



AMERICA'S P&A SYSTEM

& the Importance
of Disability Rights
North Carolina



Created through
Congressional
authority



Independent,
nonpartisan agency



Located in every
US state and
territory



Assists people
with all
disabilities



Provides investigative
oversight and direct
advocacy



Congress
expanded this
oversight system's
responsibilities over
the last 50 years

History



The nationwide Protection & Advocacy (P&A) system was created in the 1970s in response to shocking revelations of abuse, neglect, and inhumane conditions at Willowbrook State School in New York, a state-run institution for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Congress held hearings and concluded that such conditions were widespread, states were ill-positioned to adequately oversee or reform these essential service systems, and an independent oversight system was necessary.

In 1975, the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights (DD) Act, a bipartisan measure signed into law by President Gerald Ford, established the first Protection and Advocacy program: Protection and Advocacy for Developmental Disabilities (PADD). Congress authorized the Protection & Advocacy system to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect and advocate for the legal rights of people with disabilities, in response to rampant and serious unmet need.


How DRNC advances Disability Rights in NC

One in three people in North Carolina has at least one disability. Disabled people are among the largest population groups in NC and the US, including people of all socio-economic statuses, ages, races, and genders. Disability Rights North Carolina (DRNC) is the only organization exclusively dedicated to advancing and defending the rights of North Carolinians with all types of disabilities, of all ages, throughout our state. We do this work with a staff of 50, supplemented by legal interns, contract staff, and volunteers.

DRNC uses a range of legal and other advocacy strategies, including information and referral services, community outreach and education, public policy and coalition work, and individual representation. Our areas of focus include monitoring and investigations of abuse and neglect; access to education, employment, housing, health care, and other community services; and ensuring Social Security beneficiaries are not being exploited or endangered.

Using our federally mandated access authority, DRNC monitors and investigates abuse and neglect in psychiatric hospitals, developmental centers, children's institutions, nursing facilities, prisons, jails, and schools. DRNC staff work tirelessly to keep people with disabilities free from discrimination and abuse. We advocate for service systems that operate with efficiency and integrity, so limited resources are put to effective use. We help build accessible communities where people with disabilities are safe and able to live independent, productive lives.

Fraud, Waste, & Abuse



- We investigate **fraud** and **abuse** and provide direct advocacy to eliminate it

- Our investigations **uncover waste** in our state systems and our advocacy remedies these failures

- We focus on these goals with both **individual** and **systemic** approaches

- We target the most **effective solutions** for the people we are serving.

Congressional Mandates

Congress created the **Protection and Advocacy System** to **investigate** allegations of **abuse and neglect**, **monitor** for safety, **educate** the public, and **advocate** for the legal rights of people with disabilities.

Abuse

DRNC **investigates and uncovers negligent and abusive acts** that may lead to serious harm and death and advocates to prevent future harm. This includes

- Direct care abuse and neglect
- Social Security benefit misuse
- Unlawful seclusion
- Improper physical and chemical restraint
- Unnecessary Institutionalization
- Financial abuse

Fraud

Financial fraud is one of the fastest-growing forms of abuse targeting older Americans and people with disabilities. Many are susceptible to fraudsters because they lack a meaningful understanding of their rights or how to report abuse. We conduct over 125 comprehensive financial reviews each year to protect people with disabilities from fraud and abuse, and we proactively provide Know Your Rights training to empower those most at risk of exploitation..

Waste

People with disabilities are often unnecessarily institutionalized at greater cost to taxpayers.

The cost of institutional care far exceeds the cost of services in the community. When people are unnecessarily institutionalized, taxpayers bear the burden of this waste. Institutionalization makes meaningful workforce participation difficult or impossible. We have helped hundreds of people who were stuck in hospitals, nursing homes, and other institutions who want to return to their communities.

DRNC Snapshot: North Carolina's advocacy on behalf Social Security beneficiaries



Program Impact and Scope



637 cases completed



4,300+ interviews conducted with payees, beneficiaries, legal guardians, and others.



2,500+ deficiencies found —
An average of 4 deficiencies per case.

High Risk Findings



77 instances of immediate jeopardy identified — that's about 12% of all casework.



All 77 cases were promptly reported to the Social Security Administration and appropriate authorities.



Real students. Real impact.

Disability Rights North Carolina is protecting students with disabilities across the state. Here's how.

Gaston County (NC-14)

- A young autistic boy was excluded from school for over a year and left without support. After DRNC filed a complaint, he returned to school with proper services. When he was invited to a birthday party, his mother said it was a milestone that showed how far he had come.
- A student with ADHD and autism was excluded and put on homebound instruction, causing him to miss vital services. DRNC won a state complaint. Now, he's back in school with the supports he's legally entitled to, and making educational progress.

