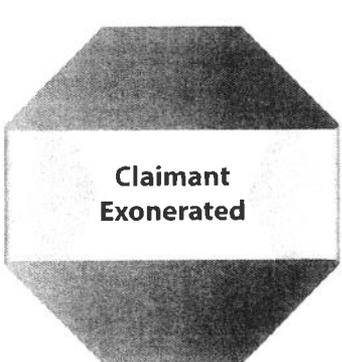
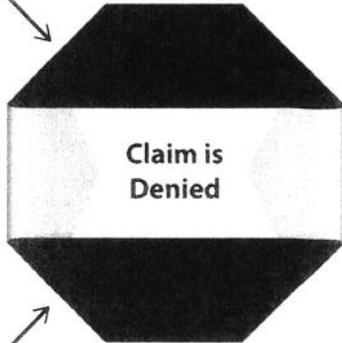
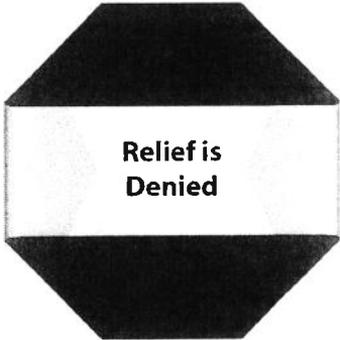


North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission Claim Review Process



or



Article 92.

North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission.

§ 15A-1460. Definitions.

The following definitions apply in this Article:

- (1) "Claim of factual innocence" means a claim on behalf of a living person convicted of a felony in the General Court of Justice of the State of North Carolina, asserting the complete innocence of any criminal responsibility for the felony for which the person was convicted and for any other reduced level of criminal responsibility relating to the crime, and for which there is some credible, verifiable evidence of innocence that has not previously been presented at trial or considered at a hearing granted through postconviction relief.
- (1a) "Claimant" means a person asserting that he or she is completely innocent of any criminal responsibility for a felony crime upon which the person was convicted and for any other reduced level of criminal responsibility relating to the crime.
- (2) "Commission" means the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission established by this Article.
- (3) "Director" means the Director of the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission.
- (4) "Victim" means the victim of the crime, or if the victim of the crime is deceased, the next of kin of the victim. (2006-184, s. 1; 2010-171, s. 5; 2012-7, s. 4.)

§ 15A-1461. Purpose of Article.

This Article establishes an extraordinary procedure to investigate and determine credible claims of factual innocence that shall require an individual to voluntarily waive rights and privileges as described in this Article. (2006-184, s. 1; 2010-171, s. 5.)

§ 15A-1462. Commission established.

(a) There is established the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission. The North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission shall be an independent commission under the Judicial Department for administrative purposes.

(b) The Administrative Office of the Courts shall provide administrative support to the Commission as needed. The Director of the Administrative Office of the Courts shall not reduce or modify the budget of the Commission or use funds appropriated to the Commission without the approval of the Commission. (2006-184, s. 1; 2010-171, s. 5.)

§ 15A-1463. Membership; chair; meetings; quorum.

(a) The Commission shall consist of eight voting members as follows:

- (1) One shall be a superior court judge.
- (2) One shall be a prosecuting attorney.
- (3) One shall be a victim advocate.
- (4) One shall be engaged in the practice of criminal defense law.
- (5) One shall be a public member who is not an attorney and who is not an officer or employee of the Judicial Department.
- (6) One shall be a sheriff holding office at the time of his or her appointment.
- (7) The vocations of the two remaining appointed voting members shall be at the discretion of the Chief Justice.

The Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court shall make the initial appointment for members identified in subdivisions (4) through (6) of this subsection. The Chief Judge of the Court of

Appeals shall make the initial appointment for members identified in subdivisions (1) through (3) of this subsection. After an appointee has served his or her first three-year term, the subsequent appointment shall be by the Chief Justice or Chief Judge who did not make the previous appointment. Thereafter, the Chief Justice or Chief Judge shall rotate the appointing power, except for the two discretionary appointments identified by subdivision (7) of this subsection which shall be appointed by the Chief Justice.

