

2021 Annual Report



Attorney General
Josh Stein

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A LETTER FROM ATTORNEY GENERAL JOSH STEIN

To the people of North Carolina,

The first year of my second term as your Attorney General has been eventful. As safe and effective vaccines have allowed us to begin re-emerging from this pandemic, many North Carolinians returned to in-person school and work and reunited with our loved ones. We at the Department of Justice (DOJ) are no different — I was pleased to rejoin my colleagues in person at the office this past fall. But with all the hope these changes bring, we continue to face other significant challenges. Some are a result of the pandemic, but others existed before COVID-19 and they continue to require our attention. My colleagues at DOJ and I remain dedicated to helping our state address the issues that affect you and all North Carolinians and make meaningful progress.

Holding drug companies accountable in our fight against the opioid crisis

The opioid crisis continues to devastate our state and tragically has worsened as a result of the increased anxiety and depression COVID-19 caused the past two years. This year, I helped lead a coalition of every state in the nation in multistate negotiations to reach a \$26 billion agreement with the nation's top three drug distributors and Johnson & Johnson. We also won a \$573 million settlement with consulting firm McKinsey over its role in promoting opioids. All told, these wins stand to bring nearly \$800 million to North Carolina, nearly all of which will go to local communities across our state. Local governments can use these funds to get treatment and recovery support services to people in their communities. Our office is also continuing our efforts to hold accountable Purdue Pharma, and the Sackler family that owns it, for their role in fueling this crisis. That means making sure that the Sacklers pay up to help clean up the mess they made. More than 10,000 North Carolinians have died of opioid overdoses in the past five years and tens of thousands more live in fear of getting a devastating call about their loved ones — we need to get them help now.

Protecting our kids from nicotine addiction

This year, my office was the first in the nation to hold Juul accountable for its role in sparking an epidemic of teen e-cigarette vaping. We obtained a court order fundamentally changing Juul's business practices to protect kids and \$40 million to help kids conquer their addiction. Juul designed and marketed its e-cigarettes to attract young people and misrepresented the potency of the nicotine in its products. But Juul is just one company, and we need to better protect our children from the e-cigarette industry at large. That's why I'm also suing Juul's founders to help pay to clean up the mess they made, investigating companies all along the e-cigarette distribution chain in North Carolina, and pushing the FDA to create industry-wide regulations. I will do all I can to prevent another generation from becoming addicted to nicotine.

Preserving our natural resources

While the nation is beginning to wake up to the dangers of PFAS, or “forever chemicals,” North Carolina has been at the forefront of addressing PFAS contamination for years. Last year, my team and I launched an investigation into PFAS contamination in our state and sued DuPont and Chemours for the damage they caused by discharging Gen-X into the Cape Fear River. This past November, I took to court 14 companies that manufacture AFFF, firefighting foam used by firefighters, the military, and other first responders. This foam is sprayed indiscriminately in the course of training or putting out fires, and it seeps into our soil and groundwater. In the water, it puts people at risk of cancer, high blood pressure, liver and immune system damage, and fetal development issues. These companies knew or should have known better, and I’m taking them to court to ensure they clean up the mess they’ve made here and restore our damaged natural resources. I’ll keep fighting to ensure all North Carolinians have clean drinking water.

Saving ratepayers \$1.1 billion

Last year, my office helped the Department of Environmental Quality negotiate the largest excavation of coal ash in our nation’s history to protect our ground water. This year, we won a \$1.1 billion settlement with Duke Energy over how to pay for the coal ash clean up that will generate savings for every single Duke Energy customer in North Carolina.

Testing sexual assault kits

We’ve made significant progress attacking the years-long backlog of untested sexual assault kits in local law enforcement custody. More than half of the more than 16,000 older kits have been tested or are in the process of being tested. Each kit represents a devastating tragedy for a victim or survivor, and we need to do everything we can to hold perpetrators of these vicious crimes accountable, no matter how long ago the crime happened. By doing so, we secure some measure of justice for the victims and we make our communities safer. I’m grateful that the legislature also recognizes the urgency of this work and provided \$9 million to test these kits and funding to hire additional scientists at the State Crime Lab to meet the testing needs of law enforcement.

Cutting down on robocalls

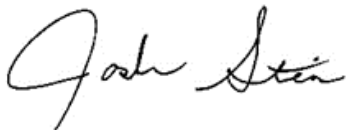
Unfortunately, robocalls continue to plague us day and night and jeopardize people’s hard-earned money. Because of the Anti-Robocall Principles I helped negotiate with 15 phone companies and 51 attorneys general back in 2019, phone companies are doing more to prevent these scam calls and have blocked more than 32 billion calls in the past two years. This year, the large phone companies implemented new caller ID authentication technology to prevent robocallers from spoofing their calls. My office and I successfully led a national coalition of every attorney general in the nation to get the Federal Communications Commission to accelerate the deadline by when small phone companies must be in compliance by a full year. We’re also going after robocallers in the courts and helped shut down a massive charity fraud operation that bombarded more than 67 million people with more than 1.3 billion scam calls about charities. But we’re all still getting these annoying calls day in and day out, and I’ll continue pushing for technology that stops these calls and working to hold these scammers accountable.

Improving our criminal justice system

The urgency of making our criminal justice system fairer continued in 2021. I've continued to serve as co-chair of Gov. Cooper's Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice. In December of 2020, we made 125 separate recommendations to improve our criminal justice system. This year, the Task Force has worked to implement these recommendations. The legislature passed and Gov. Cooper signed into law several criminal justice reform bills that reflect the Task Force's recommendations. These legislative changes will require early intervention to help officers do their jobs properly, impose a duty to intervene when a fellow officer is using excessive force, limit local laws that criminalize poverty, protect pregnant women in our state's jails and prisons from the indignity and medical dangers of shackling, and raise the minimum age of juvenile justice jurisdiction from six to 10 in most cases. These changes represent important progress, but the work is by no means finished. I remain committed to building a North Carolina that truly delivers equal justice for all. You can read more about the Task Force's 2021 work and read its reports [here](#).

This year has not been easy, but it has reinforced my belief in the resilience of the people of North Carolina. By working together and looking out for our neighbors, we can overcome hardships and build happy, stable communities across our state. It is my greatest honor to serve as your Attorney General and work with my talented, dedicated colleagues at DOJ to make North Carolina safer and stronger. We will keep at this urgent work in 2022, and I look forward to all we will accomplish.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Josh Stein". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Josh" and last name "Stein" clearly legible.

Josh Stein
Attorney General

ABOUT THE NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Each employee of the North Carolina Department of Justice (DOJ) works hard to serve the public. We strive to protect the people of North Carolina under the guidance of the DOJ's organizational values of public service, integrity, excellence, teamwork, diversity, and innovation.



An Overview of DOJ





Our **Consumer Protection Division** protects consumers and seniors from scams and fraud. Consumer specialists work to resolve consumer complaints, while our attorneys investigate batches of consumer complaints and hold businesses and people accountable for violating North Carolina's consumer laws.

The **Public Protection Section** works through policy and public education to support victims and survivors of violent crimes like domestic violence and sexual assault and to improve public safety. Public Protection specialists also educate North Carolinians across the state about scams and fraud and share ways that people can protect themselves and their loved ones.

