



**Southern
Center *for*
Human
Rights**

THE STRUGGLE OF A LIFETIME

2020/2021 ANNUAL REPORT

OUR MISSION

The **Southern Center for Human Rights** is working for equality, dignity, and justice for people impacted by the criminal legal system in the Deep South.

SCHR fights for a world free from mass incarceration, the death penalty, the criminalization of poverty, and racial injustice.

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A LETTER FROM
SARA J. TONCHI

I have often reflected on the wise words of our beloved Congressman John Lewis:

“Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year—it is the struggle of a lifetime.”

2020 was a year that we will not soon forget. From the pandemic that halted our world in its tracks to nationwide uprisings for racial justice, our communities have experienced extreme trauma and a racial reckoning. The work of the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR) has never been more critical.

In 2020, SCHR rose to these challenges, centering communities most affected by a raging pandemic and continued racial injustice. We fiercely advocated for the decarceration of our jails and prisons, convincing sheriffs across Georgia to release hundreds of people from jails as a matter of public health and safety. We also supported many incarcerated people in their successful appeals for release to judges and parole boards. Indeed, since the beginning of the pandemic, more of our clients have come home than in any other six-month period in SCHR's history. As part of our racial justice work, we assisted grassroots activists protesting for racial justice by recruiting and training a corps of volunteers to provide legal representation and working with local communities to encourage officials to drop the charges. And we did so much more in community with people who share our passion and thirst for a better world.

The stories you read in this annual report reflect the resilience of the human spirit and the beauty of what we can achieve together when we pour our energy into building a more just, equitable, and compassionate world.

From the bottom of my heart, **THANK YOU** for your contributions that keep us in the struggle for hope, the struggle of our lifetime.

With gratitude and hope,



Sara J. Totonchi
Executive Director



A LETTER FROM
TERRICA REDFIELD GANZY

Challenges and significant change shaped our journey in 2021. In this report, we reflect on our progress, celebrate our successes, honor the memory of Marissa McCall Dodson, a beloved member of our team, and pay tribute to Sara J. Totonchi, who served as SCHR's Executive Director for eleven years.

On May 21, 2021, the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR) lost our friend and colleague, Marissa McCall Dodson. Marissa served as SCHR's Policy Director, working to create systemic change through legislative policy advocacy and movement building. One of Marissa's final great achievements was drafting the legislation that ended Georgia's historically racist Citizen's Arrest law. That Georgia became the first state in the nation to end this deadly law is in large part due to the trust Marissa earned throughout Georgia, her expert legal analysis, and her keen ability to build meaningful relationships. Marissa left an indelible mark on us with her brilliance and unwavering dedication, passion, and commitment to our mission. Her absence is deeply felt, and we are dedicated to honoring her legacy by continuing the important work she so fiercely championed.

This year also marked a significant transition in our executive leadership. Sara J. Totonchi, our esteemed former Executive Director, stepped down after eleven years of dedicated service. We extend our deepest gratitude to Sara for her exceptional leadership, guidance, and vision. Sara's leadership and vision resulted in tremendous growth for SCHR, including an expansion of our areas of work, growth of our team, and a new building that allows us to better connect with our community. Sara led SCHR with care and compassion; we cannot thank her enough.

As our world continued to be impacted by COVID-19, our team has persevered, demonstrating remarkable resilience and unity. Despite the challenges we faced, our team has courageously confronted injustice, filing a lawsuit on behalf of people held in deplorable conditions of solitary confinement in Georgia State Prison, winning the release of people serving extreme sentences, exposing race discrimination in jury selection, and so much more. This work is a testament to the dedication of our team and the loyal support of our donors, partners, and community members.

Your belief in our mission fuels our work. Together, we will fight to achieve a more just and equitable society.

Thank you for your unwavering support.

Sincerely,




Terrica Redfield Ganzy
Executive Director

A photo of young Jimmy Meders from his service in the National Guard and the signed commutation order.