(b) The appointing authority shall also appoint alternate Commission members for the Commission members he or she has appointed to serve in the event of scheduling conflicts, conflicts of interest, disability, or other disqualification arising in a particular case. The alternate members shall have the same qualifications for appointment as the original member. In making the appointments, the appointing authority shall make a good faith effort to appoint members with different perspectives of the justice system. The appointing authority shall also consider geographical location, gender, and racial diversity in making the appointments.

(c) The superior court judge who is appointed as a member under subsection (a) of this section shall serve as Chair of the Commission. The Commission shall have its initial meeting no later than January 31, 2007, at the call of the Chair. The Commission shall meet a minimum of once every six months and may also meet more often at the call of the Chair. The Commission shall meet at such time and place as designated by the Chair. Notice of the meetings shall be given at such time and manner as provided by the rules of the Commission. A majority of the members shall constitute a quorum. All Commission votes shall be by majority vote. (2006-184, s. 1; 2010-171, s. 5.)

§ 15A-1464. Terms of members; compensation; expenses.

(a) Of the initial members, two appointments shall be for one-year terms, three appointments shall be for two-year terms, and three appointments shall be for three-year terms. Thereafter, all terms shall be for three years. Members of the Commission shall serve no more than two consecutive three-year terms plus any initial term of less than three years. Unless provided otherwise by this act, all terms of members shall begin on January 1 and end on December 31.

Members serving by virtue of elective or appointive office, except for the sheriff, may serve only so long as the officeholders hold those respective offices. The Chief Justice may remove members, with cause. Vacancies occurring before the expiration of a term shall be filled in the manner provided for the members first appointed.

(b) The Commission members shall receive no salary for serving. All Commission members shall receive necessary subsistence and travel expenses in accordance with the provisions of G.S. 138-5 and G.S. 138-6, as applicable. (2006-184, s. 1; 2010-171, s. 5.)

§ 15A-1465. Director and other staff.

(a) The Commission shall employ a Director. The Director shall be an attorney licensed to practice in North Carolina at the time of appointment and at all times during service as Director. The Director shall assist the Commission in developing rules and standards for cases accepted for review, coordinate investigation of cases accepted for review, maintain records for all case investigations, prepare reports outlining Commission investigations and recommendations to the trial court, and apply for and accept on behalf of the Commission any funds that may become available from government grants, private gifts, donations, or devises from any source.

(b) Subject to the approval of the Chair, the Director shall employ such other staff and shall contract for services as is necessary to assist the Commission in the performance of its duties, and as funds permit.

(c) The Commission may, with the approval of the Legislative Services Commission, meet in the State Legislative Building or the Legislative Office Building, or may meet in an area provided by the Director of the Administrative Office of the Courts. The Director of the Administrative Office of

the Courts shall provide office space for the Commission and the Commission staff. (2006-184, s. 1; 2010-171, s. 5; 2011-284, s. 11.)

§ 15A-1466. Duties.

The Commission shall have the following duties and powers:

- (1) To establish the criteria and screening process to be used to determine which cases shall be accepted for review.
- (2) To conduct inquiries into claims of factual innocence, with priority to be given to those cases in which the convicted person is currently incarcerated solely for the crime for which he or she claims factual innocence.
- (3) To coordinate the investigation of cases accepted for review.
- (4) To maintain records for all case investigations.
- (5) To prepare written reports outlining Commission investigations and recommendations to the trial court at the completion of each inquiry.
- (6) To apply for and accept any funds that may become available for the Commission's work from government grants, private gifts, donations, or devises from any source. (2006-184, s. 1; 2010-171, s. 5; 2011-284, s. 12.)

§ 15A-1467. Claims of innocence; waiver of convicted person's procedural safeguards and privileges; formal inquiry; notification of the crime victim.