The **Environmental Division** represents the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and provides legal advice and representation to the various state environmental boards and commissions with jurisdiction over our state's natural resources. The attorneys and staff of the Environmental Division work to protect the air we breathe and the water we drink and hold polluters accountable by forcing them to clean up the messes they create.

DOJ's **Civil Division** helps state government departments, agencies, and commissions further their public missions and save taxpayer dollars through their legal advice and representation.

The **Transportation Division** represents the North Carolina Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to help them keep North Carolina moving.

Our **Criminal Division** represents the state in all criminal appeals, prosecutes cases at the request of local district attorneys, represents the law enforcement Standards Commissions, provides legal guidance and technical assistance to state and local law enforcement, and represents the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (DPS).

Our **Medicaid Investigations Division** (MID) investigates and prosecutes fraud and abuse by health care providers and companies. It also protects North Carolina Medicaid patients and patients in Medicaid-funded facilities against abuse and neglect.

The **Litigation Division** handles special litigation, tort and workers' compensation claims, and most challenges to the constitutionality or legality of legislative and executive branch actions.

The **Health and Human Services Division** represents the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and its divisions.

The **Solicitor General's Office** oversees the state's civil appeals and manages select strategic litigation.

The **Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission** and the **Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission** ensure that officers enter the profession prepared to effectively keep North Carolinians safe. The Standards Commissions oversee training, standards, and certification of law enforcement and criminal justice officers.

The **North Carolina Justice Academy** provides training on its two campuses to law enforcement officers to help them better serve communities across North Carolina.

The **State Crime Laboratory** and its forensic scientists and other personnel are responsible for the analysis of evidence to help solve crimes and assist law enforcement investigations. They use science to get to the truth.



KEEPING FAMILIES SAFE

As the state's chief law enforcement officer, Attorney General Josh Stein's top priority is protecting the people of North Carolina. Our office protects families by defending criminal convictions and prosecuting certain cases. We protect our Medicaid system from fraud and abuse. The State Crime Lab analyzes evidence to identify preparators and bring justice to victims. And our office trains and certifies all law enforcement officers in North Carolina so they can better protect and serve their communities.

Criminal Division

DOJ's **Criminal Division** handles all appeals of North Carolina's criminal convictions and prosecutes cases when asked to do so by a district attorney. It also represents the Criminal Justice and Sheriffs' Standards Commissions and DPS in court.

The Criminal Division's **Appellate and Post-Conviction Section** represents North Carolina in the most complex and serious criminal convictions on appeal before our state appellate courts, including the North Carolina Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court of North Carolina, as well as the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals and U.S. Supreme Court. The section also represents the state in federal habeas cases before the United States District Court, the Fourth Circuit, and the U.S. Supreme Court.

The work of the section helps define the law in dispute before the appellate courts. In 2021, an important case before the North Carolina Supreme Court involved issues of proximate cause in the murder by starvation and negligent child abuse inflicting serious bodily injury of a four-year-old child in Gaston County. The court agreed with DOJ attorneys that there was evidence to establish that starvation was the proximate cause of the child's death and, importantly, that malice is implied in the continuous acts required for murdering by starvation.

Attorneys throughout DOJ represent the state in criminal appeals before North Carolina's appellate courts. In 2021, DOJ defended criminal convictions against 234 criminal appeals filed and represented the state in 92 oral arguments before the North Carolina appellate courts. Additionally, the Appellate and Post-Conviction Section took on 42 new habeas cases before the federal courts.

Members of the Criminal Division provide training presentations to state and national criminal justice partners, including prosecutors and law enforcement. In 2021, division members gave presentations on speedy trial issues, juvenile sentencing procedures, and criminal appeals, including preparing an extensive Guide to State's Appeals which will be a valuable resource to prosecutors across the state.

In North Carolina, original jurisdiction to prosecute criminal cases lies with local district attorneys. However, our office may handle or assist with prosecutions when asked to do so by a district attorney, usually when the local prosecutor has a conflict of interest or needs assistance with expertise or caseload management. In 2021, DOJ's **Special Prosecutions and Law Enforcement section** represented the state in 122 special prosecutions cases and 10 financial crimes cases involving tax fraud issues.

Among these cases, members of the section represented the state in several multi-week jury trials and negotiated pleas to secure justice in complex criminal prosecutions. The section succeeded in securing two homicide convictions following a multi-week jury trial in Catawba County, which resulted in the defendant being sentenced to 25-32 years in prison. Another jury trial in a high-profile wiretap case resulted in the defendant's conviction of conspiracy to traffic cocaine, continuing criminal enterprise, and possession of a firearm by a felon, netting the defendant 15.75 years in prison.

The section negotiated several significant pleas to secure justice for victims. In one, the former Cherokee County DSS Director pled guilty to felony obstruction of justice in connection with the agency unlawfully removing children from their parents' custody without proper judicial oversight. In another, a defendant's guilty plea to trafficking in cocaine and heroin, possession of a firearm by a felon, and other charges in a major drug trafficking case netted the defendant 12-18.5 years in prison. After a negotiated plea to second-degree murder and felony assault in a difficult homicide case in Catawba County, the defendant was sentenced to 9-12 years in prison.

The section also handles financial crime cases and won nearly \$600,000 in judgments in tax revenue cases in 2021. The section also works with law enforcement partners on wiretaps and extraditions, facilitating 92 wiretap cases and 422 extraditions in 2021.

The section works alongside the NC Justice Academy in helping the Attorney General honor those who have died in the line of duty at North Carolina's Peace Officers Memorial Day. Since the service that would have recognized 2019's fallen officers was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic, fallen officers from 2019 and 2020 were honored at the 2021 service.

The officers honored at the 2021 Peace Officers Memorial Day service are listed below. We are so grateful for their courageous service and we extend our deepest condolences to their families and friends:

- Jordan Harris Sheldon, 32, Mooresville Police Department
- Makeem Brooks, 27, North Hampton County Sheriff's Office
- Nolan J. Sanders, 26, North Carolina State Highway Patrol
- Sypraseuth "Bud" Phouangphrachanh, 43, Montgomery County Sheriff's Office
- Alexander Pettitway, 55, Durham County Sheriff's Office
- Ryan Phillip Hendrix, 35, Henderson County Sheriff's Office
- LaKiya Rouse, 26, Guilford County Sheriff's Office
- Terry Sampson, 60, Durham County Sheriff's Office
- Jared Michael Allison, 26, Nash County Sheriff's Office
- Tyler Avery Herndon, 25, Mount Holly Police Department
- Norman Daye, Jr., 52, Guilford County Sheriff's Office
- Jason Shuping, 25, Concord Police Department

The **Public Safety Section** of DOJ's Criminal Division represents DPS and the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) in litigation. These cases relate to the operation of DPS correctional facilities, the NC National Guard, NC Emergency Management, and other DPS entities and employees. In 2021, the section represented the state in 475 public safety cases, including eight federal jury trials, four briefs before the Fourth Circuit, and a successful defense in a large class action suit.

Medicaid Investigations Division (MID)

DOJ's **MID** investigates fraud and abuse by health care companies and providers, as well as patient abuse and neglect in facilities that are funded by Medicaid. Medicaid is a joint federal-state program, so MID works closely with federal partners including the U.S. Department of Justice, the FBI, the IRS, the Office of Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service.

