The Julius L. Chambers Center for Civil Rights

“What great things are you working on?”

The Julius L. Chambers Center for Civil Rights is a non-profit law firm dedicated to providing low-wealth North Carolina communities with sound legal representation in their efforts to dismantle structural racism. Our mission, realized through a community lawyering model, is to equip communities and community-based organizations with legal tools to address discriminatory policies and practices that block equitable access to quality public schools, affordable housing and infrastructure, political participation, and environmental justice.
The Julius L. Chambers Center for Civil Rights opened its doors as an independent non-profit in January 2018. We are a small organization committed to big work: community-engaged legal advocacy at the intersection of racial inclusion and equity. It has been an exciting year, and we celebrate our significant victories here thanks to our supporters.

Landmark Settlement on Industrial Swine Waste:  
NC Environmental Justice Network et al. v. NC Dept. of Environmental Quality

Thousands of industrial swine facilities in eastern North Carolina hold hog waste in open air cesspools and then spray liquid waste into the air. These operations pollute the air and water and significantly affect the quality of life for neighboring residents. On September 3, 2014, the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network (NCEJN), Rural Empowerment Association for Community Help (REACH) and Waterkeeper Alliance filed a Title VI complaint with EPA’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) against the NC Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). The complaint alleged that DEQ’s policies and practices, including its oversight and permitting of industrial swine facilities, have a disproportionate and discriminatory impact on African American, Latino and Native American residents and communities in NC’s coastal plain, where these facilities are concentrated.

With co-counsel at Earthjustice and Yale’s Environmental Law Clinic, we provided dozens of affidavits from affected residents, scientific research, and an extensive brief on the adverse cumulative impacts of these facilities. Initial settlement negotiations ended when the Pork Producers Council sought, over our clients’ objections, to intervene. Meanwhile, nearly 100,000 people signed a Change.org petition in support of our clients. In October 2016 productive meetings between affected residents, NCEJN, REACH, EPA, and others brought about a long-awaited site visit from OCR. North Carolina was once again on the “front line” in the battle for environmental justice, with growing public awareness of industrial agriculture’s harmful, unsustainable practices.

In January 2017, EPA issued its first ever “Letter of Concern,” warning DEQ of “deep concern about the possibility that African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans have been subjected to discrimination as the result of NC DEQ’s operation of the Swine Waste General Permit program[...].” After engaging in EPA’s Alternative Dispute Resolution process, on May 3, 2018 the parties announced a groundbreaking settlement agreement, only the third such agreement to have been reached in EPA’s history.

Under the agreement, DEQ commits to new policies to ensure compliance with federal civil rights laws and to:

- Strengthen protections and processes for the Swine Operations General Permit due for renewal in 2019;
Increase public transparency and accountability;
Increase monitoring of air and water;
Develop an Environmental Justice mapping tool to compare facilities concentration and the demographic, environmental and health status of neighboring communities.

The agreement, though imperfect, creates a new, more accountable relationship between DEQ and communities of color that are most affected by industrial animal feeding operations. It is an important victory in a larger, ongoing strategy to eliminate the lagoon and sprayfield system, and the Chambers Center will continue to push for additional changes at the state level.

Community Lawyering In Action: Equal Protection for Walnut Tree
Walnut Tree Community Association et al. v. Town of Walnut Cove

Nearly 45 years ago, the residents of Walnut Tree, a predominantly African-American unincorporated community located in Stokes County, NC, moved into their homes expecting that their community would soon be annexed into Walnut Cove, the adjacent predominantly white town. For years to come, residents would submit annexation petitions in an effort to be fully recognized in the civic fabric of Walnut Cove. They sought to participate in local elections, pay taxes, and receive additional public services. Each time, their petitions were met with rejection or simply inaction from the Town.

With wells rendered unusable due to groundwater contamination, the Walnut Tree Community Association (WTCA), led by David Hairston, lobbied for access to the municipal water system. WCTA won that battle, but when Walnut Tree was finally connected to public water and sewer, residents were charged double the rate of their in-town neighbors. With support from Chambers Center lawyers, in 2016 the community submitted another annexation petition. It was again rejected.

In September 2017, WTCA and four Walnut Tree residents sued the Town, represented by lawyers from the Chambers Center and K&L Gates, LLP, claiming violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the North Carolina Constitution. While the lawsuit proceeded, WTCA collaborated with allies living within Walnut Cove town limits to elect annexation supporters to the Town’s Board of Commissioners. Soon after, the parties reached a favorable settlement agreement, and on February 13, 2018, the Walnut Tree community was finally annexed.
This victory is a hallmark example of the Chambers Center’s unique community lawyering model, which places community leadership at the center of our legal strategy and advocacy. We are inspired by the leadership, integrity and commitment of WTCA and seek to build on the lessons and experience from Walnut Tree as we move our practice forward.