Johnston County (NC-3)

- An 8th grader with autism was pushed into a part-time schedule with no services. DRNC filed a complaint, leading to 30+ hours of compensatory services and identifying systemic failures in the district.

Johnston County (NC-13)

- An autistic high schooler was placed on a severely shortened school day and isolated in a room alone. DRNC stepped in. The student is now back full time, earning credits toward his diploma.
- A 7th grader with autism was forced into virtual learning with no path back to school. After DRNC's intervention, he returned to school with 20 hours of compensatory services.

New Hanover County (NC-7)

- A 4th grader with emotional disabilities was isolated, restrained, and excluded. DRNC helped get him back with classmates and finish the school year successfully.

Wayne County (NC-1)

- A Deaf student with additional disabilities was attending school only six hours per week. DRNC's advocacy restored full-time education with an ASL interpreter, behavior support, and proper communication services. Her mother, once forced to leave work and lose housing due to her daughter's care needs, now sees her daughter making progress in class.

Medicaid is vital to the people DRNC serves.



Jermain (NC-4) 42 is autistic, loves bowling, and dreams of studying drafting at NC State. After a cancer diagnosis and other serious medical issues, his future was uncertain.

The man had been living in a group home that failed to meet his needs. His mother, Iris, brought him home and fought for the services he deserved. **DRNC stepped in, helping Iris understand his rights and advocate for Medicaid supports.**

Today, Jermain receives community-based services that support his health, dignity, and independence. With Medicaid and advocacy, Jermain is reclaiming his life—and planning for a future full of possibility.



Josh (NC-8), a warm and funny 33-year-old with Fragile X Syndrome, relies on Medicaid's Innovations Waiver to stay safe and connected.

In 2024, his mother, Laura applied for a home security system to prevent Josh—who tends to wander—from getting hurt. But the process stalled, leaving Josh at risk.

DRNC stepped in, navigating the complex system and advocating for approval. After months of persistence, the system was installed, giving Josh safety and greater independence.

Medicaid services like this—and DRNC's advocacy—make community living possible for people with disabilities.



Miles (NC-2) is a joyful 9-year-old who loves school, his siblings, and his community. He also lives with spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy and relies on a ventilator and 24/7 skilled nursing care.

For his family, Medicaid is essential—it provides the care and equipment that keep Miles safe, healthy, and learning.

When barriers arose to accessing in-home nursing and adaptive equipment, DRNC stepped in to help the family secure critical services.

Now, Miles attends school with a nurse, participates in therapy, and stays engaged with his community.

These are not extras. They are what make it possible for Miles to thrive at home—where he belongs.

Medicaid is vital for disabled people and their families.



Kellen (NC-11), a gifted 27-year-old with autism, loves music, dance parties, and exploring the world. Today, he lives independently with the supports he needs, but getting there wasn't easy.

Growing up in rural Yancey County, Kellen had limited services. His mother, Angie, fought for his rights—and found a partner in DRNC.

With DRNC's help, Kellen accessed Medicaid's Innovations Waiver, unlocking vital services. Now, he lives in a supported home with daily assistance, community activities, and real independence.

But proposed Medicaid and advocacy cuts put this progress at risk. Kellen's future depends on preserving the services that make independence possible.



Amelia* (NC-9), the mother of a young man with cerebral palsy who requires assistance with all his care, requested additional in-home services through a Medicaid home and community-based services (HCBS) waiver after his father passed away suddenly.

Amelia's request was denied. **DRNC represented the mother in an administrative hearing and successfully negotiated for the hours to be approved.**



Sabrina* (NC-12), A 15-month-old with a genetic disorder, was denied eligibility for a home and community-based services Medicaid waiver for medically fragile children.

DRNC provided the parent with support throughout the appeal process. Together, the parent and DRNC's advocacy prevailed.

The child was deemed eligible for the waiver and is receiving the services necessary to stay in her home with her family.

*names and images have been changed to protect privacy.

Meet Alexis

How one girl's courage exposed a system that locked her away.

"We're gone! We're gone!"

Alexis Ratcliff (NC-10), a 19-year-old patient at Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist hospital for the past six years, finally rolled out of the hospital on June 30, 2025, bound for her new apartment in a nearby community where she can live the independent life she's been dreaming of for so long.

"We're gone! We're gone! I'm SO excited," Alexis exclaimed after leaving the hospital and heading to her new apartment with its pink bedroom and stocked kitchen. Family, friends, and advocates visited with her all day, sharing in the celebration of her freedom. And media were there to document her accomplishment.

Alexis didn't live in the hospital for six years because she was sick. She lived there since she was 13 because she couldn't get the services she needed to live independently.

Alexis was in a car crash when she was just 18 months old and her neck was crushed. As a result, she is a quadriplegic and uses a ventilator.