In 2021, MID recovered a record more than \$105 million in restitution and penalties for North Carolina, investigated 494 cases, and prosecuted more than 18 criminal cases and 33 civil cases. Since 2017, MID has recovered more than \$220 million in Medicaid fraud cases. MID conducted "Operation You've Got Nerve," an ongoing effort launched this year by Attorney General Stein to find and act against providers who billed Medicaid for autonomic nervous system (ANS) testing that was either unnecessary or never conducted. Operation You've Got Nerve won back \$1,190,000 for taxpayers in 2021 in four settlements.

MID won two civil settlements totaling \$75,000 this year as part of "Operation Root Canal," an ongoing effort to find and stop health care fraud among dental providers that has won \$7.2 million since its inception.

MID Criminal Case Highlight

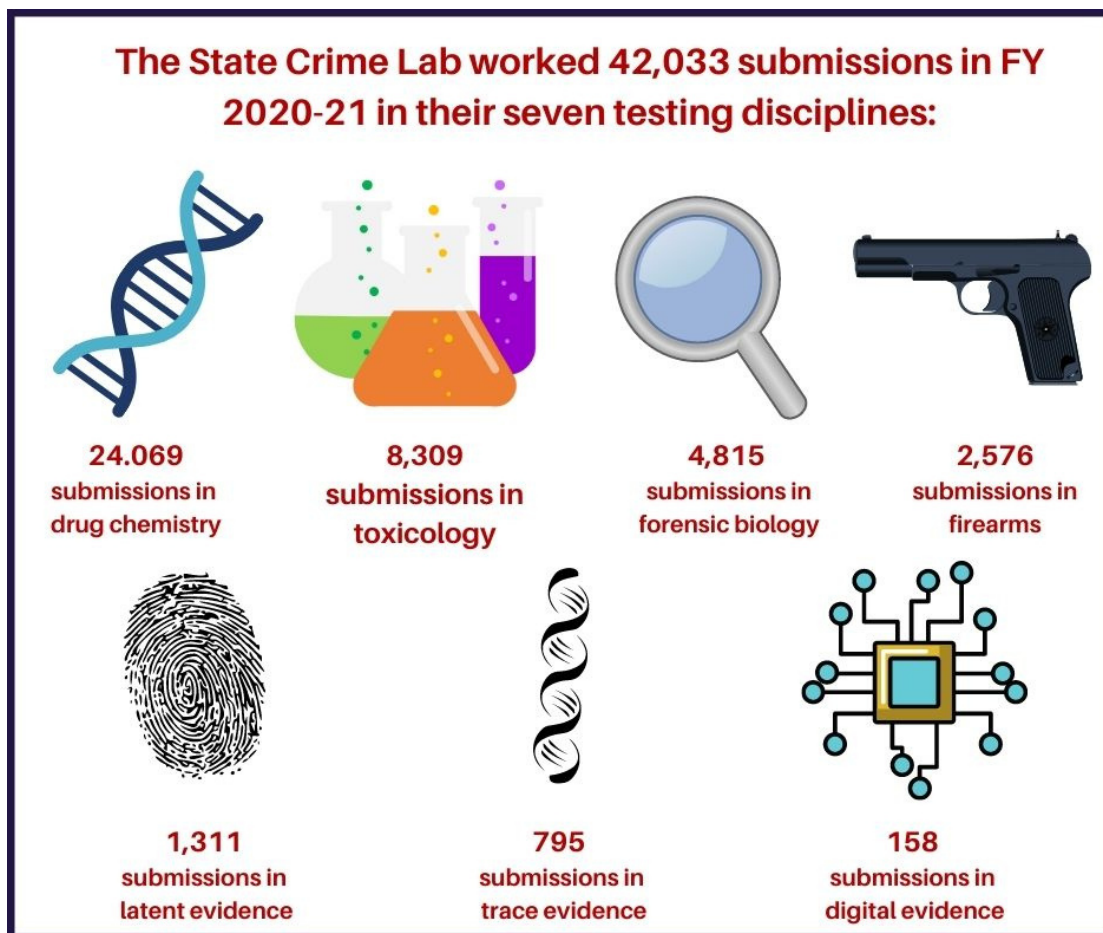
In September, MID secured a 12-year sentence and more than \$4 million in restitution against Timothy Mark Harron and his wife Latisha Harron, who used millions of fraudulently-obtained Medicaid dollars to bankroll purchases of luxury items including a private jet. Harron pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit health care fraud, wire fraud, aggravated identity theft, and conspiracy to commit money laundering. Harron and his co-defendant were ordered to forfeit items including more than \$13 million in cash, the private jet, a sports car, a pickup truck, designer jewelry, and real estate property in North Carolina. When providers commit fraud against North Carolina's Medicaid program, our office will act aggressively to hold them accountable.

State Crime Lab

The North Carolina **State Crime Laboratory** fights crime by testing evidence to identify perpetrators and help law enforcement make progress on investigations to hold offenders accountable and get justice. Crime Lab scientists provide expert testimony on their scientific analysis in trials. The Crime Lab has three campuses – a full-service lab in Raleigh, the Western Regional Laboratory in Hendersonville, and the Triad Regional Laboratory in Greensboro.

The Crime Lab worked 42,033 case records in fiscal year 2020-21 in their seven testing disciplines:

- 24,069 case records in drug chemistry
- 8,309 case records in toxicology
- 4,815 case records in forensic biology
- 2,576 case records in firearms
- 1,311 case records in latent evidence
- 795 case records in trace evidence
- 158 case records in digital evidence



This year, the Crime Lab achieved a record number of hits in CODIS, the system of local, state, and national criminal justice DNA databases. In fiscal year 2020-21, the Lab had a total of 1,029 hits to people and other cases in the database, surpassing 1,000 hits for the first time and marking a nearly 14 percent increase from the 905 hits last fiscal year. Each time scientists at the Lab test evidence that leads to a hit in the DNA database, they give law enforcement powerful, new information to move cases forward and potentially solve crimes.

Ending the Sexual Assault Kit Backlog

Testing evidence, including the older sexual assault kits in local law enforcement custody, is key to keeping North Carolinians safe. After a preliminary count in 2017, our office conducted a thorough count of untested sexual assault kits in the custody of local law enforcement in 2019. The count ultimately found 16,190 older, untested kits. DOJ is working to end this backlog and ensure it never develops again in North Carolina.

Out of the currently counted 16,190 kits, 9,335 have been submitted to the laboratory for testing. Of these 9,335, testing has been completed on 4,938 kits. Forty-one percent of the cases entered into the CODIS database had a hit to a known person or another case, leading to at least 61 arrests in at least 89 assaults. This year, the General Assembly provided \$9 million to outsource the remaining older sexual assault kits for testing and funded eight new positions for scientists at the Crime Lab to meet the testing needs of local law enforcement.