STATE BOARD OF PARDONS AND PAROLES



COMMUTATION OF SENTENCE OF DEATH

WHEREAS: Upon the 13th day of April, 1989, a sentence of death was imposed on the defendant in the case of *The State of Georgia v. Jimmy Fletcher Meders*, 238451, Indictment Number 8700763, before the Superior Court of Glynn County; and,


WHEREAS: An order of the Superior Court of Glynn County, dated the 30th day of December, 2019, directs that Jimmy Fletcher Meders shall be executed by the Department of Corrections during a certain period of time commencing at noon on the 16th day of January, 2020, and ending at noon on the 23rd day of January, 2020; and,


WHEREAS: The State Board of Pardons and Paroles having received, on behalf of Jimmy Fletcher Meders, an application for clemency requesting that the Board exercise its authority to enter an order commuting the sentence of Jimmy Fletcher Meders; and,

WHEREAS: The State Board of Pardons and Paroles has reviewed and considered the clemency application, all of the facts and circumstances of the offender and his offense, including his lack of a criminal record prior to committing this offense, his commission of only one minor infraction in over 30 years on death row, the jury's explicit desire during deliberations to impose a life without parole sentence which was legally unavailable at the time, and every living, able juror's continued support for such a sentence, as well as argument, testimony, and opinion in support of and against clemency;

THEREFORE: Pursuant to the provisions of Article IV, Section II, Paragraph II (a) and (d) of the Constitution of the State of Georgia, on behalf of the Members of the State Board of Pardons and Paroles, **IT IS HEREBY ORDERED** that the sentence of death imposed on Jimmy Fletcher Meders be **COMMUTED** this day to a sentence of life without parole.

For the State Board of Pardons and Paroles on this 16th day of January, 2020.


Terry E. Barnard
Chairman



JIMMY MEDERS GRANTED CLEMENCY

At 1:00 pm on January 16, 2020, a mere six hours before he was scheduled to be executed, the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles granted clemency to SCHR client Jimmy Meders converting his death sentence to life without the possibility of parole.

Mr. Meders was convicted of murder for killing a convenience store clerk during a robbery in 1987. He had no prior criminal history and had been a seven-year veteran of the National Guard prior to this incident. Despite his military service and clear criminal history, at the conclusion of his 1989 trial, Mr. Meders was sentenced to death, just four years before life without the possibility of parole became an option in capital cases. Living jurors who remember the trial confirmed that they did not want him to be sentenced to death, one saying, "Our options were basically a chance to set him free or the death sentence, so I went with the death sentence." In fact, jurors even asked the judge if they could recommend a sentence of life without parole.

His clemency approval and sentence commutation are proof positive that mercy from the State Board of Pardons and Paroles, especially in these circumstances, is critical in our work. The Board fulfilled the intentions of the jury in Mr. Meders's original trial, sparing our client's life, and providing mercy that was long overdue.

Mr. Meders is the first person on Georgia's death row to receive clemency since 2014 and is only the tenth person on Georgia's death row to receive clemency since 1976, the year the death penalty resumed in the United States and the Southern Center opened its doors. Since then, Georgia has sentenced 235 people to death and executed 75 according to data compiled by the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC).

In recent years, most of the country has moved further away from the death penalty, leaving it primarily localized to the South; per DPIC more than two-thirds of U.S. states have either abolished the death penalty or not conducted an execution in ten years. Additionally, 82% of all executions have occurred in the South. Such disproportionate use of the death penalty illuminates the arbitrariness of capital punishment.

SCHR will continue standing with people like Mr. Meders, advocating to end this barbaric practice.



SCHR CHALLENGES INACTION AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was abundantly clear that the crowded and unsanitary conditions in prisons and jails throughout the country, especially across the Deep South, would facilitate the rapid spread of the virus, putting incarcerated people at serious risk. Officials largely ignored the threat for too long, demonstrating a persistent disregard for the health of the people under their supervision. Before long, the constructed boundaries between life “inside” and surrounding communities “outside” began to blur thanks, in part, to widespread overcrowding, lack of precautions taken by prison and jail staff, and the frequent turnover and transfers of incarcerated people. In just three months, our national reliance on mass incarceration added more than a half million COVID-19 cases according to the Prison Policy Initiative.

Georgia was no exception. COVID-19 had taken a foothold in some Georgia prisons and jails, and we hoped to lessen the spread to other facilities. SCHR urgently advocated for decarceration and protection for people in custody. We began an outreach campaign to stakeholders and law enforcement officials to demand action on behalf of people impacted by the criminal legal system during this unprecedented time. In the span of 20 days (about 3 weeks), SCHR contacted numerous state and local agencies urging swift action:

