In 2021, Forward Justice and our movement partners made strides towards the creation of a Third Reconstruction in this country by establishing and protecting and preserving the right to vote, addressing poverty and low wages from the bottom up, and continuing to dismantle mass incarceration.
After being wrongfully convicted of murder at age 18 in Greenville, NC, and spending 26 years in prison for a crime he didn’t commit, Dontae Sharpe was finally exonerated and released in August 2019. He began serving as a Forward Justice R.I.S.E. Fellow and leading advocate in criminal justice reform. Despite being fully exonerated, Dontae had yet to receive a full pardon of innocence from the state of NC to clear his name. After two years of advocacy, international media attention, and 11 weeks of continued demonstrations in front of the Governor’s Mansion, Dontae finally received a full pardon of innocence from NC Gov. Cooper on November 12. Since receiving his pardon, Dontae has vowed to continue his work with Forward Justice, fighting for others who remain wrongfully incarcerated and entangled in a discriminatory system. Dontae’s continued advocacy with the Freedom Friday coalition helped to secure the pardon of Howard Durdley who was also wrongfully convicted and spent more than 24 years in prison.

**MARCH**

**COVID-19 Decarceration: 3,500 Releases and Mitigation Measures**

Since the start of the pandemic, we have been fighting for the lives, health, and safety of those who are incarcerated during this unprecedented global health crisis. In March, representing the NC NAACP, we reached a landmark settlement with the state of North Carolina that resulted in the unprecedented early release of at least 3,500 people in custody inside state prisons. In addition to releases, the state was required to implement important measures to mitigate the ongoing threat of COVID-19 for those who remain imprisoned, including providing proper PPE, mandatory staff testing, vaccine education and incentives, and compliance monitoring.

**APRIL**

**Honoring Andrew Brown and Movement Building in Elizabeth City**

In the wake of the tragic shooting death of Andrew Brown Jr., we worked with local, state and national leaders to help shine a light on the need for accountability in Eastern North Carolina.
AUGUST

In November 2019, Forward Justice filed a lawsuit in Wake County Superior Court, seeking to reinstate voting rights for over 55,000 North Carolinians with previous felony convictions who live and work in our communities but are denied their right to vote due to a discriminatory unconstitutional felony disenfranchisement law. On August 23, 2021, a three-judge panel expanded the prior preliminary injunction in the case, allowing 55,000 North Carolinians on probation, parole, or post-release supervision for felony convictions to immediately begin to register to vote and vote in North Carolina elections. Ten days later, the North Carolina Court of Appeals and the North Carolina Supreme Court stayed this historic ruling until the trial court ordered a final judgment. Forward Justice and our Second Chance Alliance partners await the final judgment from the trial court as this ruling will be the largest expansion of voting rights in North Carolina since the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

UPCOMING

Usurper & Fight for Independent Courts

In August 2018, Forward Justice filed a lawsuit on behalf of the NC NAACP and Clean Air Carolina, arguing that the North Carolina General Assembly had been tainted by an unconstitutional racial gerrymander, and therefore lacked the authority to amend the North Carolina State Constitution in 2018. The lawsuit challenges several constitutional amendments that were placed on the ballot in 2018, including the photo voter ID amendment.

In February 2019, the NC NAACP won a motion for partial summary judgment in this case when the Wake County Superior Court ruled that the photo voter ID constitutional amendment had been placed on the ballot by an unconstitutionally-constituted General Assembly. The Court held that the General Assembly came to power by way of an unconstitutional racial gerrymander, and lacked the authority to amend our Constitution. After winning transparent recusal rules in 2021, the case is currently on appeal and we are prepared to fight to preserve our victory at the North Carolina Supreme Court in February 2022.

RESTORED THE VOTING RIGHTS OF

55,000 NORTH CAROLINIANs

PRIMARY AND GENERAL ELECTIONS

Photo Voter ID: Enjoined for 2020 Elections

In December 2018, we filed a lawsuit on behalf of the NC NAACP, challenging the validity of North Carolina’s photo voter ID law (S.B. 824). Plaintiffs allege that the law violates Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, as well as the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, because the passage of this law was motivated by discriminatory intent as part of an effort to dilute the voting strength of the African American and Latinx populations.

On December 31, 2019, the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of North Carolina issued a preliminary injunction blocking North Carolina’s photo voter ID law, finding that the passage of this law was motivated by racially discriminatory intent in violation of the Voting Rights Act and the Constitution. The injunction remained in place throughout the primary and general elections in 2020, removing a barrier to the ballot for thousands of North Carolinians. We will continue this fight in 2022 to make this victory permanent.
As a part of our strategic partnership with the National Poor People’s Campaign, we reviewed federal voting protection legislation, met with federal lawmakers, and organized a ‘Fight for the People’ summer of demonstrations in support of federal voting rights protections. Forward Justice staff participated in and provided planning support for several rallies over the summer including: the Moral March on Manchin, which helped spur his compromise on voter protection legislation; the four-week push for $15 minimum wage and voter protections; the July 19th March on Manchin and Sinema; the Women’s March, where we provided jail support for the 70 women who were arrested as a part of that demonstration; and the August 2 nationwide, state-based mass marches and civil disobedience demonstrations.

The work continues...

We know that when we fight, we win. Our work will continue into 2022 and beyond as we continue expanding the ‘We’ in “We the people” and usher in the Third Reconstruction of America. We’re heading back to court to protect voting rights and will continue to develop tools and create spaces for movement activists and advocates to create meaningful, systemic change.
Thank you to partners, funders, donors, and community support!

We’re grateful for the support of our donors and funders! You are an integral part of our work advocating for racial justice, and our staff is honored to serve alongside you. Thank you for your investment, courage, and encouragement along the way. Together we can change the south and the nation.

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Forward Justice
PO Box 1932, Durham, NC 27702
Website: forwardjustice.org
Email: Info@forwardjustice.org
Why Our Donors Support Our Work

I support Forward Justice because it helps individuals who are unrightfully treated due to the way society looks at them. I support it also because it gives those same individuals a second chance in the community to better themselves.

- Tonya McMillan

Forward justice is very essential in the world we live in today. If we don’t bring attention to topics as such, change and resolutions will be limited. I strongly support Forward Justice and the effective innovation it brings towards justice within our communities.

- Alexandra Bright

Forward Justice is a phenomenal organization! They are doing much needed work for the community and helping people who society has forgotten about. That is why I will continue to support Forward Justice.

- Dorian Burton