Testing sexual assault kits helps us solve old cases, deliver a measure of justice to victims and survivors, and make the people of North Carolina safer. In Wilmington, a suspect was charged with a rape that occurred 25 years ago during the robbery of a convenience store. Asheville Police Department arrested a man for first-degree forcible rape and first-degree kidnapping for a sexual assault in 1992. In Hoke County, a man was arrested and charged with three counts of forcible rape, as well as kidnapping, robbery, and possession of stolen property due to testing a kit collected in 2001. A suspect was arrested after testing a kit from a sexual assault on a juvenile that occurred in 1989 in Spring Lake.

Justice Academy

The North Carolina Justice Academy trains, supports, and creates educational materials for North Carolina's law enforcement officers. In 2021, the Justice Academy taught 1,311 courses to 184,000 law enforcement officers across a wide spectrum of subjects like leadership, investigations, crime scenes, and tactical trainings. The two Justice Academy campuses in Edneyville and Salemburg combined to house 9,713 students on campus with 12,754 bed nights spent on campus. In March, the Justice Academy was honored with its fifth accreditation award from the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA).

The Justice Academy released 10 episodes of the [NCJA 10-14](#) podcast in 2021. The podcast offers supplemental education to law enforcement officers on critical issues like hemp enforcement, human trafficking, and officer safety. NCJA 10-14 is available via major podcast platforms like Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

Basic Law Enforcement Training (BLET), the curriculum that prepares every entry-level law enforcement officer for the job, is undergoing a full revision. In 2021 and throughout the revision process, the Justice Academy worked with subject matter experts from across North Carolina, including those from the NC Association of Chiefs of Police, the NC Sheriffs' Association, and Job Task Analysis. The draft lesson plans include content on topics like crisis communication, procedural justice, police legitimacy, and problem-solving. The new BLET curriculum is set to begin piloting in July 2022, with a statewide rollout in July 2023. The new BLET curriculum will work to ensure North Carolina trains smart, unbiased, and effective law enforcement officers.

Criminal Justice and Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commissions

Through the Criminal Justice Standards Division and the Sheriffs' Standards Division, DOJ staffs the Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission and the Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission. These two statewide law enforcement Commissions develop, adopt, implement, and enforce standards and topics for training and certification for all sworn law enforcement officers, correctional officers, probation/parole officers, juvenile justice officers, juvenile court counselors, chief court counselors, local confinement officers, and all justice officers in sheriff's offices in North Carolina. The Commissions certify officers, review individual violations of the rules, and audit law enforcement agencies and training schools.

In 2021, the Criminal Justice Standards Division:

- Completed 183 investigations reviewed by the Probable Cause Committee
- Certified 2,442 law enforcement officers
- Certified 1,695 corrections officers
- Certified 214 juvenile justice officers
- Certified 190 company/campus police
- Certified 2,953 general instructors
- Conducted 57 school audits
- Conducted 117 agency audits

In 2021, the Sheriffs' Standards Division:

- Completed 127 investigations
- Certified 1,140 deputies
- Certified 1,573 detention officers
- Certified 204 telecommunicators
- Certified 258 school resource officers
- Certified 389 general and specialized instructors
- Conducted 95 agency audits

In 2020, North Carolina created the North Carolina Law Enforcement Accreditation (NCLEA) program, making our state the 35th in the nation to offer a statewide standard for accreditation. The Commissions were tasked with executing the program and certifying agencies for accreditation. In 2021, the Commissions identified and ratified all 115 standards required for accreditation, approved the program manual, and offered a pilot application with six law enforcement agencies (Brunswick County Sheriff's Office, Black Mountain Police Department, North Carolina State University Police Department, Orange County Sheriff's Office, Roxboro Police Department, and Wilmington Police Department). Next year, the Commissions will begin accepting applications from North Carolina law enforcement agencies outside of the pilot program.

New Director of Criminal Justice Standards Division

In July, DOJ welcomed Jeff Smythe as the new Criminal Justice Standards Director. Previously, Smythe served as Chief of Police of the Burlington Police Department for eight years. As chief, Smythe implemented initiatives focused on de-escalation, reduction of use of force, duty to intervene, addressing implicit bias, and mental health and addiction support. He also serves in a voluntary role as a commissioner for the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA), which establishes public safety best practices for professional conduct across North America or at the international level. Previously, he served as a board member and vice president for the North Carolina Association of Chiefs of Police. The experience and commitment to public service that Smythe brings to this role will help ensure that North Carolina has the best-trained law enforcement officers serving our communities and make our state safer and stronger.



Criminal Justice Fellows Program

The Commissions also operate the Criminal Justice (CJ) Fellows Program, which pays for the two-year education of public-spirited young people who pursue a career in law enforcement. This effort will help address the shortages of law enforcement officers across the state. The program has 10 active students this year and there are two graduates currently working as law enforcement officers in our state. In this year's budget, the General Assembly fully funded the CJ Fellows program and extended its eligibility to more counties. The expansion will ensure the CJ Fellows program can recruit and place talented new law enforcement officers across the state.

PROTECTING CONSUMERS

DOJ's **Consumer Protection Division** protects North Carolina consumers from scams, fraud, and unfair business practices. Consumer Protection specialists field and investigate complaints from consumers across North Carolina. When bad actors violate state laws, our office holds them accountable to protect people's hard-earned money. In 2021, the Consumer Protection division received 28,043 consumer complaints. Whenever possible, DOJ works to mediate complaints with businesses and get refunds for consumers. In 2021, we were able to recover more than \$1.6 million for North Carolina consumers, and more than \$130,000 of those funds went to refund victims of elder fraud.

In 2021, Attorney General Stein and the Consumer Protection Division won more than \$2.1 billion in court judgments and settlements, including money secured in agreements to hold accountable corporations that contributed to the opioid epidemic and addiction in North Carolina. Since 2017, the division has won back more than \$2.3 billion for North Carolinians.



Robocalls

Robocalls are not just annoying; they scam people out of their money. This year alone, Americans have lost nearly \$30 billion to phone scams. These calls represent the number one complaint to our office, and Attorney General Stein has made fighting this scourge a top priority.

Earlier this year, phone companies were required to implement STIR/SHAKEN – caller ID authentication technology that combats spoofing by ensuring that telephone calls originate from verified numbers. This technology was part of the Anti-Robocall Principles that Attorney General Stein negotiated with 15 phone companies and 51 attorneys general in 2019 to help cut down on robocalls. Because the technology prevents robocallers from spoofing phone numbers, scam robocalls have dropped by 29 percent since June as the phone industry continues to put STIR/SHAKEN into effect. However, smaller phone companies were given an extension to implement the technology, which compromises STIR/SHAKEN’s overall effectiveness. In August, Attorney General Stein led a bipartisan group of 51 attorneys general urging the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to move up this deadline to fight the scourge of robocalls. In December, the FCC implemented Attorney General Stein’s recommendation and moved up the deadline by a year. In November, Attorney General Stein led a bipartisan coalition of 51 attorneys general in supporting the FCC’s action to reduce illegal robocallers’ access to legitimate phone numbers. Criminals use these phone numbers to evade STIR/SHAKEN and make unending calls to consumers.

In February, Attorney General Stein successfully led a bipartisan coalition of 35 attorneys general in filing a brief to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit defending the Telephone Consumer Protection Act’s robocall ban. The brief helped preserve government authority to enforce the law against illegal robocallers.