- On March 13: SCHR wrote the Georgia Department of Corrections and Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles (GBPP) days before the state shut down due to COVID-19’s anticipated spread throughout the areas least able to adhere to CDC guidelines – prisons and jails. To mitigate this spread, SCHR recommended the prison system take multiple steps, including identifying people who should be released immediately in light of the global pandemic, including the elderly and the medically vulnerable;
- On March 20: SCHR along with a group of attorneys, health care professionals, and community-based organizations sent a letter to then-Chief Erika Shields of the Atlanta Police Department, asking that she immediately instruct all APD officers to cease non-essential arrests and help curb exposure to citizens and officers alike;
- On March 23: SCHR sent a public letter to all 159 sheriffs in Georgia regarding the threat of COVID-19 to people incarcerated in jails recommending a reduction in jail admissions, the release of certain people from custody, and improvements to conditions in local jails to mitigate the risk of exposure, infection, and spread;
- On March 30: SCHR sent a follow-up letter to the GDC and the GBPP reiterating our initial recommendations and further sounding the alarm on people living in transitional centers in Georgia as they were at a higher risk of exposure due to work release requirement;
- On April 3: SCHR sent a letter to the more than 500 municipal and state court judges in Georgia encouraging their swift action to reduce the serious likelihood of widespread infection, critically reducing the jail population in their jurisdiction by reducing jail admissions and by releasing as many people as possible, consistent with public safety; and
- On April 10: SCHR sent a letter to the Department of Juvenile Justice, urging it to adopt a plan for protecting young people in its custody from COVID-19, including reducing the number of detained youth and mitigating harm for those who cannot be released during the crisis.

SCHR’s feverish efforts to protect people most vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 eventually led to SCHR joining with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to file a lawsuit against the Clayton County Jail for failure to adequately protect people in their custody.

Johnny Gates stands outside Muscogee County Jail a free man. May 15, 2021.



AFTER 43 YEARS, JOHNNY GATES FINALLY FREE

On Friday, May 15, 2020, after 43 long years of imprisonment for a crime he did not commit — 26 of which were spent on death row — Mr. Johnny Lee Gates walked out of the Muscogee County Jail a free man. Mr. Gates was welcomed back to freedom by his loving supporters, including his attorneys with the Southern Center for Human Rights and the Georgia Innocence Project (GIP).

In 1977, Mr. Gates was convicted of murder and sentenced to death in Columbus, Georgia. After decades of fighting, in January 2019, the trial court granted Mr. Gates a new trial based on exculpatory DNA evidence uncovered by the Georgia Innocence Project and blatant and deliberate race discrimination by trial prosecutors discovered by SCHR, which the trial court called “intentional”, “pervasive”, and “systematic.” Mr. Gates remained imprisoned over a year later while the State appealed the trial court’s ruling to the Supreme Court of Georgia. On March 13, 2020, the Supreme Court of Georgia upheld the trial court’s ruling granting Mr. Gates a new trial. He was finally freed in May 2020 after entering an *Alford* plea in which he maintained his innocence.

Mr. Gates’ story is unfortunately not unique. Studies have shown that an estimated two to ten percent of people in prison are innocent. Furthermore, the National Registry of Exonerations has found that Black people are seven times more likely to be wrongfully convicted of murder than white people.

Wrongful convictions, official misconduct, and many other factors that fostered injustice in this case are issues we at the Southern Center constantly confront. Mr. Gates’ case and his story are a prime example of why SCHR was founded, and why we continue to fight the vestiges of a racist and cruel criminal legal system.

March Against the Myth, June 27, 2020, organized by JUSTGeorgia in collaboration with youth organizers. The rally demanded changes to conditions that enable state-sanctioned violence and honored those who have lost their lives across Georgia.



SCHR PARTNERS WITH GEORGIA NAACP TO FORM JUSTGEORGIA

In the wake of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia, SCHR joined with the Georgia NAACP to form JUSTGeorgia, a statewide racial justice coalition.

JUSTGeorgia is a collective of Georgia organizations and community members that combat racial criminalization and seek to fortify Georgians impacted by racialized violence. Since 2020, JUSTGeorgia has worked to provide support for people impacted by racialized violence with training and leadership development that will better enable them to advocate for transformative change in the criminal legal system.

JUSTGeorgia works to train the next generation of racial justice advocates and leaders through the Esther F. Garrison Youth Leadership Institute. The Garrison Institute is designed to foster youth leadership and development, and to provide concrete organizing and movement-building skills training to young people who desire to be part of the movement for racial justice.

In 2020, JUSTGeorgia hosted the first Garrison Institute, drawing over thirty high schoolers from across Georgia to partake in virtual training on the history of oppression and Black resistance in Georgia, culminating in final media projects from young people focused on repealing Georgia's citizen's arrest law.

