for Our Work



Sources of support represent 2009 pre-audited percentages.

Like families, businesses and non-profits across the nation, the Justice Center tightened its belt in 2009, trimming expenses wherever possible. We have continued our responsible management of your gifts by decreasing our non-programmatic costs from 15% in 2007 to 13% this past year. For example, we reassessed our plans to move to a larger space in order to accommodate our growing staff and instead decided to stay put and work with what we had. We also created a new website, which not only works better than the old one but actually slashed our monthly costs.

As a result, a greater percentage of every dollar donated supports our advocacy, outreach, and research activities. We maintained our staffing

levels, and during a year that was so difficult for many of North Carolina families, our capacity to work on behalf of those families was as strong as ever.

The continued commitment and generosity of our donors and funders has enabled us to push forward with our efforts to help low- and moderate-income families in North Carolina. With the support of state and national foundations, as well as hundreds of individual donors, we were able to meet our operating budget of \$4.44 million. Thank you for looking out for the working families of North Carolina and enabling us to continue this important work.

### North Carolina Justice Center 2009 Foundation Partners

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 Annie E. Casey Foundation  
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 Center on Budget & Policy Priorities  
 Charles Stewart Mott Foundation  
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Cris and Guia Villapando  
Cynthia Aziz von der Embse  
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Joan Walsh  
Marvin and Pat Warner  
Anonymous  
Linda B. Weisel  
Anne and Bill Werdel  
Judith West  
Charles W. West Jr.  
Anonymous  
Susan Yarger  
Larry Yarger

### GIFTS IN HONOR

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Adam Searing, Bill Rowe, Anna Fedders. TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Adam Linker, Al  
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