In March, Attorney General Stein, along with the Federal Trade Commission and 46 agencies from 38 states and the District of Columbia, shut down a massive telefundraising operation run by Associated Community Services (ACS) and a number of related defendants. Their scheme bombarded 67 million consumers with 1.3 billion deceptive charitable fundraising calls. Defendants collected more than \$110 million using their deceptive solicitations that claimed to support veterans, children, and firefighters. Our office will continue to fight robocalls and hold accountable those who violate our telemarketing protections.

Data Breaches

By law, companies in North Carolina must notify our office when their data is subject to a breach. These reports allow DOJ's Consumer Protection Division to help protect people who are impacted, inform the public about the scope of the breach, and, if necessary, take action to hold companies responsible for business practices that fail to protect North Carolinians' information. In 2021, DOJ received 2,008 notices of data breaches, a record for one year, that impacted 2,369,438 North Carolina consumers.

In March, Attorney General Stein announced a multistate settlement with Retrieval-Masters Creditors bureau, doing business as the American Medical Collection Agency (AMCA), to resolve an investigation into a 2019 data breach that exposed the personal information of more than 7 million people, including 90,055 North Carolinians. If businesses illegally put North Carolinians at risk of identity theft and fraud, our office will hold them accountable.

Consumer Protection Lawsuit Highlights

When companies and scammers hurt the people of North Carolina, our office will fight back. In 2021, our office's Consumer Protection Division earned more than \$2 billion in settlements and awards on behalf of the state.

Price gougers and scammers

In May, Colonial Pipeline experienced a shutdown after being victimized by a ransomware cyberattack. Gas became in short supply, triggering a state of emergency, and our office received a number of complaints about price gouging. In November, Attorney General Stein reached a \$20,305.58 settlement with Queen's Market in Charlotte after he sued them in August for allegedly violating North Carolina's price gouging law. Queen's Market allegedly raised its prices to as high as \$9.99 per gallon of premium gas. Customers who were forced to pay unreasonably high prices for gasoline at Queen's Market are eligible for restitution. In addition to the payments, the judgment requires the defendant to permanently install software that records the prices at which it sells gas and the number of gallons sold at each price.

Our office also sued Jack's In & Out Food Mart in Durham for allegedly increasing the price of gas by 60 percent, even though there was no correlating increase in how much the company was paying for fuel. North Carolina's price gouging law exists to protect people during states of emergency. Our office will continue to protect consumers by enforcing it.

Antitrust

Our Consumer Protection Division spearheaded national efforts to hold Google accountable for allegedly violating federal and state antitrust laws. Attorney General Stein led a coalition of 37 attorneys general in July in filing a lawsuit against Google alleging that it harmed consumers by using its dominance to unfairly restrict competition with the Google Play Store, limiting their choices and driving up app prices.

DOJ will continue to fight on behalf of millions of North Carolina consumers for a marketplace that encourages competition and innovation at a fair price - even when the violator is among our biggest and most ubiquitous companies.

Tech

While technology makes our lives easier and faster, it comes with risks to our health, privacy, and well-being. DOJ is committed to ensuring that all people are safe from misinformation and exploitation online.

In November, Attorney General Stein and our Consumer Protection Division led a nationwide investigation into Meta Platforms, Inc., formerly known as Facebook, for providing and promoting its social media platform – Instagram – to children and young adults despite knowing that such use is associated with depression and other mental health harms. Earlier in 2021, Attorney General Stein urged Facebook to abandon its plans to launch a version of Instagram for children under 13 years old, which it ultimately did.

Facebook’s own internal research shows that social media platforms damage children’s emotional and mental health. The nationwide investigation will look at techniques the company used to increase how often and for how long young users use their platforms. Our office will push to learn more about how social media platforms damage young people’s health, and we will do everything in our power to protect North Carolina’s kids.

Social media holds immense power to educate and inform people of the world around them, and our office continues to call on these companies to prevent the spread of vaccine and COVID-19 disinformation. In March, Attorney General Stein called on Facebook and Twitter to take stronger measures to enforce their existing guidelines and stop the spread of anti-vaxxer disinformation on their platforms. Attorney General Stein led a bipartisan group of 45 attorneys general calling on Twitter and other companies to prevent people from selling fake CDC vaccination cards on their sites. The COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective, and our office will continue to push back against the spread of vaccine-related disinformation.

E-cigarettes

Any parent of teenagers in North Carolina knows about e-cigarette manufacturers like Juul, Puff Bar, and other companies and the damage they are causing to kids and teens. That’s why our Consumer Protection Division has led the fight to hold these companies accountable for addicting another generation of young people to nicotine. In 2021, North Carolina became the first state in the nation to hold Juul accountable for its role in the youth vaping epidemic. Our office obtained a court order with Juul that requires it to pay North Carolina \$40 million to help kids conquer their addiction and make drastic changes to the way it conducts business to protect minors. The funds and business practice changes will help turn the tide against nicotine addiction among young people.

In November, Attorney General Stein announced additional major actions against the e-cigarette industry. Our office sued Juul founders James Monsees and Adam Bowen, announced a statewide investigation into Puff Bar and other e-cigarette manufacturers, distributors, and retailers, and urged FDA Commissioner Nominee Robert Califf to protect kids from flavored e-cigarettes. DOJ is investigating Puff Bar and other companies at all stages of the distribution chain, from manufacturers to retailers and everything in between, to ensure they are not profiting at the expense to kids’ health. Where we find illegal behavior, we will not hesitate to take legal action.

Health care

DOJ is committed to protecting people's access to affordable health care, especially while hospital systems consolidate or change ownership across our state. In 2021, some hospital systems chose to sell their hospitals to other, often larger, health care companies. For many North Carolinians, these transactions are worrisome – they represent a change in health care in their communities, and our office often sees an uptick in complaints following the sales. State law grants the office inconsistent and inadequate authority to conduct reviews of these transactions, so DOJ is working with legislators to review current laws governing hospital system sales to ensure all North Carolinians have access to safe, effective health care.

One check on health care inflation is pricing transparency. Requiring hospitals to disclose their prices will allow consumers to make informed decisions about their care and its cost. This year, Attorney General Stein has contacted each hospital in the state to ensure compliance with federal price transparency regulations. Attorney General Stein is working to ensure that all North Carolina hospitals come into compliance with hospital pricing transparency protections. Our office will keep at this work to ensure patients can access the information they need.

Opioids

Our office led the national effort to hold the responsible drug companies accountable for their role in creating and fueling the opioid epidemic. The 48-state coalition reached a historic \$26 billion agreement with opioid distributors and manufacturers Cardinal, McKesson, AmerisourceBergen, and Johnson & Johnson. Our office also negotiated a \$573 million settlement with consulting firm McKinsey over its role in marketing opioids. These settlements and plans will bring nearly \$800 million to North Carolina to help people with substance use disorders. Our office is continuing efforts to hold accountable Purdue Pharma and the Sackler family for their actions in fueling this epidemic, which includes making sure that the Sacklers pay to help clean up the mess they made.

The more than 28,000 North Carolinians we've lost to opioid overdoses in the past two decades have left a trail of grieving families and devastated communities in their wake. We owe it to them to do everything we can to make sure that other lives aren't cut short by this deadly epidemic and other families don't have to experience the same grief and loss.