(a) A claim of factual innocence may be referred to the Commission by any court, a State or local agency, a claimant, or a claimant's counsel. The Commission shall not consider a claim of factual innocence if the convicted person is deceased. The determination of whether to grant a formal inquiry regarding any other claim of factual innocence is in the discretion of the Commission. The Commission may informally screen and dismiss a case summarily at its discretion.

(b) No formal inquiry into a claim of innocence shall be made by the Commission unless the Director or the Director's designee first obtains a signed agreement from the convicted person in which the convicted person waives his or her procedural safeguards and privileges, agrees to cooperate with the Commission, and agrees to provide full disclosure regarding all inquiry requirements of the Commission. The waiver under this subsection does not apply to matters unrelated to a convicted person's claim of innocence. The convicted person shall have the right to advice of counsel prior to the execution of the agreement and, if a formal inquiry is granted, throughout the formal inquiry. If counsel represents the convicted person, then the convicted person's counsel must be present at the signing of the agreement. If counsel does not represent the convicted person, the Commission Chair shall determine the convicted person's indigency status and, if appropriate, enter an order for the appointment of counsel for the purpose of advising on the agreement.

(c) If a formal inquiry regarding a claim of factual innocence is granted, the Director shall use all due diligence to notify the victim in the case and explain the inquiry process. The Commission shall give the victim notice that the victim has the right to present his or her views and concerns throughout the Commission's investigation.

(d) The Commission may use any measure provided in Chapter 15A of the General Statutes and the Rules of Civil Procedure as set out in G.S. 1A-1 to obtain information necessary to its inquiry. The Commission may also do any of the following: issue process to compel the attendance of witnesses and the production of evidence, administer oaths, petition the Superior Court of Wake County or of the original jurisdiction for enforcement of process or for other relief, and prescribe its own rules of procedure. All challenges with regard to the Commission's authority or the Commission's access to evidence shall be heard by the Commission Chair in the Chair's judicial capacity, including any in camera review required by G.S. 15A-908.

(e) While performing duties for the Commission, the Director or the Director's designee may serve subpoenas or other process issued by the Commission throughout the State in the same manner and with the same effect as an officer authorized to serve process of the General Court of Justice.

(f) All State discovery and disclosure statutes in effect at the time of formal inquiry shall be enforceable as if the convicted person were currently being tried for the charge for which the convicted person is claiming innocence.

(g) If, at any point during an inquiry, the convicted person refuses to comply with requests of the Commission or is otherwise deemed to be uncooperative by the Commission, the Commission shall discontinue the inquiry. (2006-184, s. 1; 2010-171, s. 5; 2012-7, s. 5.)

§ 15A-1468. Commission proceedings.

(a) At the completion of a formal inquiry, all relevant evidence shall be presented to the full Commission. As part of its proceedings, the Commission may conduct public hearings. The determination as to whether to conduct public hearings is solely in the discretion of the Commission. Any public hearing held in accordance with this section shall be subject to the Commission's rules of operation.

(a1) The Commission may compel the testimony of any witness. If a witness asserts his or her privilege against self-incrimination in a proceeding under this Article, the Commission chair, in the chair's judicial capacity, may order the witness to testify or produce other information if the chair first determines that the witness's testimony will likely be material to reach a correct factual determination in the case at hand. However, the Commission chair shall not order the witness to testify or produce other information that would incriminate the witness in the prosecution of any offense other than an offense for which the witness is granted immunity under this subsection. The order shall prevent a prosecutor from using the compelled testimony, or evidence derived therefrom, to prosecute the witness for previous false statements made under oath by the witness in prior proceedings. The prosecutor has a right to be heard by the Commission chair prior to the chair issuing the order. Once granted, the immunity shall apply throughout all proceedings conducted pursuant to this Article. The limited immunity granted under this section shall not prohibit prosecution of statements made under oath that are unrelated to the Commission's formal inquiry, false statements made under oath during proceedings under this Article, or prosecution for any other crimes.