Halifax County, a majority African American and persistently impoverished county, is home to three racially isolated school districts that together serve approximately 6000 students. Roanoke Rapids Graded School District is disproportionately white, while Weldon City Schools and Halifax County Public Schools are high-poverty, hyper-segregated African-American districts. All three districts perform well-below state averages. In 2015, the citizen-led Coalition for Education and Economic Security (CEES), the Halifax branch of the NAACP, and three parents filed suit against the county, alleging that the maintenance of three segregated school districts violates students’ constitutional right to a sound basic education. The case is pending before the NC Supreme Court. A victory in this closely-watched case will return the matter to Halifax County for full litigation, and impact school districts statewide. The Chambers Center has worked closely with civil rights advocates in Halifax for several years, supporting community outreach and engagement on education equity, and serves as lead counsel in the ongoing litigation, (with co-counsel the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and Latham & Watkins, LLP).
Who We Are: Founding co-directors Mark Dorosin and Elizabeth Haddix share four decades of experience as civil rights lawyers. Our community lawyering model grew out of years of work representing African American-led grassroots organizations dedicated to racial equity and inclusion. That model requires that the community’s priorities direct the legal strategy. Discerning those priorities requires working directly in impacted communities, where trust is built through listening, learning, and identifying problems and solutions together. It involves studying the external elements that affect the community’s issues. This process takes time, but because it empowers and grows effective leadership within the impacted community, it is critical to change.

We also are committed to training the next generation of civil rights lawyers. We engage law students as volunteers and interns, and plan to offer fellowships as we grow. These new lawyers gain invaluable experience working at the critical intersection of legal advocacy and racial equity.

What We Do: Our advocacy is grounded at the intersection of race and place. We help communities address the myriad discriminatory impacts of racial exclusion, focusing on inequities in education, housing, environmental justice, access to public resources, and civic engagement. We develop deep and long-standing connections to communities engaged in these struggles, and help strengthen grassroots leadership and social change advocacy. Our lawyers have expertise in systems-change strategies and work collaboratively with progressive advocacy organizations to implement them.

How We Do It: Client engagement begins with an invitation from community residents who seek to fight evidence of racial exclusion, for example, a school board’s segregative student assignment plan. We facilitate community meetings, listen to residents, and distill their short and long-term goals. Then we suggest and design legal strategies or other next steps collaboratively with the community. Examples of our strategies include:

- **Inclusion Reports and Public Education**: We conduct empirical research and analyze public data and information, creating short reports and public presentations that are grounded in the community’s lived experiences. Our clients use this information to mobilize residents and educate and engage decision-makers to achieve their goals.

- **Civic Engagement Training**: We offer community workshops to help residents learn about and leverage their collective power, whether by voting, engaging with public officials, working with public records, or participating in local elections and appointments processes. We demystify the process of civic engagement and explore advocacy tools that enhance such efforts, framed within a legal context. We ground each workshop in our premise that grassroots community engagement with local policymakers is the most effective means to achieve sustainable, systemic change.

- **Direct Representation and Litigation**: We turn to litigation only after sound community-led efforts to reach an informal or political resolution are unsuccessful. Every case is different. We engage other advocates in our work, and seek to contextualize North Carolina’s challenges within national movements for system change. We often partner with a national civil rights organization, as well as other law firms on a pro bono basis.
Please Help Us in the Fight for Racial Equity and Inclusion

The Chambers Center is committed to providing continued, high quality legal representation, advocacy, and resources to communities working to effect systemic change throughout North Carolina, but we need your financial support to do so. New challenges to racial equity and inclusion continue to emerge, and the need for aggressive, creative, and dedicated civil rights advocacy has never been greater.

We are grateful for continuing support from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, and for generous donations from Moore Charitable Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, and 11th Hour Project.

If you are one of the hundreds of individuals who also supported our work this year, we thank you immensely and hope that you will renew your contribution. If you are new to our work, we hope you will make a first-time contribution this year.

Please give what you can, secure in the knowledge that whatever you contribute will yield significant advances for justice. With your support, we can ensure that the legacy of Julius Chambers will continue for years to come.

For Justice,

Elizabeth, Mark and the Julius L. Chambers Center Board of Directors: Chandra Taylor (President), Bethan Eynon, Andrew Foster, Judy Chambers, Gene Nichol, & James Williams

“The Chambers Center gave voice and value to our most underrepresented and underserved residents. Because of their commitment to social justice, Halifax County is forever changed!” —Rebecca Copeland, President, Coalition for Education & Economic Security

We are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Please send your tax deductible contribution to the Julius L. Chambers Center for Civil Rights, P.O. Box 956, Carrboro, NC, 27510 or make an online contribution at https://chambersCCR.org/donate/

You can also follow our work at https://www.facebook.com/chambersCCR/