Saving Ratepayers Costs for Coal Ash Clean Up

Attorney General Stein, the Public Staff of the North Carolina Utilities Commission, and the Sierra Club entered in a coal ash cleanup settlement with Duke Energy in January that will save North Carolina electricity customers approximately \$1.1 billion on their utility bills over the next 10 years. Furthermore, Duke Energy is also required to excavate 80 million tons of coal ash in North Carolina under a December 2019 settlement with the DEQ (represented by the Attorney General's Office), the Sierra Club, and other community groups.

PROTECTING OUR STATE

Our office represents state government agencies, boards, commissions, employees, and taxpayers in court to protect North Carolina's interests on behalf of its people.



Protecting Clean Air and Water

Protecting the people of North Carolina includes protecting the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the environments we call home. DOJ's **Environmental Division** represents DEQ in legal actions to protect our state's natural resources.

PFAS

For decades, manufacturers contaminated our air and water with PFAS, or forever chemicals, that put people's health at risk. This year, our office continued our ongoing lawsuit against Chemours and DuPont to hold them accountable for the damage PFAS caused around their Fayetteville Works Facility. The lawsuit aims to hold DuPont and Chemours accountable for the mess they created.

Attorney General Stein and the Environmental Division filed four lawsuits in November against 14 manufacturers of Aqueous Film Forming Foam (AFFF), a fire suppressant used by firefighters, members of the military, and first responders, that contains PFAS. These foams pose serious health risks to the people who use them and to our environment. Health problems associated with PFAS include increased risks of cancer, high blood pressure, damage to immune systems, and harm to fetal development. Our lawsuits allege these companies made and sold their firefighting foam even after they knew or should have known how harmful the chemicals were. DOJ's Environmental Division will do everything in its power to protect North Carolinians' access to clean drinking water.

Clean Water and Clean Air

This year the Environmental Division won an important case for DEQ in the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals upholding North Carolina's rights under the Clean Water Act to protect water quality within state boundaries from potential adverse impacts of federally-authorized hydropower projects. In another case in the Fourth Circuit decided this year, the division successfully argued that the federal government was subject to state air quality laws just like other regulated entities.

Environmental Enhancement Grants

Each year, our office awards Environmental Enhancement Grants to projects in North Carolina aimed at protecting and improving North Carolina's environment. North Carolinians across the state have used these funds to make remarkable progress to protect our state's natural beauty and resources, including clean drinking water. In 2021, the Attorney General's Office awarded nearly \$3 million in grants to 27 grantees. These grants funded projects that helped preserve natural habitats, combat stormwater flooding, and monitor drinking water quality from our Blue Ridge Mountains to the barrier islands.



Attorney General Stein meets with recipients of an EEG grant in New Bern.

Protecting People's Health

DOJ's **Health and Human Services Division** defends North Carolina's health care by representing DHHS in legal matters. Division attorneys work to prevent fraud and abuse of health care programs and to protect services for vulnerable people like children, older adults, and people in need of mental health care.

In 2021, the HHS Division:

- Closed 1,332 Medicaid cases.
- Closed 167 child care/welfare cases.
- Closed five health care personnel registry cases to stop unlicensed health care workers with histories of abuse, neglect, misappropriation, or fraud from caring for vulnerable North Carolinians.
- Resolved seven adult care licensure and mental health licensure and certification cases to protect some of North Carolina's most vulnerable residents.
- Fought for and successfully certified more than \$16 million for collection in delinquent child support for children who are entitled to child support payments.

HHS's health service team resolved several cases with a major adult care home provider that serves many Medicaid recipients. A large portion of the assessed penalties were routed back into resident care to hire nurses and quality assurance specialists to help ensure quality care for residents at these facilities. The health service team also worked with the NC Division of Health Service Regulation and a rural county hospital during bankruptcy proceedings to help the hospital successfully complete a change of ownership. This work ensured that the people of the county continued to receive seamless health care services through the transition.

DOJ's public health and child welfare team filed an amicus brief to defend the constitutionality of a child welfare statute designed to protect minors from abuse, neglect, and dependency. The team successfully defended a constitutional challenge to the certificate of need law designed to benefit North Carolinians by controlling costs, utilization, and distribution of new health service facilities while promoting quality care and access to the underserved populations.

DOJ's child welfare team worked with the NC Division of Social Services and state legislators to help draft and implement the Expedite Child Safety and Permanency Act, which makes significant progress in assuring the safety of our most vulnerable children. The health service team worked with the DHHS to enact the No Patient Left Alone Act, which safeguards the rights of patients and residents in health care facilities to have access to visitors of their choosing during periods of hospitalization or residential treatment.

Public assistance and child welfare attorneys continued to provide training to social workers throughout North Carolina on legal tools available to protect disabled and vulnerable adults from abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation and to protect children from abuse, neglect, and dependency.

DOJ continued its successful defense of DHHS and its selection of insurers administering the Medicaid standard pre-paid health plans as part of Medicaid managed care.

Protecting the health of North Carolinians during the COVID-19 pandemic

DOJ's public health team continued to assist NC DHHS with enforcement measures to help curtail the spread of COVID-19. The health service team worked with the NC Division of Health Service Regulation to create a way for temporary nurse aides who worked in nursing homes during the COVID-19 pandemic to become permanent nurse aides based on their on-the-job training and experience. This equivalency training and certification pathway enabled nurse aides to continue serving the people of North Carolina in a time of great need.

The health service team also worked with the Division of Health Service Regulation to help bring the Acute Hospital Care at Home Program to North Carolina. In response to surging numbers of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations, this program allowed treatment of more than 60 different acute conditions, such as asthma and COPD, in home settings with proper monitoring and treatment protocols.

DOJ attorneys also assisted NC DHHS in implementing urgent COVID-19 vaccine administration contracts to ensure COVID-19 vaccines are available to more North Carolinians.

Transportation

DOJ's **Transportation Division** represents the Department of Transportation (DOT) to strengthen North Carolina's infrastructure by keeping DOT's projects moving. The Transportation Division represented DOT in 2,546 cases in 2021, including:

- 2,283 property acquisition cases to move forward projects to build new highways, bridges, and turnpikes.
- Winning a case at the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina defending a bridge project in Currituck County. The win allows this important project to move forward.
- A case where a Raleigh Carvana franchise agreed to change its business practices to ensure that consumers properly received their titles of cars purchased from the dealer.
- Additional cases defending DOT in employment, environmental, and administrative matters.

These infrastructure projects help keep our state connected and contribute to North Carolina's economic progress.

Civil Division

The **Civil Division** works to protect North Carolinians by representing various state agencies in legal matters. The division's six sections – Services to State Agencies, Education, Labor, Property Control, Revenue, and Insurance – assisted state agencies throughout 2021, including on issues related to COVID-19, state finances, and teacher licenses.

DOJ's **Services to State Agencies section** provides legal representation to a variety of North Carolina state agencies. In 2021, attorneys in the Services to State Agencies section met challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our attorneys helped state agencies carry out their essential functions while taking legal measures to keep their employees and the public safe.