(a2) The Innocence Inquiry Commission shall include, as part of its rules of operation, the holding of a prehearing conference to be held at least 10 days prior to any proceedings of the full Commission. Only the following persons shall be notified and authorized to attend the prehearing conference: the District Attorney, or the District Attorney's designee, of the district where the claimant was convicted of the felony upon which the claim of factual innocence is based; the claimant's counsel, if any; the Chair of the Commission; the Executive Director of the Commission; and any Commission staff designated by the Director. The District Attorney, or designee, shall be provided (i) an opportunity to inspect any evidence that may be presented to the Commission that has not previously been presented to any judicial officer or body and (ii) any information that he or she deems relevant to the proceedings. Prior to any Commission proceedings, the District Attorney or designee is authorized to provide the Commission with a written statement, which shall be included in the record of the Commission's proceedings. Any statement included in the record shall be part of the Commission's record of proceedings pursuant to subsection (e) of this section.

(b) The Director shall use all due diligence to notify the victim at least 30 days prior to any proceedings of the full Commission held in regard to the victim's case. The Commission shall notify the victim that the victim is permitted to attend proceedings otherwise closed to the public, subject to any limitations imposed by this Article. If the victim plans to attend proceedings otherwise closed to the public, the victim shall notify the Commission at least 10 days in advance of the proceedings of his or her intent to attend.

(c) After hearing the evidence, the full Commission shall vote to establish further case disposition as provided by this subsection. All eight voting members of the Commission shall participate in that vote.

Except in cases where the convicted person entered and was convicted on a plea of guilty, if five or more of the eight voting members of the Commission conclude there is sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review, the case shall be referred to the senior resident superior court judge in the district of original jurisdiction by filing with the clerk of court the opinion of the Commission with supporting findings of fact, as well as the record in support of such opinion, with service on the district attorney in noncapital cases and service on both the district attorney and Attorney General in capital cases. In cases where the convicted person entered and was convicted on a plea of guilty, if all of the eight voting members of the Commission conclude there is sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review, the case shall be referred to the senior resident superior court judge in the district of original jurisdiction.

If less than five of the eight voting members of the Commission, or in cases where the convicted person entered and was convicted on a guilty plea less than all of the eight voting members of the Commission, conclude there is sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review, the Commission shall conclude there is insufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review. The Commission shall document that opinion, along with supporting findings of fact, and file those documents and supporting materials with the clerk of superior court in the district of original jurisdiction, with a copy to the district attorney and the senior resident superior court judge.

The Director of the Commission shall use all due diligence to notify immediately the victim of the Commission's conclusion in a case.

(d) Evidence of criminal acts, professional misconduct, or other wrongdoing disclosed through formal inquiry or Commission proceedings shall be referred to the appropriate authority. Evidence favorable to the convicted person disclosed through formal inquiry or Commission proceedings shall be disclosed to the convicted person and the convicted person's counsel, if the convicted person has counsel.

(e) All proceedings of the Commission shall be recorded and transcribed as part of the record. All Commission member votes shall be recorded in the record. All records and proceedings of the Commission are confidential and are exempt from public record and public meeting laws except that the supporting records for the Commission's conclusion that there is sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review, including all files and materials considered by the Commission and a full transcript of the hearing before the Commission, shall become public at the time of referral to the superior court. Commission records for conclusions of insufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review shall remain confidential, except as provided in subsection (d) of this section. (2006-184, s. 1; 2009-360, s. 1; 2010-171, s. 5; 2012-7, ss. 6, 7.)

§ 15A-1469. Postcommission three-judge panel.

(a) If the Commission concludes there is sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review, the Chair of the Commission shall request the Chief Justice to appoint a three-judge panel, not to include any trial judge that has had substantial previous involvement in the case, and issue commissions to the members of the three-judge panel to convene a special session of the superior court of the original jurisdiction to hear evidence relevant to the Commission's recommendation. The senior judge of the panel shall preside. The Chief Justice shall appoint the three-judge panel within 20 days of the filing of the Commission's opinion finding sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review.