In August 2021, JUSTGeorgia hosted a two-day, in-person iteration of the Garrison Institute with young people from Southeast Georgia. This program featured background information on JUSTGeorgia and Esther Garrison's legacy and included a road trip taking students through the history of resistance in Southeast Georgia. Students had the opportunity to learn about Savannah's place in the slave trade, view the remnants of slavery and resistance in Savannah, and explore the history of the First African Church and the Underground Railroad in Georgia. SCHR has taken the lead in convening these cohorts, and we will continue hosting additional gatherings of youth leaders in Metro Atlanta and across Georgia to honor the strong revolutionary Black organizing history and continue that legacy.

Governor Brian Kemp signs House Bill 479, May 10, 2021, repealing Georgia's citizen's arrest statute, flanked by Wanda Cooper-Jones, mother of Ahmaud Arbery, Marissa McCall, SCHR's beloved Public Policy Director, and coalition partners.



CITIZEN'S ARREST REPEALED IN GEORGIA

In May 2021, Georgia became the first state in the nation to repeal its citizen's arrest law, coming less than two weeks after the one-year anniversary of Ahmaud Arbery's murder. While citizen's arrest laws date back to medieval England, Georgia's citizen's arrest law was passed in 1863 during the American Civil War and was subsequently used to justify lynching-era violence. As noted by Mercer University law professor Tim Floyd to GPB News, while it is not clear why the citizen's arrest law was created, there was a clear pattern of how it was applied. "Often during the lynching era, these white mobs would claim that they were exercising the right of citizen's arrest," he said.

White citizens exercising lethal authority claimed the lives of four Black people in Hamilton, Georgia, in 1912, accused of killing a white planter who was abusing Black women and girls, and again in 1946, when a group of white men making a citizen's arrest ripped two Black couples from their car in Walton, Georgia. These historical examples were followed by their contemporaries, with the killer of Kenneth Herring invoking citizen's arrest after chasing him down because of a traffic accident and by the killers of Arbery after chasing him as he jogged in Brunswick, Georgia.

The racist implications of the law cannot be ignored.

As noted by SCHR's beloved former Public Policy Director Marissa Dodson when repeal legislation unanimously passed the Georgia House, "the House took an important step to protect Black Georgians by voting to repeal the citizens' arrest statute, an unnecessary law that has been used for more than 150 years to justify anti-Black violence."

SCHR's Public Policy Unit was central to the creation and passage of this critical legislation. We were proud of the work and thankful for the support of our coalition partners, the Georgia NAACP and the JUSTGeorgia coalition, who stood with us in centering the truth about this law's racist history and brutal impacts to hold our state accountable.

The repeal of citizen's arrest is one more step in tearing down historically racist laws and systems that oppress communities of color.



STAFF PROFILE
CORTEZ WRIGHT

ABOUT

Cortez Wright is the Marketing Director at the Southern Center for Human Rights. They joined SCHR in May 2016 as the Development Associate, transitioning into the role of Development and Marketing Manager in January 2018, and Marketing Director in September 2021.

At SCHR, Cortez works to help constituencies get to know and learn to love SCHR by raising awareness about SCHR's programs, people, and activities, fostering donor enthusiasm and engagement, and empowering supporters to get involved. Cortez is the current chairperson of Southern Fried Queer Pride and the Trans Housing Coalition.

WHY SCHR?

After seven years of working in reproductive justice with small, grassroots community organizations, I wanted to shift the kind of nonprofit change work I was engaged in. This desire brought me to the Southern Center for Human Rights. I was impressed by SCHR's then 40-year history, and more so with a strategy for change that not only fought for individuals but sought to shift entrenched systemic forces within longstanding institutions of power. From SCHR's individual resentencing cases and defense of people on death row to its efforts to change the material conditions of people locked inside, I was awed by the passion and commitment of the team at SCHR and wanted to be a part of their stories.

WHAT KEEPS YOU MOTIVATED?

I am motivated by our clients, people who face some of the harshest conditions, most unforgiving audiences, and inhumane treatment daily, and continue to fight to challenge what often seems impossible. Working alongside them and holding and sharing their stories, pains, and triumphs is an honor. Their stories often make visible the failings and trappings of our society, and we must ensure they are not rendered invisible by a system that has relegated them to being less than less. It is our duty.

STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

The Southern Center for Human Rights has consistently earned a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator. This is Charity Navigator's highest possible rating and indicates that SCHR is accountable, transparent, financially health, and efficient.

You can find our full audited financial statements for 2020 and 2021 on our website at www.schr.org/who-we-are/financial-reports.

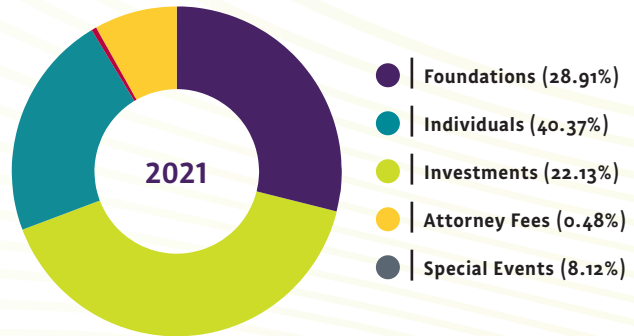
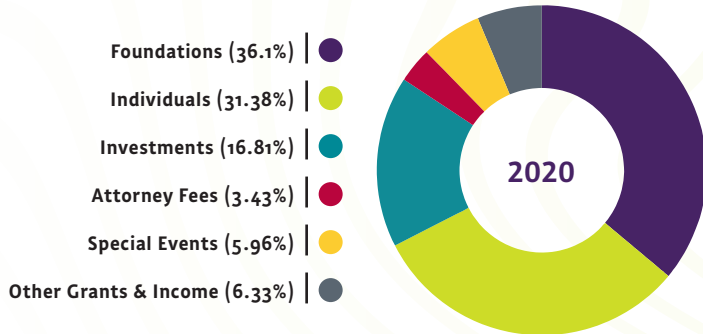
SUPPORT & REVENUE	FY2020	FY2021
Foundations	\$ 2,538,200	\$ 1,492,528
Individuals	2,206,657	2,084,339
Investment Revenue	1,181,870	1,142,331
Attorney Fees	241,318	24,616
Special Events	457,033	419,057
Other Grants	432,555	-
Other Income	12,262	-
TOTAL SUPPORT & REVENUE	7,069,895	5,162,871

EXPENSES	FY2020	FY2021
Program Services	3,489,166	3,852,233
Management & General	317,725	409,268
Fundraising	356,348	415,410
TOTAL EXPENSES	4,163,239	4,676,911

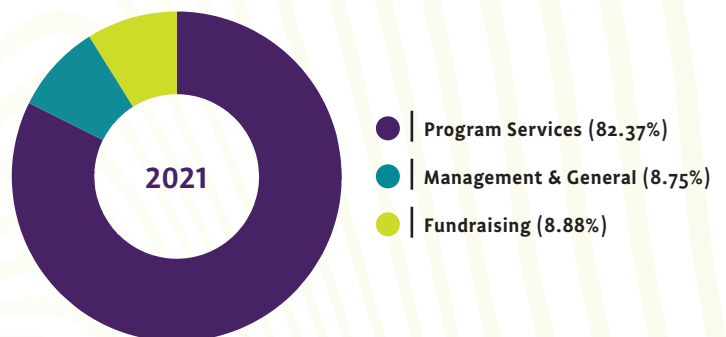
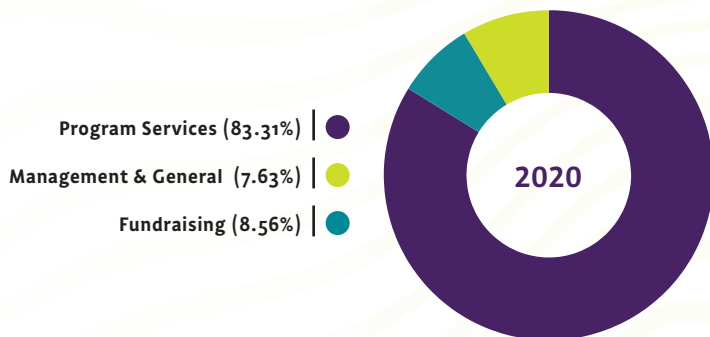
CHANGES IN NET ASSETS	FY2020	FY2021
	4,050,777	483,489

NET ASSETS	FY2020	FY2021
Beginning	11,160,897	15,211,674
Ending	\$ 15,211,674	\$ 15,695,163

SOURCES OF REVENUE



HOW FUNDS ARE USED



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Ebony J. Brown

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Senior Attorney

Caitlin Childs

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