Attorneys in the Services to State Agencies section protect the state's data by providing legal advice and representation to the North Carolina Department of Information Technology (DIT). This year, attorneys representing DIT helped speed up purchasing and implementation of a technology system to quickly disburse federal funding to North Carolina residents in need of housing assistance.

DOJ's legal team represents the Department of State Treasurer to protect the state's financial interests. Attorneys representing the treasurer won cases to protect the state's retirement trust fund and the state's health plan trust funds.

Our attorneys represent the interests and employees of the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) in legal actions. Attorneys representing AOC secured victories in 2021 in lawsuits brought against judges, magistrate judges, clerks, and district attorneys, protecting the integrity of North Carolina's judicial system.

The **Education Section** protects students and schools by enforcing state and federal law. In 2021, attorneys in this section ensured state universities can continue to operate with remote learning and worked to uphold professional standards for teachers.

The **Labor Section** represents the North Carolina Department of Labor to ensure worker safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Attorneys in the section won cases before the Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission that protect the wellbeing and safety of North Carolina's workforce.

The **Property Control Section** advises and represents state agencies on construction projects and the use of state lands.

Attorneys in the **Revenue Section** continue to work to uphold tax assessments by the Department of Revenue to ensure that all taxpayers pay their fair share. These cases fund important state services like education, law enforcement, and health care.

The **Insurance Section** represents the North Carolina Department of Insurance in legal matters. In 2021, the section worked to enforce the law against rogue bail bondsmen, among other activities.

Litigation Division

The **Litigation Division**, through its Special Litigation, Tort Claims, and Workers' Compensation sections, defends the state in claims asserted against state agencies.

In 2021, the **Special Litigation Section** defended the constitutionality of laws like the Safe Child Act, which broadens the ability of sexual abuse survivors to hold their abusers accountable. The section also successfully and repeatedly defended the governor's COVID-19 related executive orders to protect the health and safety of North Carolinians.

The **Tort Claims Section** defends the state in claims brought under the North Carolina Tort Claims Act. The section serves state clients in claims ranging from minor property damage matters to complex, multiple-party litigation. The section closed 1,419 cases in 2021.

The **Workers' Compensation Section** defends the state against legal action brought against state agencies under the Workers' Compensation Act. The section closed 611 cases in 2021.

Solicitor General

DOJ's Office of Solicitor General oversees our office's civil appeals and handles many of our most complex and significant cases, including cases at the U.S. Supreme Court. It also provides advice to the attorney general on challenging legal policy issues.

In 2021, DOJ attorneys in the Office of Solicitor General:

- Prevailed in several significant constitutional cases in the Fourth Circuit, including a case that established the state's immunity from takings claims in federal court and a case that recognized the state's right to seek collect punitive fines from redress against the federal government for violations of the Clean Air Act.
- Represented the state in several "friend of the court" briefs, including:
 - A case that affirmed the constitutionality of the state's anti-patent troll statute
 - A case seeking to affirm the constitutionality of the Safe Child Act, which allows survivors of sexual abuse to seek relief against their abusers
 - A case that affirmed that all North Carolinians have the constitutional right to petition the government
 - A case seeking to affirm the right of people in same-sex relationships to seek a domestic-violence protective order against an abusive partner
 - A case seeking to affirm the rights of homeowners to install solar-power systems on their own homes; and
 - A case supporting North Carolina small businesses that filed business-interruption insurance claims in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Co-led a broad, bipartisan coalition of states that successfully preserved a key government authority to enforce the law against illegal robocallers.
- Worked with lawyers in the special litigation division to defeat an attempt by a gambling operation to evade the state's ban on video sweepstakes.
- Continued to help successfully lead DOJ's defense against numerous lawsuits challenging government restrictions designed to slow the spread of COVID-19 and save lives.
- Defeated an appellate petition seeking to dismiss Attorney General Stein's ultimately successful lawsuit against Juul for unfair and deceptive trade practices.

ENGAGING NORTH CAROLINIANS

Protecting the Public

The **Public Protection Section** works to prevent crime and support victims and survivors by identifying policies that better serve North Carolinians. The section also works to protect people from becoming victims of scams and frauds by providing presentations and educational materials about the latest tactics that scammers are using to take people's hard-earned money. While COVID-19 hindered in-person presentations, members of the section still held more than 77 online presentations, addressing more than 2,400 people.

The section continued to administer the Address Confidentiality Program, which provides a confidential address for victims and survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and stalking. It can be an important part of a comprehensive safety plan.

Members of the Public Protection section also lead much of the office's work on the North Carolina Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice (TREC), which Attorney General Stein co-chairs. In December 2020, TREC issued 125 recommendations to improve our criminal justice system. This year, TREC has been focused on implementing as many of these recommendations as possible, whether at the state or local level. TREC recently issued an interim report on its progress, which you can find [here](#). Public Protection staff also serve on the Crime Victims' Compensation Fund, the Domestic Violence Commission, the Human Trafficking Commission, the North Carolina Senior Consumer Fraud Task Force, the Financial Literacy Council, and the State Reentry Council Collaborative.

Sexual Assault Kit Initiative

The North Carolina State Crime Lab and the Public Protection section continue to work to administer the \$2 million grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI). In addition to testing previously untested kits in local law enforcement custody, the grant is being used to help ensure that sexual assault investigations and prosecutions are supportive of and transparent to victims and survivors of sexual assault. Throughout the year, extensive training and technical assistance were provided to law enforcement and advocates. Recognizing the importance of this work being victim-centered and trauma-informed, numerous trainings were provided from multidisciplinary perspectives and offered best practices and protocols for professionals in service to survivors. The topics ranged from "Forensic Genealogy" to "Understanding the Medical Forensic Exam to "Overcoming Common Defenses in Sexual Assault Cases." As a part of the initiative, the section created the "Survivor Fund" this year to support the special needs of cold case victims.

In 2021, the section held 14 events and trained 761 law enforcement officers and advocates on sexual assault investigations. Learn more about this work [here](#).

Responding to Constituent Concerns

The constituent response team at DOJ works to help answer questions from North Carolinians who seek assistance, share their concerns, or search for the correct agency to respond to their questions. This work includes responding to people who contact our office through postal mail, email, and phone calls, including our animal welfare hotline and Open Government Unit. In 2021, our office handled nearly 17,500 messages from constituents on issues including public safety, election guidance referrals, pandemic response questions, and feedback on the office's work.

STANDING UP FOR NORTH CAROLINIANS

Supporting Students

Our students need the best education and financial foundation possible to build successful futures and become tomorrow's leaders. We also want to encourage young people to enter public service professions including teaching and policing. The federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program forgives the remaining student loan balance for federal direct loan borrowers who work for 10 years in a public service role and make their loan payments. This program has not lived up to its promise, leaving millions of public servants in the lurch. Attorney General Stein called for major fixes to the loan forgiveness program. As a result of Attorney General Stein's letter and the hard work of education advocates, the U.S. Department of Education announced changes to the public service loan forgiveness program that will help more students apply for and receive the forgiveness they were promised.

Attorney General Stein and Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler urged the U.S. Department of Education to make farmers eligible for the PSLF. We need farmers to feed people and secure our food supply, but there are nearly six times as many farmers over 65 than under, often because the cost of education and the cost of starting a farm are too high. By giving farmers access to loan forgiveness, we would help ensure that North Carolina's farmers can pursue their careers and North Carolinians and people across the nation have necessary food resources.