(a1) If the Commission concludes that there is credible evidence of prosecutorial misconduct in the case, the Chair of the Commission may request the Attorney General to appoint a special prosecutor to represent the State in lieu of the district attorney of the district of conviction or the

district attorney's designee. The request for the special prosecutor shall be made within 20 days of the filing of the Commission's opinion finding sufficient evidence of innocence to merit judicial review.

Upon receipt of a request under this subsection to appoint a special prosecutor, the Attorney General may temporarily assign a district attorney, assistant district attorney, or other qualified attorney, to represent the State at the hearing before the three-judge panel. However, the Attorney General shall not appoint as special prosecutor any attorney who prosecuted or assisted with the prosecution in the trial of the convicted person, or is a prosecuting attorney in the district where the convicted person was tried. The appointment shall be made no later than 20 days after the receipt of the request.

(b) The senior resident superior court judge shall enter an order setting the case for hearing at the special session of superior court for which the three-judge panel is commissioned and shall require the State to file a response to the Commission's opinion within 90 days of the date of the order. Such response, at the time of original filing or through amendment at any time before or during the proceedings, may include joining the defense in a motion to dismiss the charges with prejudice on the basis of innocence.

(c) The district attorney of the district of conviction, or the district attorney's designee, shall represent the State at the hearing before the three-judge panel, except as otherwise provided by this section.

(d) The three-judge panel shall conduct an evidentiary hearing. At the hearing, the court, and the defense and prosecution through the court, may compel the testimony of any witness, including the convicted person. All credible, verifiable evidence relevant to the case, even if considered by a jury or judge in a prior proceeding, may be presented during the hearing. The convicted person may not assert any privilege or prevent a witness from testifying. The convicted person has a right to be present at the evidentiary hearing and to be represented by counsel. A waiver of the right to be present shall be in writing.

(e) The senior resident superior court judge shall determine the convicted person's indigency status and, if appropriate, enter an order for the appointment of counsel. The court may also enter an order relieving an indigent convicted person of all or a portion of the costs of the proceedings.

(f) The clerk of court shall provide written notification to the victim 30 days prior to any case-related hearings.

(g) Upon the motion of either party, the senior judge of the panel may direct the attorneys for the parties to appear before him or her for a conference on any matter in the case.

(h) The three-judge panel shall rule as to whether the convicted person has proved by clear and convincing evidence that the convicted person is innocent of the charges. Such a determination shall require a unanimous vote. If the vote is unanimous, the panel shall enter dismissal of all or any of the charges. If the vote is not unanimous, the panel shall deny relief.

(i) A person who is determined by the three-judge panel to be innocent of all charges and against whom the charges are dismissed pursuant to this section is eligible for compensation under Article 8 of Chapter 148 of the General Statutes without obtaining a pardon of innocence from the Governor. (2006-184, s. 1; 2010-171, ss. 1, 5; 2012-7, s. 8.)

§ 15A-1470. No right to further review of decision by Commission or three-judge panel; convicted person retains right to other postconviction relief.

(a) Unless otherwise authorized by this Article, the decisions of the Commission and of the three-judge panel are final and are not subject to further review by appeal, certification, writ, motion, or otherwise.

(b) A claim of factual innocence asserted through the Innocence Inquiry Commission shall not adversely affect the convicted person's rights to other postconviction relief. (2006-184, s. 1; 2010-171, s. 5.)

§ 15A-1471. Preservation of files and evidence; production of files and evidence; forensic and DNA testing.

(a) Upon receiving written notice from the Commission of a Commission inquiry, the State shall preserve all files and evidence subject to disclosure under G.S. 15A-903. Once the Commission provides written notice to the State that the Commission's inquiry is complete, the duty to preserve under this section shall cease; however, other preservation requirements may be applicable.

(b) The Commission is entitled to a copy of all records preserved under subsection (a) of this section, including access to inspect and examine all physical evidence.