Alexis's move was the result of DRNC's advocacy with help from the US Department of Justice and other agencies. US Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. announced in a press release a resolution that helped enable Alexis to move out, invoking his father's legacy. "Today, the Office for Civil Rights fulfilled (his) vision by ending unnecessary segregation and helping a young woman build the future she deserves. This resolution brings Make America Healthy Again to life—empowering people like Alexis to live healthy, productive lives in their communities."

A sharp and witty young woman, Alexis said she is thankful for family and friends who "wouldn't let me give up." Her determination served her well. "I've learned who I want to be and that I want to help advocate for people with disabilities. People with disabilities deserve to live in the community like everyone else," she said.

While living in the hospital, Alexis graduated high school with honors and received a full scholarship to college. She's put that on hold until she gets settled. In the meantime, she just completed training to further develop her advocacy skills. Next up: college, then law school.

Looking at the spaces in her new home, Alexis decided the kitchen is her favorite. A decorative plaque above the refrigerator says it all: "Home Is Where Your Story Begins." Alexis is ready!



Alexis in her new home with DRNC advocate Kirby Morrow

DRNC CASEWORK – LEGAL ADVOCACY IN ACTION



For years, a North Carolinian (**NC-11**) with multiple sclerosis received in-home support through Medicaid. Then a policy change threatened to cut his services unless he moved into an institution, even though that option cost more than his 20 hours of care at home.

This decision put the independence of thousands at risk. DRNC and its partners stepped in to stop it.

The outcome preserved vital in-home services for more than 12,000 people and affirmed that support systems should help people remain in their homes and communities, not force them into costly, isolating institutions.



A firefighter (**NC-6**) who wanted to become an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) so he could advance his firefighting career and fulfill a childhood dream was denied the accommodations he needed to take the exam for certification.

With DRNC's help, the young firefighter was given the accommodations. "I have wanted to be a firefighter since I was five years old," he said.

"I am hopeful my experience shows others like me not to assume they cannot have a career as a first responder just because they need accommodations."

A disabled worker (**NC-5**) requested a transfer to an open position, a reasonable accommodation under the ADA.

When the request was denied, DRNC stepped in to ensure his rights were protected.

The outcome confirmed that employers must consider reassignment before denying accommodations, which keeps North Carolinians with disabilities on the job, rather than being wrongfully excluded from the workforce and reliant on public benefits.

A medically fragile toddler (**NC-4**) was placed by a county Department of Social Services in an institution over 100 miles from home, despite federal guidance favoring care in family and community settings.

DRNC challenged the practice, leading the DSS agency to revise its policies.

This policy shift strengthens protections for children with disabilities across the state, ensuring DSS agencies prioritize keeping children at home and in their communities.

A DRNC IMPACT SNAPSHOT *

One Year. Thousands Served.
Countless Dollars Saved.



3,131

requests for
DRNC services



873

new cases
opened



2,121

people receiving
information and
referral services



152,094

used our website
rights resources



4,356

advocacy
resources
distributed



608

news stories about
our advocacy



92

education and
training services



3,193

people received
education/trainings



275,662

people reached
through website, social
media and email

Data reflects DRNC activity from October 1, 2023 – September 30, 2024.



In the words of people we serve

With DRNC's help, a disabled older gentleman was able to access the federal funding needed to repair his hurricane-damaged home. "I thank you so very much for all you have done to make this grant possible for me. It took a lot off me to know the mold is gone. I have a very nice place to live now and to help (his wife) raise our grandchildren."

"I sense a genuine effort to assist every case, even though I understand limitations exist. I truly hope for (DRNC'S) expansion, enabling you to offer assistance to more people in the impactful capacity you strive for."

"The staff at DRNC went above and beyond to assist my family and I with my son. They listened to our needs and took over where was necessary in order to get (the son) better treatment, but most importantly... getting him home. I cannot say enough nor put into words how the staff advocated for my son like it was one of their children... We are forever grateful to them. THANK YOU... DRNC is AWESOME and AMAZING!!"



In the words of the people we serve

A US military veteran who relocated to NC from another state reached out to DRNC for information about Emotional Support Animals (ESA) and housing. "I am HAPPY," he wrote to us. "She (DRNC staff) talked to me, didn't act like a robot. As a Veteran I need help (but) so many times I get shoved to the side. Thank you!"

A woman sought DRNC's help with concerns that her landlord might evict her because she has a service dog for a seizure disorder.

"Your input and resources were tremendously helpful. Empathetic and competent staff at all levels." She wishes DRNC had more funding "to hire more staff to do more of the great work you do."

A case manager called DRNC seeking community resources and services for children with disabilities. "My experience was great," she wrote. "I needed information for children's resources to give to the parents whose children are disabled. I really was helped a lot. (The DRNC staff person) went out of her way to help me and I really appreciate it! She obviously cares about helping the disabled. I received incredibly helpful information."



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Toll Free (within NC): 1-877-235-4210



www.disabilityrightsncc.org