Attorney General Stein is committed to making sure that every child in North Carolina's public schools has access to a quality education – which is their constitutional right – regardless of where they live in North Carolina or the amount of money their family has. That includes having a qualified teacher in every classroom and a capable principal in every school. Through the ongoing Leandro case, DOJ attorneys are representing the state of North Carolina and the State Board of Education to ensure that the state is delivering on children's educational needs.

The youth vaping epidemic continues to plague students in high schools and middle schools across the state. That's why Attorney General Stein reached out to school principals, superintendents, and health educators notifying them of a resource to help educate students on the epidemic. "Vaping: Know the Truth" is a 40-minute free digital learning experience that gives students in grades 8-12 core knowledge around the dangers associated with using e-cigarettes and offers resources to help young people quit if they already vape.

We also need to make sure that our kids are safe at school – an issue that’s even more critical after two North Carolina schools experienced school shootings in 2021. Attorney General Stein has opposed measures that seek to take away states’ abilities to put in place sensible age-based gun protections and keep guns out of young people’s hands. He’s also urging the federal government to close the ghost gun loophole and declare ghost guns to be firearms under federal law, which would help reduce the availability of these unserialized, untraceable guns.

Protecting Survivors of Crime

Attorney General Stein helped draft and championed the SAFE Child Act into law in 2019 to help protect children against child sex abuse and online predators. The law also created a two-year period for people who were victims of child sexual abuse that fell outside of the statute of limitations to file civil actions against their abusers. That window ended on Dec. 31, 2021. The law is subject to legal challenges about the constitutionality of this look-back window. Attorney General Stein has filed briefs in four cases to defend the law in court and will continue to defend this law and give victims an opportunity to obtain justice.

People who commit heinous acts of serial sexual violence often have a criminal history of violence against women. If many sexual assault offenders arrested for other violent crimes against women had had their DNA collected and uploaded to the state DNA database, they would have been caught earlier and prevented from committing serial rapes. That’s why Attorney General Stein is calling on the General Assembly to change the law to expand the types of crimes that require DNA collection upon arrest to include assault on a female, thereby increasing the database and our chances of solving sexual assaults.

Attorney General Stein is also supporting the Stop Addiction Fraud Emergency (SAFE) Act to help address the growing issue of patient brokering and addiction treatment fraud in North Carolina. Sometimes, when people struggling with substance use disorder begin to seek help from treatment, patient brokers exploit them by luring them to treatment facilities and sober living homes that are more focused on filling beds than treating patients. These brokers get kickbacks; the patients get swindled. The SAFE Act would make this type of patient brokering a felony and help protect vulnerable people who are seeking real help for their addiction. Sen. Jim Burgin introduced the SAFE Act in the Senate, where it passed, and the bill is now in the House.

Upholding Postal Service Quality

U.S. Postmaster General Louis DeJoy this year adopted a 10-year plan that will lead to the slowdown of 30 percent of standard mail from three to five days and raise the price of mail by six to nine percent. Attorney General Stein filed a complaint with the Postal Regulatory Commission and asked the commission to order the Postal Service to submit the plan for review and give states and people the opportunity to make comments. These changes are especially concerning for people in rural North Carolina who rely on the Postal Service for essential services, older North Carolinians and people with disabilities who need timely mail delivery to receive medications, and small business owners who use the Postal Service to conduct their business.

Protecting LGBTQ Rights

Attorney General Stein has continued to push for additional protections for LGBTQ North Carolinians, who are too frequently targeted with hateful rhetoric and discrimination in the places they live, work, and go to school. He supported the federal government's decision to undo the Trump administration's Title X rule that reduced health care access for underserved communities including the LGBTQ community. He also called on the U.S. Senate to pass the Equality Act to protect people from discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. He called on the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. DOJ to develop more comprehensive guidance to ensure students in public schools are disciplined fairly – students are too often discriminated against based on their race, gender or sexual orientation, or disabilities.

RECOGNIZING COMMUNITY LEADERS WITH DOGWOOD AWARDS

Attorney General Stein annually recognizes North Carolinians who work to keep people safe, healthy, and happy in their communities. This year's Dogwood Award recipients have been leaders to help end the pandemic, further criminal justice reform, protect people, secure justice for victims and survivors of crimes, protect North Carolina's natural resources, protect election integrity, fight the opioid crisis, educate our students, and expand access to broadband.

The 2021 Dogwood Award recipients are:

- Dr. Rasheeda Monroe, The Sister Circle, Cary
- Dr. Netasha McLawhorn, The Sister Circle, Raleigh
- Dr. Michele Benoit-Wilson, The Sister Circle, Raleigh
- Dr. Tiffany Lowe-Payne, The Sister Circle, Wendell
- Dr. Jacqueline Hicks, The Sister Circle, Zebulon
- Dr. Nerissa M. Price, The Sister Circle, Raleigh
- Lowe's Home Improvement, Mooresville
- President Deborah Dicks Maxwell, North Carolina NAACP, Wilmington
- Dr. Kerianne Crockett, North Carolina Obstetrical and Gynecological Society, ECU Brody School of Medicine, and Vidant Medical Center, Greenville
- Kristie Puckett Williams, American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina, Charlotte
- Secretary Eddie Buffaloe, North Carolina Department of Public Safety, Raleigh
- Sheriff Quentin Miller, Buncombe County Sheriff's Office, Asheville
- Officer Stephanie Collins, Fayetteville Police Department, Fayetteville
- Ingram Bell, Gate City Coalition, Greensboro
- Linda Combs, sexual assault Survivor and advocate, Fayetteville
- Sue and Rod Lee, HeartWorks, Bayboro
- Karen Prince, HeartWorks, Bayboro
- Chief Chris Blue, Chapel Hill Police Department, Chapel Hill
- District Attorney Matt Scott, Robeson County, Lumberton
- Sen. Jim Burgin, District 12 (Harnett, Johnson, and Lee counties), Angier
- Kemp Burdette, Cape Fear River Watch, Wilmington
- Margaret D. Bordeaux, North Carolina Division of Public Health's Injury and Violence Prevention Branch, Wilmington
- Major Elijah Bazemore, Durham County Sheriff's Office, Durham
- Kevin Leonard, North Carolina Association of County Commissioners, Apex
- Sara LaVere, Brunswick County Board of Elections, Brunswick County
- Rep. Dean Arp, District 69 (Union County), Monroe
- Rep. Jason Saine, District 97 (Lincoln County), Lincolnton
- Rep. Donny C. Lambeth, District 75 (Forsyth County), Winston-Salem
- Rep. Jake Johnson, District 113 (Henderson, Polk, and Transylvania counties), Mill Springs
- Michelle Ellis, Hunter Huss High School, Gastonia
- Octavia Hamilton, Isaac Dickson Elementary School, Asheville
- Dean Bagnoni, John F. Kennedy High School, Winston-Salem
- Christopher Lane, Chapel Hill Police Department, Chapel Hill
- Marcus Morris, Scotland Neck Police Department, Scotland Neck
- Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, Asheville
- Piedmont Land Conservancy, Greensboro