(c) Upon request of the Commission, the State shall transfer custody of physical evidence to the Commission's Director, or the Director's designee, for forensic and DNA testing. The Commission shall preserve evidence in a manner reasonably calculated to prevent contamination or degradation of any biological evidence that might be present, while subject to a continuous chain of custody and securely retained with sufficient official documentation to locate the evidence. At or prior to the completion of the Commission's inquiry, the Commission shall return all remaining evidence.

(d) The Commission shall have the right to subject physical evidence to forensic and DNA testing, including consumption of biological material, as necessary for the Commission's inquiry. If testing complies with FBI requirements and the data meets NDIS criteria, profiles obtained from the testing shall be searched and uploaded to CODIS. The Commission shall incur all costs associated with ensuring compliance with FBI requirements and NDIS criteria. (2012-7, s. 10.)

§ 15A-1472. Reserved for future codification purposes.

§ 15A-1473. Reserved for future codification purposes.

§ 15A-1474. Reserved for future codification purposes.

§ 15A-1475. Reports.

The North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission shall report annually by February 1 of each year on its activities to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety and the State Judicial Council. The report may contain recommendations of any needed legislative changes related to the activities of the Commission. The report shall recommend the funding needed by the Commission, the district attorneys, and the State Bureau of Investigation in order to meet their responsibilities under S.L. 2006-184. Recommendations concerning the district attorneys or the State Bureau of Investigation shall only be made after consultations with the North Carolina Conference of District Attorneys and the Attorney General. (2006-184, s. 9; 2011-291, s. 2.4; 2014-100, ss. 17.1(p), 18B.1(f).)

INNOCENCE PROJECT

Conviction Integrity Units

A Conviction Integrity Unit conducts extrajudicial fact-based review of secured convictions to investigate plausible allegations of actual innocence. The National Registry of Exonerations reported that there were 24 conviction integrity units across the United States in 2015 that produced 58 exonerations.¹ Nearly 90% of all CIU-exonerations come from just four counties.²

Recommendations: Because most CIUs have been operating for only a few years, we are still discerning best practices. However, based on those that have successfully produced exonerations it is recommended that CIUs:

- ***Be led by people with a criminal defense or “innocence” background.***
- ***Provide training to personnel*** on specific topics including underlying contributing factors to wrongful convictions and emerging issues in forensic science that may impact past convictions secured by the use of older scientific methods.
- ***Be appropriately resourced*** by attorneys, investigators and staff for whom CIU cases have clear priority above other office matters, with sufficient personnel and budget resources to enable timely investigations and thorough and thoughtful recommendations. CIUs should report directly to, and be supported by, the District Attorney’s Office.
- ***Use an “interest of justice” standard of review*** for determining whether a claim of innocence should be re-investigated and whether a conviction should be overturned.
- ***Establish a process for facilitating extensive information sharing*** between the CIU and the parties seeking relief, including open file discovery and contemporaneous disclosure of information discovered in the CIU investigation (other than CIU work product information and information that could endanger third parties).
- ***Report results*** including the outcomes of investigations and the number and nature of cases reviewed.
- ***Conduct a root cause analysis*** separate and apart from the CIU case review, on each case where a recommendation is made to alter a conviction, to understand and address the circumstances and environments that allowed one or more errors to occur in the administration of justice.
- ***Identify and implement improved policies and procedures*** for each stakeholder that might prevent the recurrence of the error(s) that permitted the flawed conviction to occur.

CIU Case Studies: The Kings County District Attorney’s Conviction Review Unit in Brooklyn, New York is considered a national model. It incorporated all of the above best practices and produced 20 exonerations in just two years. The unit actively works with defense counsel to conduct a collaborative, thorough, re-investigation into cases with plausible claims of innocence. On the other hand, the Cook County, Illinois CIU, created in 2012, reports having helped secure thirteen exonerations, but there is evidence to suggest that it fought against the exoneration in at least five of those cases.³

¹ *The National Registry of Exonerations*, Exonerations in 2015 at 2.

http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Exonerations_in_2015.pdf

Id.

² *Id.* at 13-14.